



AREA SPORTS



Willie "The Bam" Johnson -- martial arts was his ticket out of the projects

Story and photo by Ray Gilbert

Willie "The Bam" Johnson, teased and ridiculed for his love of martial arts at an early age, has fought and kicked his way out of the projects to the very pinnacle of the sport and now is reaching back to help others.

Born and reared in East Baltimore's Lafayette housing projects, Johnson, who's specialty is the Wu Shu Du form of martial arts, recently opened his very own training center in Laurel where he is teaching his students the principles of self development, self defense, inner peace and confidence that comes with success in martial arts.

Johnson currently reigns as the number one U.S. competitor in the sport's forms and weapons competition, and he is being featured as the cover story of this month's edition of the national martial arts magazine, *Kung-Fu Illustrated*.

Since watching his first Bruce Lee movie at the age of seven, Johnson instinctly realized that his hope for survival and success depended on his mastering of the sport. Living in an environment where basketball was king, Johnson soon realized martial arts was the only thing he was good at so he endured the taunts from friends and even some of his own family as he practiced.

"The only people who supported me and didn't try to dissuade me were my mother and sister. Other people jokingly called me Bruce Lee or that 'Dumb Karate Kid,'" says Johnson.

Johnson adds, "I just chose a different way out of the ghetto."

Now looking back the "Dumb Karate Kid" feels blessed with the choices he made and his decision to tough it out and not to give up. As a master of his sport, Johnson has traveled throughout the world demonstrating his ability and competing with others.

He has made several trips to Beijing, China to study Wu Shu at the Beijing Physical Fitness Institute and has been named Instructor of the Year by the Educational Funding Corporation and the Shaolin Wu Shu Academy. Johnson has authored several articles for leading periodicals and is being featured as the cover story of the current issue of the national martial arts magazine *Kung-Fu Illustrated*.

What's next on the horizon for this martial superstar? Television, what else? He is set to begin filming at Universal Studios in Orlando, Florida, this coming March, *Quest for the Dragon*, a child oriented, educational show depicting the true philosophy of martial arts. The character played by Johnson, *The Slam Bam Man*, is based on his very own life experiences.