

COLLINSVILLE ATHLETE WINS 3 GOLD MEDALS

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Caption: McArther won three gold medals in tae kwon do at the World Games in Athens, Greece.

By Elizabeth Donald

The best part about competing in the World Games wasn't bringing home three gold medals, according to Steve McArther.

It was the lighting of the Olympic torch in Athens, Greece.

McArther and the rest of the U.S. National Martial Arts Team witnessed the official lighting ceremony on March 31 and had their picture taken at the flame.

"That has to be the highlight," McArther said. "To witness that moment puts the emphasis on the international level, and the Olympic movement of striving to be your best."

McArther, 35, has studied tae kwon do for 22 years, achieving a fourth-degree black belt. He teaches classes from McArther's Tae Kwon Do & Fitness, his dojang, or school, in Collinsville.

Last week, he joined the U.S. team at the World Games in Athens. He brought home gold medals in tae kwon do sparring, Korean forms and open forms. He also won a silver medal in tae kwon do forms.

Forms contests are the artist side of martial arts, grading on power, balance, speed and focus. Sparring is a traditional contest between two athletes, with points given for kicks and punches. It's like the difference between figure skating and boxing, he said.

Early on, he took the silver in tae kwon do forms, and it discouraged him for a few minutes. "I had to sit back and pull my thoughts together," he said.

But he pulled it together, facing down all kinds of martial arts to win the gold in open forms. "To carry tae kwon do, which is not normally known for its forms ... that was exciting," McArther said.

The competition in Greece was like nothing he had ever faced. "There was no room for mistakes in this competition," he said.

The World Games are not officially allied with the Olympics, but are held in conjunction with them. McArther --- who made it to the pretrials for the 1988 martial arts Olympic team ---

hopes that will bring the attention of the International Olympic Committee to martial arts and widen the offerings beyond tae kwon do and judo, the only arts currently represented at the games.

Unfortunately, several countries pulled out of the World Games for fear of terrorism. "That was the only disappointment," he said. "But the competition was not marred by the lack of international support."

As if the cheers of his teammates and students weren't enough, McArther's own teacher, grandmaster Thomas Perry of Springfield, was present. It meant something to McArther to have his teacher watching him.

"From your standpoint as a coach, watching your student succeed is a victory in itself," McArther said. "I feel that about my students."

McArther has reason to be proud. Fifteen students of McArther Tae Kwon Do went to the Midwestern U.S. Open competition last month, facing more than 300 competitors, and brought home 12 first-place ribbons and 10 second- and third-place ribbons.

For McArther, it still comes back to standing in Athens and watching the torch light. "The whole experience was definitely the highlight of my career," he said.

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