

South Korea crowned team kendo champion

Japan failed to win the top spot at the World Kendo Championship for the first time ever as South Korea beat Team USA in the team competition finals on Sunday.

A riotous crowd cheered as South Korea defeated Team USA in the men's team kendo competition in the final round of the 13th World Kendo Championship in Taipei on Sunday.

It was a historic moment, as Japan, the spiritual home of kendo, failed to take top honors for the first time in the tournament's 36-year history. South Korea, on the other hand, finally escaped second place, where it had languished for the past six tournaments.

The one-day team kendo competition was a round-robin affair, with each team offering five competitors, gaining either one point through victory or no points for draws.

Team USA turned in the most remarkable performance, besting Japan 3-2 in a semi-final match that came down to the final competitor.

In the finals, however, USA's luck ran out as South Korea captain Kim Jeong-guk delivered a decisive head strike against Marvin Kawasaki. Team USA lost the match 2-0.

USA coach Yuji Onitsuka said he wasn't surprised by his team's strong performance.

"That's what we came here to do," he said before the final match.

Many members of Team USA are second and third-generation Japanese living in the US, and had become accustomed to third place performances, such as in the previous World Kendo Championship in Glasgow, Scotland, in 2003.

Unlike other tournaments, kendo does not include a third-place consolation match, preferring to award two "third place" finishes, a reflection of the sport's oft-described origins as "the way of the samurai."

Taiwan turned in a strong performance, reaching the semi-finals before being defeated by Korea 5-0. They shared third place with Japan.

In women's team competition, Japan took first and was followed by South Korea with Germany and Canada sharing third place.

This year's tournament was notable for the presence of new, up-and-coming teams from Eastern Europe such as Poland and Bulgaria. A total of 39 teams took part in the men's team competition.

In singles competition held on Saturday, it was an all-Japan final with M. Hojo defeating T. Tanaka. A pair of Korean competitors, S. Kang and G. Oh, shared third place.

M. Hojo is a police officer from a prefecture outside Tokyo. In the championship match he showed remarkable skill, ending the match with a *do*, a point scored by striking the opponent's abdomen.

His opponent, T. Tanaka, was gracious in defeat, and benefited from a very short semi-final match that required much less than the allotted five minutes to overcome his Korean opponent.

"I want to do beautiful kendo," Tanaka said after the match, adding that it was the first time he had fought against fellow countryman Hojo, who he described as a worthy opponent with great spirit.

In women's singles competition, it was an all-Japan sweep. First place went to S. Sugimoto, with K. Komuro taking second, while E. Inagaki and M. Shimokawa shared third place.

Throughout the weekend competition, a near-capacity crowd was on hand at the National Taiwan University Gymnasium showing considerable spirit and cheering loudly, as well as snapping up kendo equipment and souvenirs sold at the venue.

Taro Ariga, the CEO of an online kendo shop, says a basic set of equipment including helmet and pads can run anywhere from US\$300 to US\$10,000.

The *shinai* (bamboo sword) used in competition can be had for as little as US\$50 or as much as US\$200, with higher-end swords made from Japanese bamboo.

For one Taipei-area police officer who regularly practices kendo, the tournament was well worth the price of admission, as he was able to choose from a wide array of equipment for sale as well as observe world-class competition.

He said it takes an average of 10 years to gain the skills necessary to compete in world-class competition, with most local practitioners, or *kendoka*, simply appreciative of the exercise and conditioning, which he compared to boxing.

At the awards ceremony, teams from 49 countries gathered together one last time, celebrating the comradery of teammates and fellow competitors, no doubt looking forward to the 14th World Kendo Championship in three years.

By Sean Scanlan
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER
Wednesday, Dec 13, 2006, Page 20