



KARATE KIDS

A Kick for All Abilities

By Tina Dealwis

With this summer's smash hit remake of the classic 1980s movie "The Karate Kid," martial arts is flying high in popularity once again. Just ask 10-year-old Wesley Magee-Saxton.

When he was six, Wesley wanted to follow in his older brother's footsteps and learn tae kwon do. He wanted to attend the same school as his brother, so Wesley's parents approached Quest Martial Arts Centre in Scarborough, Ontario, which agreed to give Wesley one-on-one lessons. Over the last four years, Wesley has worked his way up to an orange-black belt, and says he is having so much fun that he plans to continue with tae kwon do until he gets his black belt. "It's just an amazing sport to learn, and it helps you with self-defense," Wesley, who has cerebral palsy, enthuses.

Whichever discipline you choose, martial arts benefits both mind and body. The sport teaches self-defense, discipline and focus. It's great exercise, and the realm of martial arts is now becoming more accessible to youth with disabilities as well, thanks to instructors like Joshua Drury, owner of Pick Fitness in Toronto.

Drury has been teaching karate for more than 15 years, but only after his mother was injured in a car accident did he begin to research options for people with disabilities. "It hits close to home for me," he shares. "I wish there were more programs for people with disabilities."

When he researched karate, he saw a lack of opportunities for people with disabilities in the sport. "There was a real void in the offerings for karate for kids with disabilities, so I started a program. I took it upon myself to fill that void," Drury explains. He began by teaching integrated classes, where kids with disabilities learned alongside able-bodied kids. In September 2010, he will be launching a new program called Ability Karate, exclusively for kids with disabilities.

The benefits of martial arts are many, and provide excellent skills for kids with disabilities. "Physical benefits of karate include increased balance, coordination, and circulation," Drury describes. "There are mental benefits too," he offers, "like improved focus and concentration. There's a lot of stimulation in karate programs, so it prolongs the mental stimulation and the social factor – getting out and achieving things."

In addition to being a lot of fun, Drury says the self-defense element of martial arts is important. "The disabled community can be a target, and to learn self-defense is a really great thing. You're learning life skills, and you gain a good understanding of yourself and your surroundings," Drury promotes. "You can constantly improve. Not just physically or mentally, but your character too," he says.

Wesley's mother, Jan Magee, agrees. She says that martial arts have greatly benefited Wesley. "It has helped him physically and mentally. It has helped his self-esteem; he's very proud that he's in tae kwon do. When he tells his able-bodied friends that he is in tae kwon do, he gains this immediate respect – that just because he has a disability doesn't mean that he can't participate in sports." From a physical standpoint Magee says that martial arts have helped strengthen Wesley's muscles, improved his reflexes and his balance. Wesley pipes in, adding that "it also helps with spatial issues and coordination."

"It's an excellent sport for people with disabilities because it helps level the sports playing field," says Magee. "It's good for self-esteem. It helps kids feel like they're part of a sport." Martial arts also allow students to progress at their own pace, and to their own abilities. "The philosophy is great. You progress at your own level. Everyone moves ahead at their own speed," she notes.

Drury says his focus is on making sure that karate is safe and fun for the kids he teaches. "All of our classes

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are on matted surfaces, and we don't do hand-to-hand combat. We make sure all of our equipment is safe." There is also a high instructor-to-child ratio, plus volunteers who provide assistance during the class. Class sizes are relatively small, with a maximum of 12 students per class. The classes can be adapted to accommodate students' individual challenges. "We're trying to welcome everybody. We'd like to know if people have special problems or other limitations, so we can keep it safe for them. We've learned that everyone is different, and learns differently." Wesley does many of his tae kwon do moves from his wheelchair, against the wall, or with his walker.

Drury has been involved with karate for most of his life. A black belt, he is a former national champion. He has also participated as a referee. Now 30, Drury not only runs Pick Fitness, but is also the chair for the committee for athletes with a disability with Karate Canada. Through his work with Karate Canada, Drury is trying to increase opportunities for disabled athletes.

When looking for a martial arts school, Drury advises that it's important to find an instructor with whom you feel comfortable. "There are different martial arts, and many are starting to offer programs for enthusiasts with a disability. It's important for families to find someone they trust. Find an instructor who makes you comfortable. Make sure the program is safe and that the instructor is well-versed in instructing people with



Photo by Brenda Spielmann

disabilities." And, find an instructor that belongs to an accredited association.

Whatever the approach you take, whether it be one-on-one lessons like Wesley, or a group class, with a little hard work and a lot of fun, anyone can be a karate kid!



PARASPORT ONTARIO MISSION: *Providing support to all members of the disability community – regardless of age or stage in life – to find, connect with, and participate in competitive and recreational sport programs and activities of their choice to enhance physical function and quality of life.*