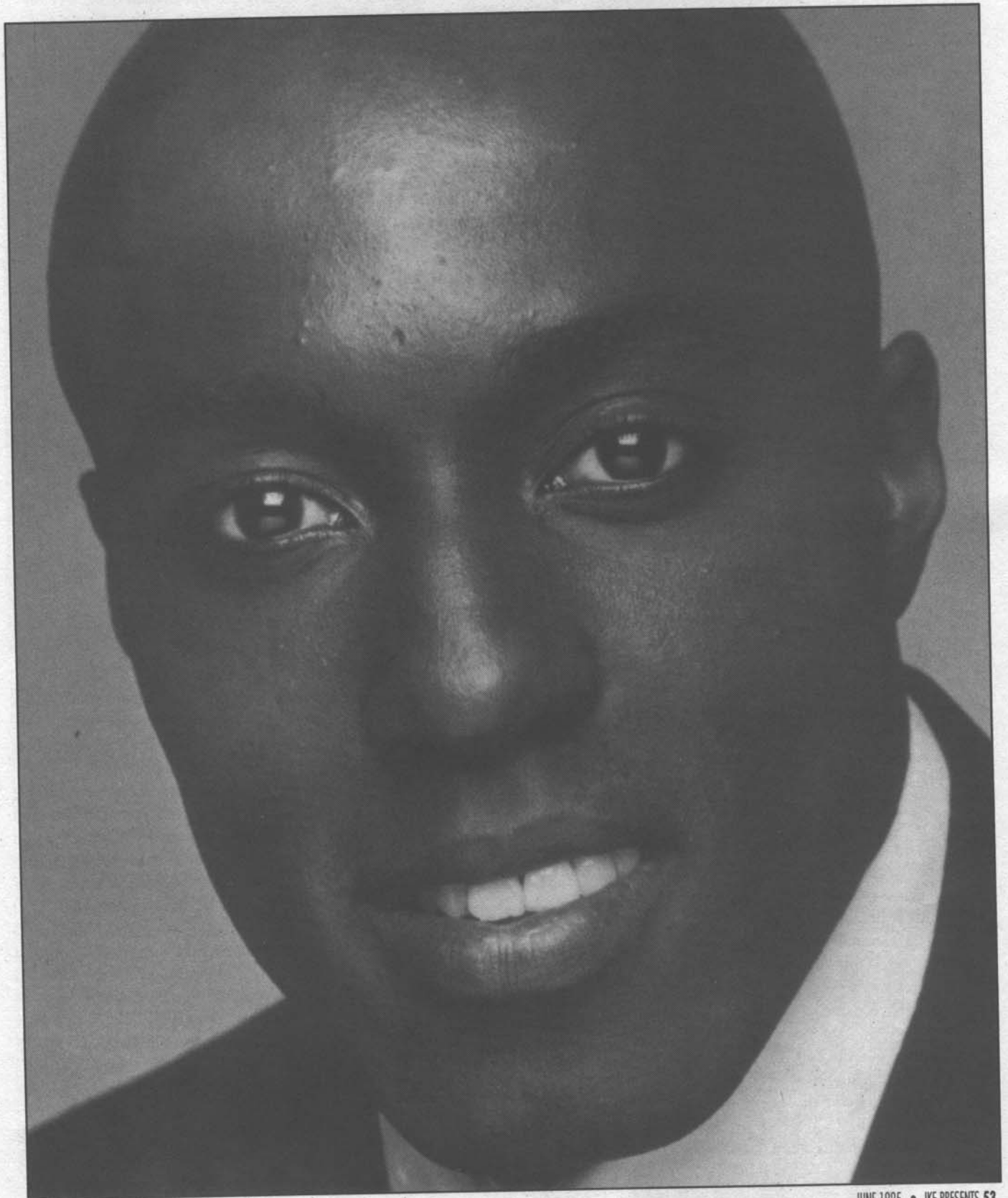


The Human Side Of A Martial Arts Champion



In the world of sport karate, as in all Western sports, the winner of a sporting event is viewed as a hero. Someone with great power, cool under pressure, aggressively on top of every situation – the list goes on and on. People forget that these heroes are really just like everyone else — human. Here, a prominent champion exposes the high-pressure personal side of this status, and how he copes with it. If you think being a champion's all glory and glamor, you'll think differently after reading this.

By Willie Johnson and Nancy Musick



One must train hard to express the champion attitude.

Becoming a martial arts champion takes a tremendous amount of hard work, dedication, discipline, and self-sacrifice. But to anyone who has reached this goal, all the effort has been worthwhile. To have your name known to perhaps thousands of fans, to have your picture on the covers of national and international magazines, to sign autographs wherever you go, to possibly go on to break into movies -- this is what many martial artists dream of.

And internationally recognized martial arts champion, Willie "The Bam" Johnson, is well on his way to very possibly achieving all of these dreams.

But there is another side to the martial arts champion — his ego. By dictionary definition, ego means self-centered proof of nothing but our own existence; the theory that self-interest is the basis of morality; selfishness. Somehow the martial arts cham-

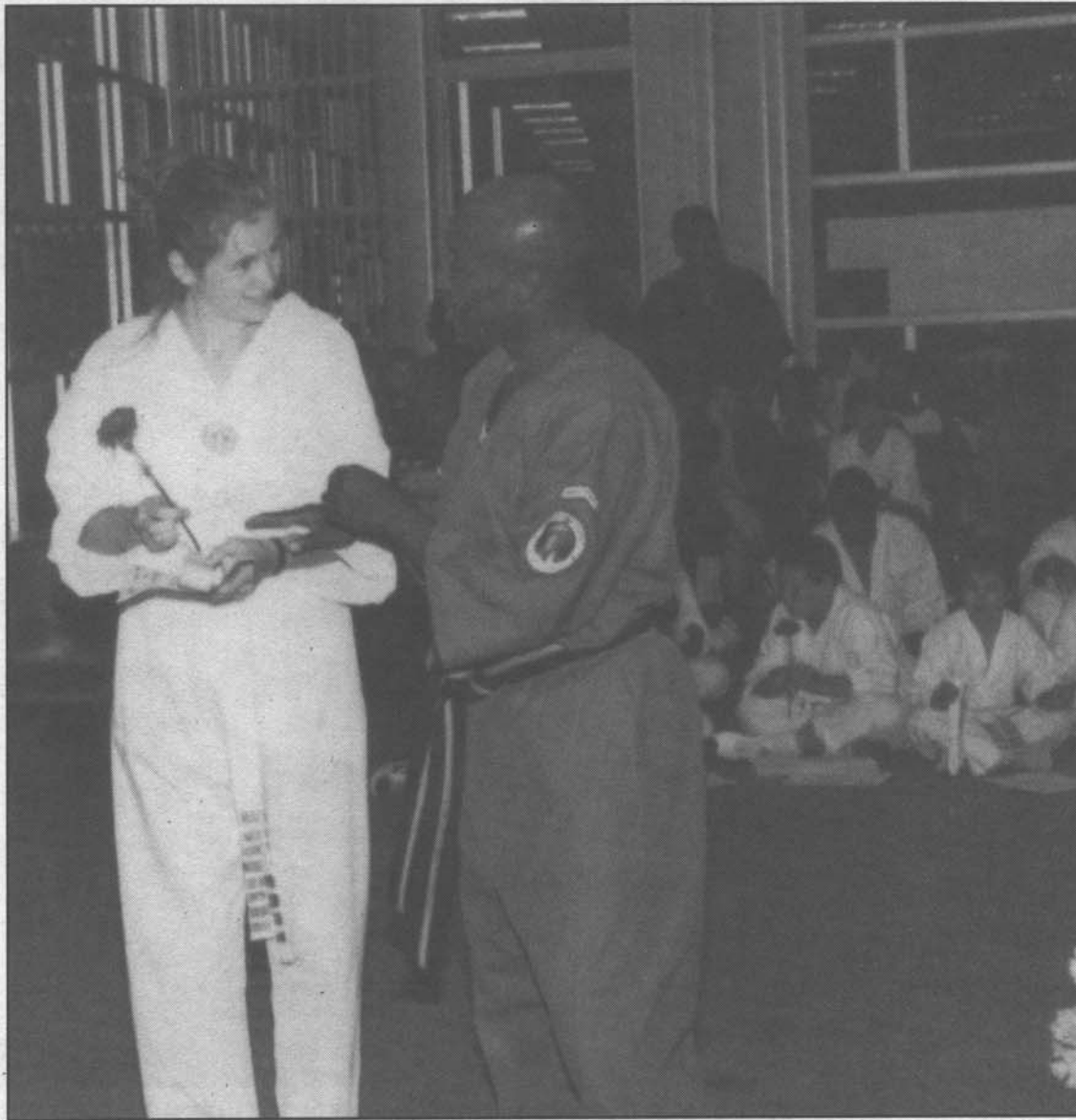
“In the classroom, students are constantly struggling for control over the competition mind set,” says Johnson. “I see it in every sparring match—students trying to outdo each other and win at any cost. We’ve forgotten that the true purpose of martial arts is to defeat the ultimate opponent—the self, not each other.”

pion must achieve balance between his ability and his ego -- the same balance that the founding fathers of the martial arts first introduced -- through principles.

If your ego gets out of control, you lose all perspective of who you really are and what the true purpose of your life is. You forget to be humble. You forget that you are only who you are because you have been blessed by the Universal Creator.

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According to Johnson, champions ask themselves: “Have I practiced enough? Is



Willie Johnson (right) shows his human side when dealing with students. "Champions have emotions, too," he points out.

my body really in shape for this? Can I win one more time?" Johnson says that the week before an event he can't sleep or even interact well with others because he wants to win so badly.

The Demands of Competition

Like it or not, sport karate has reached such a place of prominence on the sports scene and is so competitive that what was once merely a spare-time fun activity has now become a high-pressure endeavor with the same demands as any other top-level profession. And it's not just the champions who feel this pressure, but also the younger athletes and their parents (some of whom are living out their own dreams through their children's achievements.)

No longer is this a playful and light-hearted sport. It has assumed all the qualities of serious hard work: arduous practice, long hours learning and refining

When all is said and done, the only one that can truly defeat or beat you is you. And only through a conscious awareness of your shortcomings and character defects can you really achieve success. The real champion is the one who isn't afraid to show weakness because, from this admission, comes his real strength.

skills, sweating bullets, suffering bruised bones. All this in preparation for the big tournament and the dream of performing in the night time finals on center stage for 2,000 or more people that you don't even know. To bring home a six-foot trophy and have your name in the national ratings.

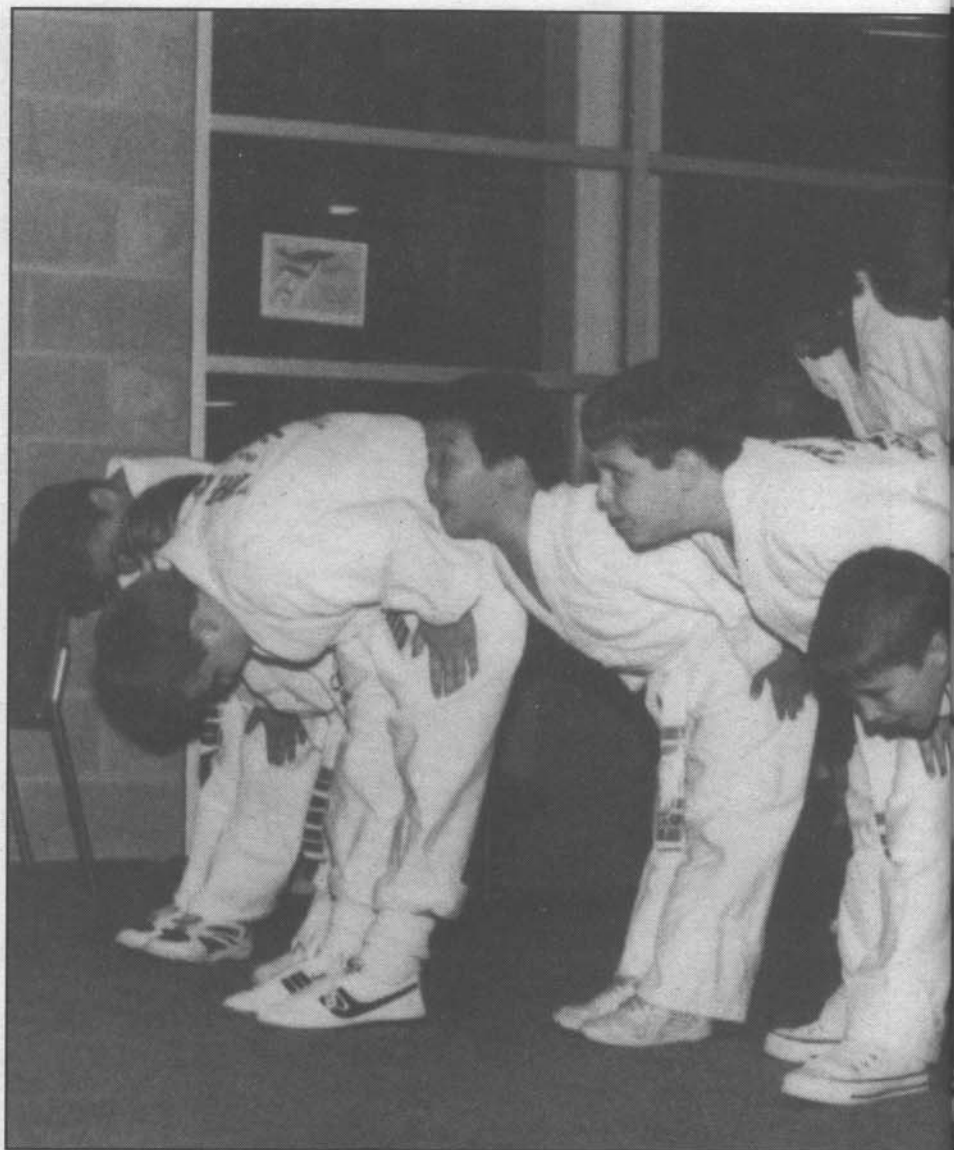
Today's champion, who once found weekend tournaments a place to relax, have fun, and hang out with good friends, now goes hunting or fishing just to get away from the pressures of the tournament circuit.

"What's wrong with this picture?" asks Johnson. "Have we become so focused on winning and on self that we've forgotten that the martial arts was intended to be a physical, mental and spiritual way of life. In striving to become a champion have we lost sight of self? Is it wrong to have a diversion that seems completely unrelated to the

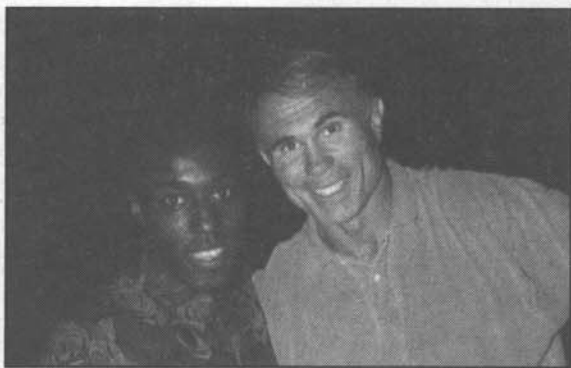
struggles of our sport? I don't think so," he concludes.

Most superior athletes have just such a diversion and it gives them time to look at things from a totally different perspective, thus creating balance in their lives. A true artist must have more depth than just the physical. Taking a closer look, we see the real creativity and freedom of expression that every true champion must possess. And we must never lose sight of the need for providing an environment which allows for the nurturing of this creativity.

His big life lesson, Johnson says, is this: "From happiness came sadness; from sadness came failure; from failure came experience; from experience came choices; from choices came wisdom. If I had a chance to change anything in my life, I wouldn't, because I wouldn't have this knowledge to share."



Champions demonstrate respect at all times in Johnson's classes.



Willie Johnson (left) with kicking legend, Bill "Superfoot" Wallace.

I Have Seen the Enemy — And He Is Me

"In the classroom, students are constantly struggling for control over the competition mind set," says Johnson. "I see it in every sparring match -students trying to outdo each other and win at any cost. We've forgotten that the true purpose of martial arts is to defeat the ultimate opponent -- the

self, not each other."

When all is said and done, the only one that can truly defeat or beat you is you. And only through a conscious awareness of your shortcomings and character defects can you really achieve success. To most people, shortcomings and character defects — such as peer pressure, hostility, fear, anger, and so on — are not dealt with but

simply glossed over with outside distractions. The real champion is the one who isn't afraid to show weakness because, from this admission, comes his real strength.

The problem is that so many of our present martial artists have gotten so involved in the physical side of the sport that they have overlooked such things in life as spirituality, education, material security, and, in short, just the simple things outside of the martial arts field.

Today's martial artist is willing to forego short-range goals for the achievement of long-range objectives, like becoming a nationally-ranked champion. Too many martial artists find out the hard way that lack of balance leads to being financially broke, physically busted, or just plain disgusted.

Conclusion

The answer to this problem, according to Johnson, is to return to "having balance




Champions, says Johnson, should always make time for their fans. Touching a fan's life, up close and personal, could change a youngster's life.

in all areas of our lives because the martial arts is truly a total way of life." As Bruce Lee once said, "If you look at the finger pointing at the moon, you'll miss all the heavenly glory."

So, the next time you look at a champion, remember that what you see on stage is merely the external trappings. The real measure of any champion is the inner self. If the champion loses this focus on self-development, he or she becomes a selfish person.

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"I am the sum total of all my life experiences, the physical, mental and spiritual. And this is exactly what every martial artist should be striving for, total balance based on universal principles." 

Willie "The Bam" Johnson is a Washington, D.C.-based champion and instructor; Nancy Musick is a freelance writer.

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