



December 16, 2008

## Taekwondo champ goes for gold

Carmel man only Hoosier to compete on U.S. team

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If all goes well, Garth Cooley will return home to Carmel this week as a world champion in taekwondo.

But it won't be for sparring. The sixth-degree black belt already has several world medals from his competitive days in the 1990s. Wednesday, the former two-time U.S. national team member is looking for hardware in a different arena -- the third WTF World Poomsae Championships in Ankara, Turkey.

"Poomsae" means form in Korean, a series of standardized kicks and punches to demonstrate balance and power. A competitor is scored for accuracy and presentation in what looks like a gymnastics routine combined with shadow boxing, and some military precision thrown in.

But this isn't play-fighting. It's a highly competitive event, drawing 500 martial artists from 50 countries. Cooley is the only Hoosier among two dozen members of the U.S. National Taekwondo Poomsae Team, where he anchors a three-man team.

"The essence of poomsae is the backbone of taekwondo and self-defense. It's the martial art, opposed to the sport of sparring," Cooley said.

His every move will be scrutinized by a panel of seven judges surrounding a padded stage. Any misstep in timing or wayward move will mean a deduction in points.

"Staying synchronized with my teammates probably will be the most difficult thing, because three people have to do everything as one unit," said Cooley, 41, a University of Indianapolis graduate. "If even one person makes an error, then the whole team is docked."

Best-case scenario, Cooley's team would perform six routines to earn a spot on the winners' platform. If they stumble, they'll be done after two.

Finding practice time hasn't been easy. Cooley and his teammates live in different states -- Ronald Southwick works for Michigan State University in Lansing, and David Turgeon teaches martial arts in Amston, Conn. -- and have only hooked up three times since qualifying. The longtime friends last gathered in November at a Connecticut tournament, where they got pointers from two-time poomsae world medalist Ky Tu Dang of Denmark.

They'll need every bit of advice, too. Aside from Korea, where taekwondo is the national sport, the toughest competition will be the emerging powerhouses of Iran, Turkey, Italy, Spain and Germany.

"Historically, the U.S. has done well on accuracy and struggled on presentation. We are focusing more on presentation this time to make it to the finals and hopefully on the medals podium," said Cooley, the last American to make the individual final selection round at the inaugural 2006 event in Seoul, South Korea.

Cooley's no stranger to the winner's stand. In the 1990s, he crisscrossed the world as a champion welterweight, medaling in sparring at the Goodwill Games (1994); U.S. National Championships (1993); World Games (1989); and the U.S. Olympic Festival (1987), among others. Now, the 6-2, 180-pound Cooley teaches at Korea Taekwondo Academy, the Northeastside martial-arts school founded in 1974 by Grandmaster Chul Koo Yoon.

Yoon, an eighth-degree black belt who directed the sport at the 1987 Pan-Am games in Indianapolis, said the poomsae event is long overdue.

"The WTF has focused too much and too long on sparring competitions," said Yoon, now retired and living in San Diego. "I think they still have to add two more things -- freestyle poomsae and board breaking. If they don't have those, how can (athletes) prove all their techniques?"

Aside from a team warmup and paid entry fees, Cooley does not get much support from USA Taekwondo, the sport's national governing body. He and the other U.S. team members paid their own way to Turkey. For Cooley, that means about \$3,000 to cover airfare, hotel and food.

But it's worth it, he said.

"I'm happy this type of competition has come into play at this point in my life, because I can still compete," he said. "It's an extension of my training and my knowledge base, and in turn helps me give back more to my students.

"It also makes me proud to have the opportunity to be one of the very few that can represent the U.S."

## Additional Facts

Cooley bio

>> **Name:** Garth Cooley.

>> **Residence:** Carmel.

>> **Age:** 41, born June 27, 1967, in Phoenix.

>> **Education:** 1985 graduate of Phoenix Central High School; 1989 graduate of University of Indianapolis, majoring in business administration.

>> **Occupation:** owner/head instructor at Korea Taekwondo Academy (KTA), sixth-degree black belt.

>> **Hobbies:** family time with wife, Julie, two kids, dog and two cats; favorite foods are Mexican, Italian and Korean; enjoys "Star Wars" trilogies, Tom Clancy, James Bond and Austin Powers series; and listens to contemporary, classical and some alternative music.

**Source:** USA Taekwondo.

On the Web

>> World Poomsae Championships: [www.2008wtfworldtkdpoomsae.com](http://www.2008wtfworldtkdpoomsae.com)

>> World Taekwondo Federation: [www.wtf.org](http://www.wtf.org)

>> USA Taekwondo: [www.usa-tae kwondo.us](http://www.usa-tae kwondo.us)

>> Korea Taekwondo Academy: [www.ktausa.com](http://www.ktausa.com).

