

E.M.

Tae Kwon Do Wunderkind From Earth



From near death as an infant, Erik Morrisette has overcome his accident-caused impediment through Tae Kwon Do, and has become a tournament champion who collects trophies as others collect stamps.

by Ada Chong

This is but a small portion of Erik's harvest of trophies, plaques and ribbons. "The dusting is what gets me, but we all share," says Mrs. Morrisette.

The proud father looked at his son's opponent with a little disdain. From his seat, this boy looked no more than twelve or thirteen and rather skinny, almost too delicate. Honeyed curls framed his boyish face and with his big brown eyes fixed on his son's countenance, he seemed too gentle and small to be a winning fighter. No doubt Timmy could whip this little boy in no time. He cheered loudly as the match began: "C'mon Tim, you got it made!"

When the bell rang and the referee raised the victor's arm, it wasn't Timmy's. The father pulled his son out of the ring irreverently and walked away. "What was the score?", someone asked. An anonymous voice replied, "Three to one, Erik."

Many people get the wrong impression when they first meet Erik Morrisette; he looks like the boy any mother would like to have, well behaved, quiet, handsome. But not only that, he also gets top grades, is a well-rounded athlete (swimming, gymnastics, and volleyball), but most of all, he loves a good fight. His favorite sport is Tae Kwon Do. I assumed it must be his favorite because in less than four years he has accumulated one hundred and fifteen trophies in tournament competition, all before attaining the first degree black belt. That roughly indicates that he usually walks away with a trophy every time he enters a tournament, an average of twice a month, and that makes it more than just the passing fancy of an enthusiastic aficionado from Southern California.

One may think that having a special gift for martial arts is enough, but that's only the beginning. What makes him such a success in the ring? Taking his training seriously, living it, instead of leaving it behind after the hour is over at the dojang. Tae Kwon Do has taught him "confidence, physical fitness and self discipline." For competition he has had to further polish his abilities for more accurate timing, control and balance, things that make him a super free stylist. He chose Tae Kwon Do because he likes kicking, but adds that kung fu is also nice.

What makes his achievements rather remarkable? The fact that Erik can do anything at all is a



miracle in itself. Actually, he could have been doomed to a much duller life, maybe mental retardation, perhaps even death. At the age of seven months, while playing in his crib, Erik tossed and turned accidentally wrapping two blankets around his head preventing normal breathing. No one knows how long he stayed that way, his muffled cries went unheard. Luckily, his father came to check and discovered him on time but although he frantically tried to revive him by massaging his chest and applying

Erik gave one last gasp and went limp. He was declared clinically dead.

mouth to mouth resuscitation, Erik gave one last gasp and went limp. When the paramedics arrived Erik was declared clinically dead.

With their invaluable help, he was able to start breathing again, but doctors later told the anxious Morrisettes that as a consequence of this unfortunate incident, their child could have suffered some brain damage due to

the lack of oxygen in those critical moments. The extent of the damage could not be assessed at the time, they had to wait until he got older. However, despite such dark predictions, Erik developed and grew up with his brothers and sister normally, with the exception of a slight speech impediment and trouble coordinating his hand movements. "It wasn't until he started Tae Kwon Do that his hands began to improve. Now it is hard to tell, and hardly anybody remembers what he went through as a baby. Really, thanks to his training, he is quite coordinated now." His voice filled with emotion, Erik's father told me they can't explain how he survived. Obviously, he is a proud father.

Like many other students, Erik was attracted to martial arts via Bruce Lee's movies. Later, when his older brother joined a Tae Kwon Do dojang in Los Angeles, Erik begged his parents to sign him up too. They did and today have no regrets. Erik worked relentlessly and was awarded his black belt in August, '82. As of this writing, he is the youngest one in the dojang, but instructors and fellow students alike respect him regardless of his age. The black belt test was grueling. Among other requirements it included several knife defense techniques, three to one simultaneous combat, all advanced forms, breaking with jumping double kicks, flying double two directional kicking, brick breaking and an oral exam, just to mention the highlights. Many don't pass the exam the first time, but Erik did with the first try. To my surprise, Erik said that the scariest part was the oral exam and reading his written essay aloud. The rest was "just like in class."

"Erik learns fast and has good timing. He is a very serious student and I like that, I wish there were more like him, even among the adults," says Phillip Rhee, his instructor. Rhee and Erik usually work together choreographing demonstrations for special occasions. His workouts may total as many as fourteen hours a week, and he still finds time to practice more, working with his mini-arsenal of traditional weapons, or kicking the bag.

Other children perhaps would brag about this degree of achieve-

ment; but Eric rarely, if ever, discusses his involvement in martial arts with other sixthgraders, not just because he is basically shy, but to avoid being mixed up in a senseless fight, or being used by peers. So far he has never used self defense in a real confrontation. Still, Erik is a kid at heart. The youngest of four children until recently, Erik likes rock 'n roll music, maybe some "new wave", Saturday morning cartoons, frequent visits to MacDonald's, and a chance to see a movie. He is particularly partial to Oriental films peppered with martial arts action. His all-time favorite: *Enter the Dragon*.

Free style is his forte in tournament competition, and even with extensive experience, he admits getting a little nervous before a match. Nonetheless, the bulk of his trophies are for free style, the rest are for kata and traditional weapons kata, most of which are self taught, in contests against more sophisticated, experienced and advanced competitors. How does he do it? Some people say one is born with a knack for it, while others argue it is 50 percent talent and 50 percent luck. Erik simply says "I just go there and do it."

This advanced trophymania, does it all go to his head? Egos do get inflated for less than this. But not with Erik, although it is creating a serious storage problem in the Morrisette's household.

"Is it important for you to win?" I asked.


"Not really." He answers with a whimsical expression. "I just try harder the next time around when I lose."

Not all the credit should rest on his shoulders, though. As the saying goes, a bit altered: "Behind every great kid, there are great parents" and his are no exception. Arthur and Sharon Morrisette have traveled tirelessly in their VW van, or by jet, taking Erik to tournaments everywhere, from the obscure small town Sunday events,

"Behind every great kid, there are great parents. . ."

to the bigger and better tourneys sometimes as far as Florida, Las Vegas, San Jose, San Diego, and Berkeley, Calif. Erik gratefully acknowledges his parents' support, and of course, he does his part to deliver. Tae Kwon Do has become a very important part of this family's life.

His plans for the future include a good education, and martial arts. Someday, he dreams, he may even become a respectable Tae Kwon Do instructor.

That's fine, E.M., but in the meantime, where is your Mom going to keep any more trophies? 



Erik and mother, Sharon Morrisette.



As it is customary, senior students lead the warm up routine before class. Erik and two red belt classmates are seen here showing a stretching exercise.