

## The Art of Losing

By Herb Perez

In every competition, one person wins and one person loses. It is one of the only places in life where things are black and white.

Inevitably, it is an experience that we all will have-if we have not already had it. The difference, however, lies in how each person chooses to deal with the experience. Losing serves different purposes for different people. For some it is the realization of an expectation or self-fulfilling prophecy, and for others it ignites the fire that tempers their competitive steel.

Nevertheless, losing is the single defining factor that separates champions from challengers, for one uses it and the other is used by it. The true test of methodology takes place in the arena during a match. If your method and training regimen are effective, you will win. If they are not, you will lose. Therefore, losing, in a sense, points out the weaknesses in a player's method, training and strategy.

Whenever I lost in competition, I would analyze my performance and assess its weaknesses. I would then adjust my training to correct the deficiencies. A loss should force a person to change and improve his method, and with each correction that person should move toward

excellence. It is sometimes difficult to be honest with oneself about one's own deficiencies, and another person may be helpful in this evaluation process. I used to have a favorite instructor who would highlight my areas of weakness, while ignoring my strengths. With his observations, I was able to quickly change my training program to address these weaknesses. Although his assessments at times seemed harsh, they were extremely effective because his statements were direct, honest and realistic. Of course, his observations were often painful, but they quickly brought me back to the real world of my abilities and inabilities.

Losing brings everything into sharper resolution; it separates the extraneous from the essential. A coach who helps by illuminating the extraneous and directing an athlete toward the essential is indispensable. By using the loss as an opportunity to evaluate skills, the martial artist can make the most out of a bad situation.

I remember losing at different levels of tournaments. Some losses were crucial, while others were not. Nonetheless, my response to the loss would be the same. I would immediately withdraw from everyone around me so I could deal with the pain of my loss and eventually reflect on it. For example, I would sit off in a corner and cry after a significant loss, not so much for the loss itself as for the sacrifice I had undergone in an attempt to win. For without the win, it seemed that all the preparation had gone to waste. I would sacrifice everything while

training so a loss was not even a possibility. I refused to become comfortable with the idea, let alone the reality, of losing.

In fact, for the entire year after a loss, I would envision the person who had beat me. I would train every day with him in mind. When I felt tired, it was his face that would push me further. In 1986 I lost my first World Cup to a competitor from Egypt. For the entire next year, I trained every day with him in mind. I faced him again at the 1987 World Cup, where I beat him resoundingly and beat the Korean in the finals to win the gold medal. I employed this method for the remainder of my competitive career through the Olympics in Barcelona.

Losing, like any other habit, is developed as it is repeated. The more one loses, the more he grows comfortable with losing. I realized early that if I wanted to be an Olympian, I could not afford to have an intimate relationship with losing. This is the common thread that is visible in the character of most, if not all, elite athletes I have met. They refuse to become comfortable with losing. They may use the loss as an emotional tool to enhance their drive to win, but that is not to say they enjoy it. Rather, they hate the idea of losing-so much so that the only acceptable alternative is winning. Of course, this attitude cannot be maintained for every level of athlete. However, it is indispensable to those who are in search of the top position.

It is important to remember that you cannot always win. In fact, only

one person can win; all the others must lose. This is not a statement about those who lose; rather, it is a commentary on a method to be employed to make the most out of those times when you do not win. These times of loss can serve as a mirror of an athlete's technical acumen. If used properly, the loss can bring him closer to his ultimate goal and dream. If it is not used, it will only consume him.

About the author: Among numerous other titles and championships, Herb Perez won a gold medal in taekwondo at the 1992 Olympics.