

## North Korea Taekwon-Do Demonstration Team Visits United States

Most of the delegations that visit the United States from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea visit for diplomatic purposes or technical exchanges in fields such as agriculture and medicine. Last October, one of the first cultural delegations visited the US: the DPRK's Taekwon-Do Demonstration Team. Taekwon-Do, which originated in Korea, is one of the most popular martial arts worldwide and in the United States. Although the DPRK Demonstration Team has performed in other countries, for many Americans, last year's tour was a rare opportunity to see this talented team in action, as described below.

### Breaking Boards and Eating Barbeque Taekwon-Do is the New Ping Pong

*Karin J. Lee*

In the middle of an auditorium, eight people crouch shoulder to shoulder to form a human hurdle, like the row of cars that a stuntman jumps with his motorcycle. Another person stands at the far end of this human chain, holding up a small pine board. With only a short running start, his teammate leaps over all eight people and breaks the board with his feet before landing. A little later, another man springs high in a spread-eagle leap, and uses his feet to break two boards held at shoulder height.

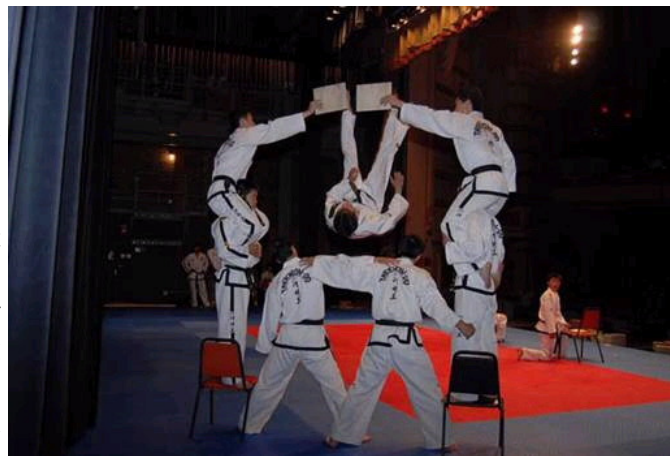
Still not impressed? Here's another routine you shouldn't try at home. Two men stand on top of ordinary kitchen chairs about four feet apart. Their two teammates sit on their shoulders, each holding aloft a board in his outstretched hand. In between

the chairs stand two additional teammates, their arms linked at shoulder height. A gap is formed between the boards held about 12 feet in the air and the heads of the standing duo. A seventh teammate propels his body *upside down* through this opening. As he reaches the peak of his back flip, he smashes the boards with his feet.

These are only some of the feats of athleticism demonstrated by the North Korean National Taekwon-Do Demonstration Team during their Good Will Tour to the United States in Octo-

ber 2007. The delegation of twenty, including Captain Pae Nung Man, a translator, and guides, toured five cities during their two week tour of the United States: Los Angeles, CA; San Francisco, CA; Cedar Rapids, IA; Louisville, KY; and Atlanta, GA.

This tour took them on multiple airplane rides and eight hours driving from the second largest US city through a mid-western city with a population of less than 200,000. In Los Angeles, they were cheered by a sell-out crowd of 4,000 before going on a VIP tour of Universal Studios. At their next stop, they used the beautiful San Francisco Bay as a backdrop for their Taekwon-Do poses before they headed south for a visit to Silicon Valley. In Cedar Rapids, after an unexpectedly large turnout of 1700 people required a last-minute change in venue, they visited a 280-acre hog farm and enjoyed a celebratory pork roast.



In Louisville, the North Korean team performed as part of the opening ceremony for the 21<sup>st</sup> Annual Taekwon-Do Tournament held by the Hwang Martial Arts School – a tournament that drew 1,000 competitors from all over the United States as well as several other countries. Despite the demands of the tournament, they still found time for a Kentucky barbeque. In Atlanta, they visited the regionally famous Stone Mountain Park, where they could enjoy magnificent vistas and entertainment, as well as Coca Cola World, and the Atlanta Aquarium. And all along the way they were warmly welcomed, hosted, chauffeured and feasted by friendly and generous Taekwon-Do buffs and Korean American families.

All together, 13,000 people saw the hour-long demonstrations, which were accompanied by other entertainment such as Korean folk dances. The audiences responded enthusiastically to the team's incredible athleticism, according to [Grandmaster Woo Jin Jung](#), publisher of the Cedar-Rapid based [TaeKwonDo Times](#) and the main organizer of the tour. In one of the most popular feats in Iowa, eight peo-

ple formed a human pyramid, with three on the bottom row, three on the middle, and two on top, much like cheerleaders during a particularly demanding routine. At the far end, a ninth person held a board at shoulder level. A tenth team member launched himself over the pyramid, and, when he got to the other



side, smashed the board with his foot before landing.

Maurice (Mo) Sonnenfeldt, who helped organize the demonstration and tourism in Atlanta, explained that one favorite skit included audience participation: “An audience member, identified in advance, comes on stage where she is defended by one person against a gang of assailants. As

she stands by and watches, her protector withstands multiple blows from wooden boards, which break across his body.” The demonstration team also displayed a contagious sense of humor. According to Walter Keats, who drove four hours from Chicago to Kentucky to see the team, [this skit begins](#) with one of the female team members waiting for her nerdy date. When he finally arrives, they argue over his late arrival, until bullies come and attack them. The man makes a few ineffective attempts at self-protection, only to be knocked down. It's then up to the woman to vanquish the bullies, while her date cowers on a chair to avoid the fray. Only when the bullies are safely “knocked out” does the date risk a few kicks at their motionless bodies.

The North Korean team impressed experts and novices alike. Master George Vitale, who has visited over thirty countries around the world studying and promoting Taekwon-Do, confessed to me “I have been to dozens of Taekwon-Do demonstrations and [by this time], they bore me to death.” But this one was different, he explained. “In tul after tul, they were moving in perfect unison. I'd never seen anything like it.” According to Vitale, their precision, synchronization

and athleticism were so stunning that filmmakers in the LA audience jokingly offered the team jobs as stunt men on the spot.

The team was warmly received every where they went. After performances, the audience swarmed the team members asking them to autograph whatever was available – programs, tee-shirts and even bits of pine board broken during the demonstration. They were greeted with bouquets of flowers in Los Angeles, and with a banner crowded with hand-written messages of welcome in San Francisco. As the Demonstration Team entered the arena for the 21<sup>st</sup> Taekwon-Do Tournament in Louisville, the North Koreans were escorted by Americans, men escorting

women team members and women escorting men. Each of the American women was dressed in a beautiful Korean Hanbok. When the group performed outside of Atlanta in Duluth, Georgia, dignitaries in the audience included the mayor of the Duluth and the Chairman of the Board of Commissioners of Gwinnett County. Kay Halloran, mayor of Cedar Rapids proclaimed the second week of October 2007 as “International Tae Kwon Do Week.”

Taekwon-Do is one of the most appropriate subjects for cultural exchange between the United States and the DPRK. Not only is Taekwon-Do the national sport and National Martial Art on the Korean Peninsula, but, according to Vitale, the greatest number of Taekwon-Do practitioners are in the United States.

For Grandmaster Woo Jin Jung, the October 2007 Good Will Tour was the realization of a long-held dream. When announcing the tour, he wrote: “I have long hoped and tried to sponsor the North Korean National TaekwonDo Demonstration Team to the USA. I am not a political person. I am just one TaekwonDo person who came from South Korea and settled down in the US by teaching TaeKwonDo. I have desired to contribute to peace and unification through TaeKwonDo. Nothing more, nothing less.”

Grandmaster Jung’s per-

sistence may have been responsible for getting the tour here, but as he acknowledges, it was not his success alone. As he and Grand Master Jun Oh Hwang of Hwang’s Martial Arts acknowledged, “Each event was special, planned with precision and taste by hardworking American martial artists who have dreamt and toiled for this day for years. . . . We

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*“I’d never seen anything like it”*

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would like to thank the team, for being so courageous and making this monumental trip to share their wonderful skills with the American people. We would also like to thank all the organizers, whose determination made this happen. Also, the tour could not have been possible if it was not for the hard work of so many volunteers and for the generosity of the cities that hosted the tour—the feeling of community was wonderful.”

Spend just a few minutes chatting with one of the tour organizers, and it is clear that the North Korean athletes made a positive impact here in the United States. The response from the DPRK team seems to have been reciprocal. In a message from the North Korean team [posted on the web](#), the team said:

To the United States,

We would like to thank all of those



*“ We thank you for your warm welcome ”*

involved in organizing and implementing the Good Will Tour 2007. Our trip to the United States was wonderful. We were so pleased to have the opportunity to travel to the United States and we were so proud to represent Taekwon-Do for Americans.

The United States was so big and there were so many things to see and do. Our hosts showed us great hospitality and respect and for that we are thankful. It was wonderful to see the faces of Americans as they witnessed our demonstration for the first time and we thank you for your warm welcome.

Everyone was so friendly and helpful as we toured the country. We send our deepest thanks.

In Taekwon-Do and Respect,  
The North Korea National Taekwon-Do Demonstration Team members

*Interested in learning more? Visit the Taekwon-Do Times website dedicated to the tour, particularly the photos pages. Then stay tuned for TONG-IL: BREAKING BOARDS, BRICKS, AND BORDERS. According to the producers, this feature length documentary film is about Grandmaster Jung Woo-Jin and his “journey to unify his divided country of Korea and bring cultural understanding across battling political borders through the martial art of Taekwon-Do.” It includes footage of the North Korean Demonstration Team in the DPRK as well as the Good Will Tour in the United States. The producers are planning a 2009 release; sign up at their website (<http://www.luvfilms.com/>) to get on their mailing list for more information as the release date approaches.*

**NOTE:** All photos in this article are from the [website dedicated to the Good Will Tour](#) mentioned above. They were contributed to the website by organizers from across the country.



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