

First Martial Arts Games in the books

By Don Descoteau
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Relatively low turnout no stumbling block for WMAG

It's a Catch-22. In the martial arts world, a tournament has to build a reputation for attracting top-level

competitors before many top-level competitors will come. Makes it kind of tough for a fledgling event to get off the ground.

Saanich karate instructor Ken Marchtaler, the chair and a founding director of the World Martial Arts Games movement, which staged its first multi-discipline competition last weekend at Bear Mountain Arena, was nonetheless pleased with the end result, despite a lower than expected number of competitors.

"I feel really good after today's meeting about the future of WMAG," he said Monday, after directors met to discuss future tournaments and do a post-mortem of the Victoria event.

Next year's event will be in Europe, Marchtaler said, with subsequent tournaments in Islamabad (2008), Sydney (2009) and Las Vegas (2010).

"We've got people on our side like (former world kickboxing champ) Carl Emery, who operates 10 schools in Switzerland. I think what we'll do next year in Europe is we'll be able to attract more support from the European community."



Sharon Tiffin/Victoria News

Members of Team Canada compete in the team forms event during the World Martial Arts Games Saturday at Bear Mountain Arena.

This year's tournament drew a number of extremely talented athletes, Marchtaler said, but just eight countries were represented on the floor.

Members of the World Martial Arts Games committee knew their inaugural event wouldn't be without its hiccups from an organizational standpoint, said USA director and the team's head coach for the 2006 Games, Alberto Friedmann.

"If we had held this two weeks ago, we would have had a lot more representation from the U.S. because school would still be out," he said, noting that Team USA consisted of eight athletes.

But the Games showed promise for the future in terms of unifying martial arts disciplines, U.S.A. head coach and World Games Movement director Alberto Friedmann.

"There's several disciplines that tend to keep to themselves most of the time, but there was good representation from those groups here," he said.

Much work remains to entice certain groups to get involved in multi-discipline competition such as the World Games, he added.

"We talk of having respect and setting aside egos, but there still is a lot of huge egos involved in the world of martial arts," he said.

Four-event gold medallist Daniel Gartner of Germany put on a show for the handful of spectators still in attendance late Sunday afternoon during the grand championship, an event that pitted winners from the various disciplines against each other.

His back flips and crisply placed punches and kicks drew cheers even before he was finished his forms routine.

A practitioner of the kun-tai-ko style of karate in Munich, Gartner, 26, was disappointed with the lack of participation from countries such as Switzerland, Spain and France, whose athletes generally rank among the leaders at European events.

He surmised that funding was a roadblock for many European groups - corporate sponsorship paid half of the cost of the Germans' trip to Victoria. Some groups likely didn't see the event as being important enough to travel a great distance, he added. Those who bypassed the Games missed a tournament that embodied an "Olympic spirit," Gartner said.

"Big tournaments don't have that Olympic spirit. Here all that spirit comes together," he said. "Now it just has to grow."

Some of the many Canadians in the field echoed Gartner's comments

about the spirit of the event and voiced enthusiasm for what they learned.

Mark Jacobson, a 21-year-old karate black belt out of Sylvan Lake, Alta., said he would take a number of memories away from the tournament. One was competing against and befriending Gartner, another was going toe-to-toe with Emery.

"He took me out in seven seconds," Jacobson said with a grin. "It was an honour to fight him."

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