

Kendo tourney to begin tomorrow

Just one day before the 13th World Kendo Championships, there was a noticeable buzz in the air as students hurriedly taped down lines and added padding to the third floor of the National Taiwan University (NTU) Gymnasium.

Compared with other athletic competitions, kendo requires surprisingly few materials.

It can be practiced nearly anywhere, such as in this spacious auditorium or in a purpose-built dojo.

The only requirement is for a clean, swept floor, which allows for barefoot competitors to perform intricate footwork and trademark stamping whenever an attack is made.

For the next two days there will be lots of foot-stamping, shouts and quick retreats as 250 of the world's best kendo competitors, *kendoka*, take part in singles and group competition in the three-day World Championships.

Held every three years, the event is a showcase for the estimated 8 million practitioners of kendo around the world.

The sport is particularly popular in its native Japan because of its roots in the Kamakura period (1185-1233), one of the earliest samurai governments, when it was practiced by military clans.

During this period, the sport grew under the spiritual influence of Zen Buddhism.

And it continues to be much more than stick fighting: The All Japan Kendo Federation continues to remind participants that the stated goal of the sport is to "discipline the human character through the application of the principles of the sword."

Kendo has a tradition of innovative instructors who have taught sword mastery through theories such as the single-sword school and the swordless school, underscoring the fact that kendo can transcend simple combat techniques.

The modern face of kendo is largely attributed to Naganuma Sirozaemon Kunisato (1688-1767), who introduced bamboo practice swords (*shinai*) and body armor (*bogu*) to students.

It was a big departure from the *katana*, or long metal samurai swords, which had been used even during practice sessions.

The sport became more prominent in the late 18th century, with the use of bamboo swords and body armor making it possible for competitors to deliver full strikes.

In modern tournament competition, kendo matches are presided over by three referees who wave flags when a point is awarded -- a red flag for one competitor and a white flag for the other.

Much like modern fencing, points are awarded only for a successful attack that hits the target -- in conjunction with the attacker's front foot contacting the floor and a vocal shout with the strike.

Kendo is more stringent than fencing, as two referees must agree when a point is awarded. The match continues until a competitor scores two points.

If a predetermined time limit has been reached and only one competitor has a point, that competitor wins. Ties are settled by a draw, a referee's decision or an extra period.

Competition today begins at 9am, with the event concluding by 4:20pm. Tomorrow, competition starts at 9am and will conclude with an awards ceremony at 5:45pm.

Tickets can be purchased at the NTU arena ranging in price from NT\$600 to NT\$900. A limited amount of VIP seating is sold out.

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