

Karate King

by Philip Walker

It was my mum's idea to get me into Karate. She didn't ask me if I wanted to go to my first training session, she just told me I was going. I was six years old. On my very first evening, I remember standing outside a huge hall, shaking all over. Inside, the hall was heaving with big scary-looking boys and girls in white suits. Mum waved goodbye and disappeared out the door without a backward glance. I ran over to the corner with my water bottle and tried my best to look a lot braver than I actually felt.

But I quickly became a Karate convert and Wednesday evenings were never the same again. I remember staring enviously at the bright green jumpers of squad members filing past me week after week. My coach always motivated us with his words "*Anybody can become a squad member if they are willing to put in the effort*". Little did I know how prophetic these words would actually become.

Nine years later, I awoke early on the morning of the European Championships in Nice and took an ice-cold shower. This was followed by a light training session under the warm sun by the swimming pool. A tight knot formed in the pit of my stomach on the short 15-minute walk to the arena. This was a huge step up for our Karate team, it was our first time competing in an advanced category. Our opponents were all adults and our first fight was against a British team. A fleeting feeling of panic descended over us all as we lined up on the open Tatami. We double and triple checked everything. Our mitts were strapped tightly, our belts were bright red and gleaming like rubies and our suits had been freshly pressed for the important day ahead.

I stepped right up to the middle of the Tatami, I stretched both my legs and rolled my shoulders back and freed my body up to prepare. I slowly bowed to my opponent, shook his hand and lined up on my mat in my ready stance. The head referee marched up to the mat signalling to both of us to make sure we were ready. He then shouted "Hajime" and I sprang into action, bouncing up and down edging towards my opponent, I threw a lead hand punch to his head and pulled my hand back sharply, barely touching my glove off his face and scored a full point. Before I knew it, the bell rang out, the timer ended and the fight was over. We had won our first big fight; it had been an extreme challenge, but we had risen to meet it. It was such a proud moment.

But it wasn't over yet.

Our upcoming fight was against a Portuguese team. They were a strong, intimidating team and I was not surprised they had made it this far. There were hundreds of people watching but most importantly, my entire family and club members were all there to support us. This time I felt quite confident. I stepped before my opponent and then I looked at my family up above cheering me on. I gave it my very best shot and the finish was a tie. Our team, from one of the most northerly parts of Ireland had secured a Bronze European medal. We were on cloud nine. I'll never forget the roar of the crowd. It was deafening and a truly magical moment.

The feeling of winning that first European Championship medal was amazing. I felt all the months of hard training had been worth every moment. The award ceremony is a cherished memory of mine. My team waited patiently by the steps at the podium until the sound of Amhrán na bhFiann began to fill the entire hall. We hopped up onto the podium, high above the crowd, with dazzling smiles. Our shining medals were carried in front of us and it felt like the medals were crowned on each one of us. The honour of representing Ireland was incredible, we proudly carried our flag and wore our bright green Ireland tops. I have never felt so proud.

I really can't wait for the next big competition. I am completing my Black Belt in December, so I have almost some time to improve my skills. Taking that big step was nerve wracking, but I think I am now almost addicted to winning and I realise that everything I have trained for led to this achievement. There's no going back now. I am ready for whatever next challenge the future holds.

“If you believe in yourself and have dedication and pride - and never quit, you'll be a winner. The price of victory is high but so are the rewards”

Bear Bryant