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Taekwondo students, teacher head off to national competition

RILEY SIMPSON, Assistant Editor

Glenview resident Amil Dravid, 14, took up taekwondo in sixth grade. Ever since, he has risen from a white belt (the beginning level) to a black belt (the highest), and he lost 30 pounds in the process. Dravid, who will be a freshman at Glenbrook South in the fall, was quick to give credit to his instructor at AKYI Martial Arts, Master Ray Kyi.

"He's motivational, inspirational and [fosters] an environment to set goals," Dravid said.

But Kyi was almost quicker to compliment his student.

"This kid goes beyond what I ask him to do," he said of Dravid.

Eight of Kyi's students went beyond during the Illinois State Championships in March as they qualified to compete in the USA Taekwondo National Championships from July 4-10 in Austin, Texas. AKYI students have competed mostly at regional tournaments, and Kyi said the national championships will be the school's first step onto the big stage.

Joining Dravid and Kyi at nationals are Glenview residents Nick Halliwell, 13, and Melanie An, 11. They'll all be competing in one or more of three categories: Poomsae (taekwondo forms), board breaking and sparring.

Although the forms might sound the least physically taxing, getting the technique down to a T can be tricky, An said.



(Left to right) Master Ray Kyi, Amil Dravid and Melanie An practice their taekwondo forms at AKYI Martial Arts in Glenview. RILEY SIMPSON/22ND CENTURY MEDIA

Another wrench is that she'll have to perform the green belt form — the style with which qualified at state — even though An has since graduated to a purple belt. So she has been simultaneously learning her higher purple-belt form while refreshing her green-belt techniques for nationals.

The same goes for Halliwell in forms, but he also has to work on his board-breaking approach. He can choose the number of boards and how to break them at the competition, but it still boils down to technique — which he said is easier and more efficient at breaking board than brute force.

To master these forms and be flexible enough to hold straight kicks over their heads, students practice at the AKYI Martial Arts studio, at 1971 Johns Drive in Glenview, and at home for hours on end.

Dravid and Halliwell

come to class for about two hours every weekday, and the former does his taekwondo stretches while watching TV or hanging out at home.

There are added benefits, too. An has taken the discipline (calling Master Kyi "sir" and bowing) and listening skills have helped her in school and to be more polite and respectful.

Halliwell uses taekwondo as a stress release.

"When you kick pads, it feels really good," Halliwell said. "[Taekwondo] is something to help me end my day."

For Dravid, his meteoric rise, the friends he's made and the promise of more success at nationals and beyond — he said he'd like to make the USA Taekwondo Team — are more than enough for him to stick with the sport.

"[Taekwondo] will probably be a lifelong thing for me," Dravid said.

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