

Victoria NEWS

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Picture this: two karate black belts go head-to-head while on the next mat over, a pair of novice judokas grapple their way to a result. Across the arena floor, a sport jujitsu match reaches a thrilling conclusion.

Saanich karate instructor/practitioner Ken Marchtaler has imagined such a scenario for the past few years. His vision of the Capital Region hosting a tournament for practitioners of various martial arts from numerous countries to compete side-by-side has taken shape.

The first World Martial Arts Games are set for Aug. 18-20, 2006 at Bear Mountain Arena.

"So far we have 26 teams signed from 26 countries," said Marchtaler, who teaches Okinawan-style karate out of the Braefoot Community Centre. "We've got people committed from Pakistan, Iran, several African nations and others."

The idea of the tournament and the organization created as a backdrop for the event, he said, is to promote an inclusionary philosophy that provides competitive and cultural opportunities for athletes at all skill levels, from disciplines such as karate, judo, sport jujitsu, kempo and taekwondo.

As well, the goal is to create a fundraising vehicle that would provide bursaries to allow athletes in poorer countries to enter international events.

Where three mixed martial arts tournaments held annually on the Lower Mainland draw around 700 athletes each, the Victoria organizing committee is shooting for more than 1,000 competitors.

"Overall I think it's going to be a real lift for Victoria," Marchtaler said. "Not only have you got at least 1,000 athletes, but they're going to bring people with them. I can see two to four times as many visitors coming to town."

Hugh MacDonald of Sporthost Victoria is helping co-ordinate marketing the event as a liaison with groups such as Tourism Victoria and PacificSport. Having an international competition of this style would be yet another way to introduce the region to visitors from other countries, he said.

"It will have a huge impact," MacDonald said. "The Victoria region tends to do quite well in August, but there are some dips in that period of time. It's a major event, it's wonderful and the initiative that is being shown by Ken and his group is tremendous."

Michelle Carpenter teaches Olympic style taekwondo at the Woo Kim club in James Bay and competes internationally. Having a major mixed martial arts tournament held in Victoria would be a great learning experience for her students, she said.



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Members of Team Canada, including coach Ken Marchtaler of Saanich (second from left) and athlete Roxanna Feraru (holding flag on right) gathered after competing at a world mixed martial arts event in Germany this past summer. Canada's team will no doubt be much larger next summer in Victoria.

"I've always told my students every martial art has its benefits," Carpenter said. "To expose them to different martial arts is just expanding their horizon and I would really encourage it. Whether my students compete or go there to watch, they'll be there definitely."

The now-splintered nature of ancient martial arts, with the multitude of spinoff styles that have emerged over the decades, has not lent itself well to providing a world stage on which to demonstrate the various disciplines to the masses. While hundreds of thousands of practitioners may be involved in one style or another worldwide, the measuring stick for sports remains a bona fide world championship and ultimately, inclusion in the Olympic Games. Karate, for example, was a demonstration sport at the 2004 Olympics in Athens but is being dropped from the list for Beijing 2008 due to a need to downsize the overall competition. That leaves judo (introduced 1964) and taekwondo (1988) as the only martial arts with full medal status in the Games. When it comes to giving athletes a financial leg up on the road to achieving their competitive goals, many countries including Canada do not provide funding, known as carding in this country, unless the sport has a national body whose goals include sending athletes to a world championship and/or the Olympics, as well as providing standardized development programs.

Therein lies the rub.

"Judo and taekwondo have carded athletes because of the Olympic Games. Other sports don't have that same luxury," Marchtaler said. "Part of that has to do with politics but some of these organizations haven't evolved the same way as judo and taekwondo have. The big thing is having a world championships."

The objectives are many-fold in this ambitious unification program, Marchtaler said. Not only is the creation of a world body to oversee yearly annual competitions a must to boost other martial arts' profiles, the formation of the Canadian National Martial Arts Association was designed to deal with such challenges as the carding of athletes who take their sport to the highest levels, he said.

The World Martial Art Games will soon be looking for volunteers. For more information, go to <http://www.worldmartialartsgames.com> or call 885-8850.