Taekwondo offers excitement, exercise

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With a loud outburst and swift hand motions, the referee summoned sophomore Dan Gilmore and his opponent to the center of the ring, where they will maneuver, jump, block and kick for the next two rounds.

Gilmore, like many of the students at Saturday's taekwondo tournament at the Student Recreation Center, initially got involved in taekwondo simply to stay in shape. But for Gilmore and many of his fellow competitors, the sport has proven to be much more than exercise.

"Competition comes in time, but it really is about the fun aspect of it," Gilmore said. "It's about getting a really good workout and meeting a lot of really fun people."

Gilmore is one of 26 members of Truman's Taekwondo Club, which put on Saturday's tournament. The event was open to club members only.

Tournaments like the one Saturday consist of three main parts. The first is sparring, in which opponents face off head-to-head wearing protective gear. The second, known as "forms," are events that demonstrate precision and power that can be translated to sparring. The third portion is board-breaking.

Gilmore said sparring was intimidating at first, but he has become more comfortable as he has continued to practice.

"I think the best way to not get intimidated is to keep going about it, learning that you can get kicked and you can take a hit," he said.

Sophomore Noelle Johnson got her start in taekwondo in third grade, but hadn't regularly practiced the sport until early this school year. She said her favorite part of the competition is the forms.

"It's really relaxing, kind of like yoga or something," Johnson said. "You just have to be very controlled and focused." Johnson said she is also mainly in the sport for fun, but she has enjoyed improving her technique. She said she was satisfied with how she performed Saturday.

"I think I did pretty well," Johnson said. "I probably could have done better, but I'm only orange belt, so I think I still did pretty well." Sophomore Jennifer Chen, the lead instructor of the taekwondo class that meets four nights per week at the Student Recreation Center, teaches both Gilmore and Johnson. Chen started learning the sport 10 years ago when her mom put Chen and her brother in classes for exercise. She received her black belt in 2002 and took classes off-and-on before arriving at Truman.

Chen started planning to teach the class her first semester at Truman, working with a senior at the time to improve the efficiency of the course and incorporate more self-defense. She began teaching the course in the spring of 2009.

"We wanted to really utilize all of our time and all of our equipment, but at the same time, we didn't want to cut back on the class," Chen said. "We wanted to make sure that we still had the same amount of students and were able to have the same amount of one-on-one time with each student and be able to help them progress." Chen said, "We wanted them to be pushing themselves to improve."

Chen said the student who improved the most is still working hard on perfecting his form and evaluating his own potential.

"He's the one who comes in and he's pushing himself to work hard. When you see a product of how hard they work every day," Chen said. "We have had students in the past who were not as interested in the sport." Chen said students in the past have had difficulty determining whether they had enough dedication and potential to continue the sport. Before and after each sparring match, the competitors shake hands with each other and with their opponent's coach.

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Gilmore said showing respect for your fellow competitors is one of the most important aspects of taekwondo.

"This is not a class where you fight, this is a class where you learn," he said. "We're not going to go out and challenge people to street fights. That's not really part of this class."