

Interview with Mr Hong Looi

Mr Hong Keat Looi began his Taekwon-Do training in Malaysia in 1989. He has gone on to become one of the most recognised competitors on the tournament circuit having competed so far in six ITF world Championships beginning in Argentina in 1999. Mr Looi won a silver medal in the World Championships in New Zealand in 2011 before going on to become European Champion in Slovenia in 2012. Mr Looi sat down for an interview with ITA PR Officer, Carl Smullen ahead of his grading for 5th Dan at the ITA summer blackbelt grading.

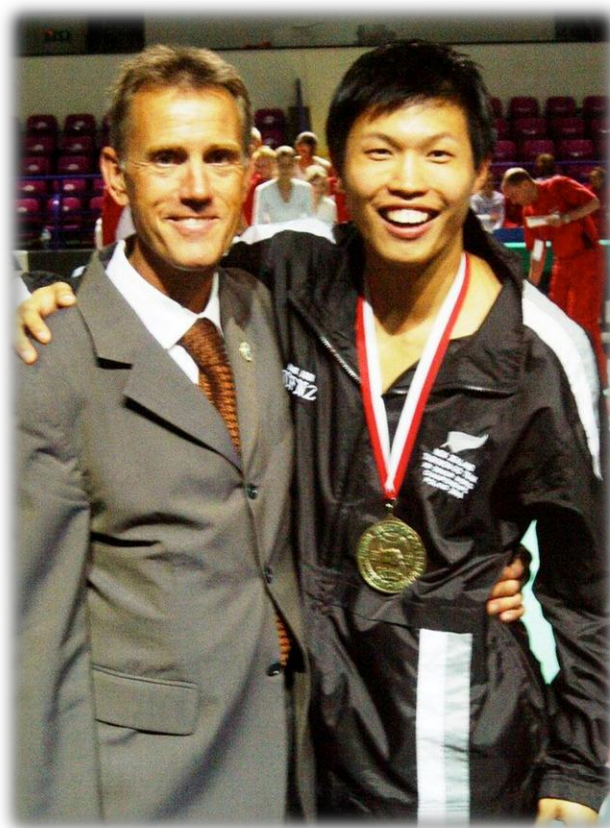


Where and when did you begin Taekwon-Do and why did you start Martial Arts training initially?

I have five siblings, one brother and four sisters and we had a neighbour that was a 3rd degree blackbelt and she was extremely good. She began to have a personal class with my 5 siblings in her backyard, I think I was only 3 years old at that time, so all I could do was watch over the fence as I wasn't allowed to do it, I could only go to the competition and watch. I always thought it was cool and of course you always want to do what you aren't allowed to, so I kept begging can I do it. When I got older, when I was 9 years old I was allowed to join, this was a few years later and all my brothers and sisters had reached blackbelt at that stage, so I joined in to a different group. So I started training, but it was more because I wanted to do what my brothers and sisters done.

When I started to go to competitions, the standard in Malaysia at that time, in 1989 was so strong, it was just a privilege to represent at the regional competitions, regional not even national. To imagine going to a national competition, it would be quite a privilege. Mum and Dad were always very supportive they drove us to training. When my eldest four brother and sisters left for New Zealand in the early 90s, I had only been training for three years, myself and my remaining elder sister were left. I got to my blackbelt after three and a half, years and I was allowed to go to the regional competitions, I was kind of bad at patterns, but I loved to spar although my technique was not the best I think I always loved to spar. I didn't really do that well initially as I was always put into an adult division even as a child. I thought it was quite good to be pushed to an adult division, and I remember I won my first match against an adult which was a big, big thing. Then I won my first competition as a blackbelt in 1992 and that was the highlight of my time in Malaysia. I still have that medal

with me. That allowed me go to the national competition although unfortunately I never represented Malaysia on the national team at that stage. I went to New Zealand in 1997 but before that I was unable to train in Taekwon-Do for two years because in Chinese culture, studies must come first.



Mr. Looi with Grandmaster Bos at the World Championships in Poland, 2003 after winning a bronze medal in the male team power test

So it was only when I went to New Zealand in 1997, myself, my sister Lisa and my brother Lewis found a club which was about 20 minutes away from where we lived. This was the first time it was mentioned to us that we were of okay standard, not bad. The instructor at the club, Mr. Andrew Niven (who has since become one of the German coaches) told us we should try out for the team for the world championships. I was thinking: World Championships? I didn't even manage to get into my national championships, but we decided to give it a shot. The selection had already taken place for the -71kg place but the -80kg spot was still available so I contended with seven other competitors and I managed to get the highest points so I went to my first World Championships in Argentina in 1999 at -80kg.

You have travelled and lived in many places around the world; can you tell us the places you have lived and people you have trained with in Taekwon-Do and some of the people who have influenced you along the way?

Wow I have been so fortunate enough to have visited so many places and meet many wonderful people! I left Malaysia for New Zealand in 1997 to attend high school and was later accepted into University of Auckland, before graduating with a Biomedical Science degree in 2002. New Zealand has a quite structural organisation so we had the opportunity to travel around the whole country and help the local instructors. New Zealand is actually where I improved my patterns. There was a guy called Daniel Jackson who was a black tag at the time. We were going to University at the same time, he was good at sparring but was stronger at patterns and I was rubbish at patterns, so we made an agreement, he would help me with my patterns and I'd help him with sparring. We trained for about three hours every day, six-days –a-week for four months and somehow my patterns became really good. I started to win 3rd places in patterns competition; it was a nice feeling that way.



Mr Looi, his brother Lewis and NZ Taekwon-Do teammate, Steve Morris after World Championships in Italy 2001

I made a decision to travel around Europe after World Championships in Poland in mid 2003. A Czech friend of mine, Jan Kubat, who at that time was staying with me and my family in New Zealand during his travel around New Zealand, assured me that there were a lot of competitions. I just felt that I needed to progress as an individual and at the same time, I always heard about Europe, I wanted to fight with the best people and Europe had some of the best people at sparring in Taekwon-Do. During my travel in Germany, I stumbled across a photo of myself and my brother, performing the New Zealand haka a few weeks earlier in the

recent 2003 World Championships in Poland in the railway station in Dortmund. I looked for the club address, and that was when I met Grandmaster Ung Kim Lan. He greeted me and asked if I have my dobok and to come and train. So I did. I moved to England because Malaysia is a Commonwealth country and I was able to stay in England for two years for working and holidaying. I trained in England at a club with Mr Tom Dennis after a coincidental encounter with Mr. Piotr Capaja, who was training under Mr. Tom Dennis. He told me a few Polish taekwon-do fighters had moved over to London to work and we should be able to train together. At the same time, Master Jerzy Jedut was also conducting a sparring seminar the following weekend. That was the first time I met with Master Jedut properly and I also attended my first Polish winter camp the following year in 2004. That was when I knew that the possibility of cross-pollination of Taekwon-Do knowledge was possible. Myself and my partner, Sabina Mason, whom I also met at my Taekwon-Do club in England decided to drop everything and moved over to Poland for three months and just train. I must say it was quite an experience because that's all they do, train, train, train. We were lucky enough to get some great knowledge from Master Jedut, he was very transparent and willing to help.

At that time I wasn't really representing any country at international level. I did manage to represent England at the European Championships in 2004 in Finland and I was also able to coach the England team at the Junior World Championships in 2004 in Italy in special technique. It was at the Junior Worlds in Italy that I had a chance to train with Master Willy Van De Mortel and Mr Tomasz Barada for the first time. During one of the breaks in the championships, we were able to use the arena for training. I was lucky that they always saw potential in me. Master Van De Mortel, although he only told me later, said he saw the potential in me to win since 2004, since that training session.



Mr Looi and Ms Sabina Mason

Myself and Sabina moved to Ireland in 2007. We had met up with Mr Stephen Cooley on several occasions at international events, and that is actually how we started training in the Rivervalley club. We found there was a very good level at the club, which made us even more certain that this is the club that we should be in. I had to return to Malaysia for a year to work and I wanted to see how good my level was, so I made contact with the Malaysian team and I represented Malaysia at the 2007 World Championships in Canada.

In 2008 I went over to the Slovenian Open but I went a few weeks early so I could train with Mr Tomasz Barada. He had retired from competing then, and I found him a very good gentleman, very kind, he was a champion but also very, very humble when it came to giving his knowledge out as well. So myself and my partner Sabina went over for a couple of weeks just to train with him. We wanted to know at that stage why we were just outside the medals tally; we wanted to know how we get to the finals. So we went over and I had some one-on-one sessions with him and we were able pinpoint and iron out some of the problems. I came back to Ireland from Malaysia in 2008 with a job offer and that was when I started to train properly with Mr Cooley again, the first campaigns with the Irish team were the European Championships in Benidorm and the World Championships in Argentina in 2009 and that was really where it all took off from.



Mr Looi with Grandmaster Lan Ung at the International Instructor Course in Scotland in May 2012

Have you always been interested in the competitive side of Taekwon-Do, did you always have competitive success, even as a colour belt?

No, no. Malaysia's standard was so high at that stage and like for a lot of people, as a colour belt Taekwon-Do for me was something that the whole family did together. It's good to be able to do something that you're skilful and at that stage it was sparring for me. I liked the idea that you could catch somebody out and that's actually quite a nice thing to be good at. At the same time the fact that Taekwon-Do gives you the agility to perform in all other sports as well, it's kind of amazing.

I was told by Master Paul McPhail in New Zealand that I was good in sparring but he said I wouldn't really be respected as an individual in sparring unless I did patterns as well and that's when I teamed up with Daniel Jackson and we came to the agreement that he help me with patterns and I help him with sparring. This was a good comradeship and we were able to exchange knowledge and help each other that bit more. The competitive side has always been very challenging but I think you need to progress yourself, Taekwon-Do has four disciplines, I was never really good in special technique and breaking until I went to New Zealand and I was fortunate enough that their knowledge in these disciplines was extremely high and so we were able to help each other. I was lucky that when I got stuck at a level in sparring, I was able to focus on some of the other disciplines like patterns, special technique and power breaking. When you reach a plateau, you need to look at the other disciplines, rest a little bit, don't take it personally and you will be able to come back fresh. If you rotate between the 4 disciplines you actually in turn turnout to be a better fighter a better jumper and better at Taekwon-Do as a whole.



Mr Hong Looi winning Silver in -71kg sparring at the 2011 World Championships

I'm lucky that I have had a lot of who worked with me and believed I could do it. There have been three masters who have influenced greatly: Grandmaster Ung Kim Lan, Master Jerzy Jedut & Master Willy Van De Mortel. Grandmaster Lan has helped me mentally, Master Van De Mortel has helped me tactically and Master Jedut helped me foundationally. They helped me get that bit right and the rest was up to me to put it all together in such a way that the preparation would result in a gold medal. I must say that I'm thankful. I didn't actually believe I was going to get to the final but I knew if I did it, I had a strong chance of being top of the podium.

I still very much believe in martial arts you need to have a good character whether you win or lose, because no one really respects a person who wins but does not have a good attitude. It's important to position yourself so you can win in an honourable way, but at the same time set an example for others so you become a good role model for the future generations. I had a role model when I was in Malaysia, he was a kind person and I wanted him to win. It's just a natural human thing; you want the good person to win.



Mr Hong Looi with Andrew Montague, Lord Mayor of Dublin at a reception for the 2012 Irish national team

You attended your first World Championships as a competitor in 1999, and have since competed in 6 World Championships, with great success including a silver medal in 2011 in New Zealand, has your approach to competing changed in that time?

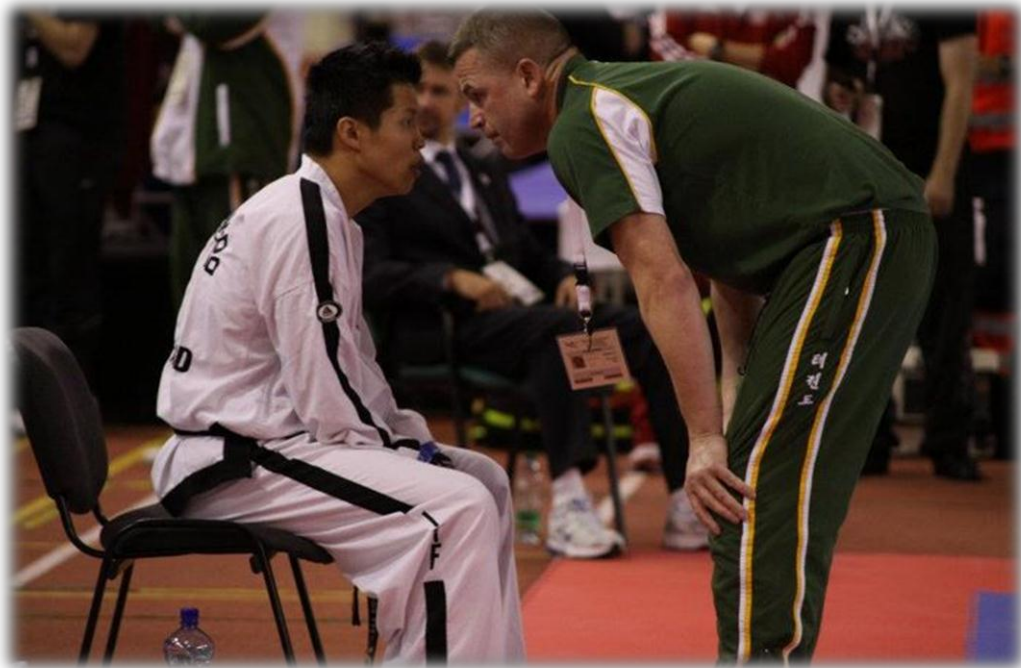
I can say that maybe deep down, subconsciously I did not have the hunger to want it enough in the past. I know that for the European Championships [in Slovenia, 2012] that I changed my approach so much. The Worlds in New Zealand was definitely a great sense of achievement. To go back to what was my home town and to win the silver medal, although it was not gold, was very satisfactory, maybe that put my mind at ease that I was in a comfortable place. For my approach to the European Championships that resulted in a gold medal, there was a quote that I use "If you always do what you've always done then you'll always get what you always got". I realised that I needed to change my approach, especially after another big upset in the 2011 European Championships in Bratislava, seven months after New Zealand where I lost to same competitor from Slovenia, [Grega Rudolf] that beat me in the final in New Zealand. It was the second time in a row I lost to him, this time in the second round of the Championships. So I could choose to say 'I'm never going to beat this guy' or I could do whatever I could to find a way to win. I began by assessing what I did in preparing for New Zealand and Slovakia. I began to change my approach including

superstitious little things like not getting a haircut before a championship. At this stage it's not actually the physical preparation that makes the difference, it's the mental preparation. That includes little things like I don't look at the draw sheets before the championship. In that way you spend your energy only on that day and do not work yourself up a few days before your fight, and so you are able to train properly and have a set routine.



Hong Looi, European Champion 2012

I had gotten a lot of help from a lot of interesting masters and instructors from around the world. They helped me with things from the mental side, to knowing how to play the ring, to how to prepare myself and have a routine and how to eventually turn that preparation into intuition. You have to be humble enough to accept that advice even when you win a silver medal, sometimes people lose themselves and think 'I'm actually a silver medallist, I'm good, I don't need to learn anymore', that is totally incorrect. That is actually when you need to start to learn, it's when you need to start opening yourself up to learning. At that stage when I won the silver medal I was thinking no, I'm good enough to win and I won't be happy until I'm standing on top of the podium. So a lot of things needed to change including my own ego. You have to be humble enough to accept criticism, change of tactics and surround yourself with very positive people. I'm lucky enough that I have a very supportive partner Sabina who also does Taekwon-Do competitively. I'm also lucky enough to be in a club where there are superb competitors, who are also hungry for success. I'm lucky enough to have an instructor, Mr Stephen Cooley who has helped and believed in me.



Mr Looi with Irish Coach Mr Stephen Cooley, 6th Degree

There were so many ups and downs along the journey to the gold medal, it was an emotional rollercoaster. And I would say that to up-and-coming juniors as well as seniors that they will experience this rollercoaster, and they just have to believe in themselves. There is always a way to beat an opponent but sometimes it's not your day and you just have to accept that. And the journey is the most important part, you have to enjoy it and even if you don't get there don't be disheartened, if you want it hard enough, change your approach and your chances of winning will be increased, there will always be one winner and one loser, your hunger and hard work will determine how far you go.

Since you came to Ireland how has the standard of Taekwon-Do changed, have you seen an improvement?

In terms of standard, yes since 2007 Ireland has improved. I think the Irish Taekwon-Do Association itself has gotten much bigger and the knowledge has gotten much more extensive. I have noticed that Irish people have a hunger that no other country has, and I have travelled quite a bit. It could be boxing or any kind of martial arts but there is a fighting spirit, a passion, there. The standard right now, especially at the foundation level is quite high. You have those who are already very good and they will slowly taper off to be instructors and they will be able to input more knowledge and more experience. The results speak for themselves; we have gone from winning very few medals to a stage where we are now fighting for the top three or four positions. We have the likes of Paul King with a world silver medal, Luke Woods 2009 World Champion, Stephen Ryan with a world silver medal in patterns as well as the successful juniors; hopefully we will be able to pass down this

knowledge. One thing I really think we should be working on is the other disciplines, special technique and power breaking, after all it is part of our grading system so if we are able to improve that bit more, our results will be that much better. We cannot forget that other countries are getting better because of the cross pollination of knowledge, this is a good thing; we should always try to exchange with others to further our knowledge.



What are the most memorable moments you have had in Taekwon-Do?

- Wow, they're many. If I go in archive year the first memorable moment was when I was still in New Zealand and we were drawn against Poland in team sparring in the 1st round of the 2003 World Championships in Poland. We lost the first fight but then we won the second and third fights which meant we were 4-2 up and we needed to play tactically to win one more fight. Poland at that time were the best team. We had Carl Van Roon in our team and unfortunately he got injured in the special technique but he was still world champion. So he became our number six and we had to switch tactically. We just lost out 6 – 4 to Poland but when we were 4 – 2 up, every single ring stopped and they all came to watch our fight.

- The next memorable moment for me was Carl Van Roon winning the special technique at the 2003 World Championships in Poland. He was actually my first student when I was teaching in New Zealand and to see him winning the special technique was just a proud moment for me still for having him in the club. Now he is a very successful practitioner and he still continues to win. I remember we used to spar I'd be telling him you could jump this I saw the talent when he started his first class in my club, he had some karate knowledge then but my god that was an amazing moment when he won it in 2003.



Mr Looi with Carl Von Roon in 2000

- The win against Slovenia for the Irish team in team sparring in the 2009 World Championships in Argentina was electric. Words cannot express how satisfying that one was because it came down to the last fight. That is definitely a highlight, everyone was thrilled, it was electric.
- Winning the silver medal in the 2011 World Championships in New Zealand was something very memorable and close to my heart. I was very sick with pneumonia for seven weeks and then only had three weeks leading up to the competition. However I didn't give up and trained the best that I could. Standing on the world championship podium for the first time was very fulfilling indeed and doing this back in New Zealand in what was once my home and where the my whole championship campaign begun was the cherry on top
- I must say winning the Euros was undoubtedly a highlight; there were a lot of emotions in there. There was happiness, there was joy, there was relief and also some sadness because a lot of hard work and sacrifice went into it. There was a lot of relief, a lot of thankfulness and gratefulness. I couldn't have got there by myself and a lot of people need to know that, for success you need to have a lot of strong

people around you, tactically, emotionally, those names I mentioned before were all part and parcel of what I have become today and what I will become in the future.

- Other memorable moments, are watching people close to me like my partner Sabina winning her first European bronze medal in sparring at the 2010 European Championships in Sweden and then again in the 2011 European Championships in Slovakia although I did not perform well myself, she beat some of the best fighters to win. My clubmates, Luke Woods when he won the worlds in 2009, Paul King when he won the worlds silver in 2011 and also fellow teammate, Stephen Ryan when he won the worlds silver in 2011.
- One more moment that was fantastic was when I drew with Mr. Jaroslaw Suska in patterns at the 2010 Euro's. For someone who was a sparrer, who didn't know how to do a pattern and then got some help when an instructor told me I would never be respected until I was good at patterns, to work myself, to then draw with Suska in the quarter finals of the 2010 European Championships in Sweden, was a great achievement. Nobody can say you won't be good in a discipline, it comes down to how much you want it, ask for help. You have to be humble enough to ask for help and then work very, very hard.



Mr Looi vs. Mr Jaroslaw Suska at the European Championships in Sweden, 2010

Having already achieved so much in Taekwon-Do, what are your future goals?

That's a tough one. I'm 32, the choice for me was to either finish as the last -71kg champion [because of the new weight divisions] or to adapt to the change. One thing that doesn't change is change you have to always adapt to the change. I could finish at the top or I can go on. Now that I have gotten to where I am I want to be able to give back a lot of my knowledge, the way a lot of the selected individuals have helped me along the way. I have thought about opening a club, my family is actually quite far away in Malaysia and some in New Zealand so obviously thinking of how to have personal time with my family and Sabina's family is the priority.

I am going to go for my 5th degree, that's my next goal*. I want to take some time to recover because there a lot of little injuries as we didn't really have a proper rest since before the 2009 World Championships with how the tournament schedule worked out. So I want to have a good rest for the body and the mind as well. I then want to go forward for the Europeans in 2013 as well as pushing for the World Championships in Spain.



Hong Looi at the World Championships, New Zealand, 2011

Finally, what advice would you give to a junior grade that has the ambition of becoming European or World Champion in the future?

It's very important to have a very good foundation, if you have a good foundation behind you including patterns, sparring, special technique and power breaking, it is very easy to taper adapt to the medium and higher levels. The basics are the most important if you get the basics right, you are rooted, like a plant. At the higher levels it comes down to strategy & mental strength but if you don't have a good foundation or know how to do a proper side

kick or punch, then it is harder to learn these things at the higher level. Yes it's important to have good timing but you must also know how execute technique properly.



Mr Looi in action winning Gold in Patterns & Sparring at the Dutch Open 2012

We are all going to go through hard times and that is one thing that the colour belts need to know, you will always have these hard times, when you have a hard time in one discipline, no problem do something else, come back to it in a few weeks' time, give it another shot. I would also say, discuss your aspirations with your instructor, it's very important you have that communication with your instructor, you have to make that connection, tell them what you want because it's your Taekwon-Do life, if you want to treat it as part of your leisure time that is fine, but if you want to be a European or World champion you need to share inner fears, strength and weaknesses with your instructor or a close ally and I really hope that that will help get you close to where you want to be. And if in doubt..... ask. Ask a senior, ask someone who has got there before, and I'm sure they will be more than happy to share their experience with you.

* Since the interview Mr Looi has successfully graded to 5th Dan Blackbelt at the Irish Taekwon-Do Association summer blackbelt grading under the ITA grading panel