

Phillip Rhee-Underdog Master

by Marc Ziropiannis-Lead Correspondent

When people think of Phillip Rhee, they generally think of the martial arts champion, tournament organizer, bodyguard, movie star, writer, producer, and director. In fact, Phillip Rhee is known to have played many diverse roles in his life, both on and off the big screen. One of the least known, yet most important, roles in Phillip Rhee's curriculum vitae is that of champion of the underdog for the last 40 years. It was this lifetime of devotion to the less fortunate that culminated in the development of his new film project, Underdog Kids.

For Master Rhee, a 6th dan in Tae Kwon Do, 3rd dan in Hapkido, and black belt in Kendo, the affinity for the less fortunate is not a matter of sympathy, but empathy. As a young immigrant Asian boy growing up with little financial means and no ability to speak the language in San Francisco in the 1970s, all the odds were against his achieving the stardom he would earn over the course of the next 30 years. He was the quintessential underdog.

To what does Master Rhee attribute his ability to alter his path and avoid the rampant gang violence of his community? He credits it all to the martial arts.

“On the streets of San Francisco I witnessed it all. If it were not for Taekwondo, I would surely be dead.”

Rather than becoming a victim, or victimizer, Phillip Rhee decided to do what he calls “embracing the hardship.” He was determined to let adversity be the motivating force behind his life's goals, and the

martial arts his instrument to accomplish those goals.

“Through difficult times we come to understand what we are about as human beings. Adversity builds character.”

Phillip Rhee and his brother, Simon, learned at an early age that martial arts, and Tae Kwon Do in particular, were the keys to staying out of trouble, improving their lives, and helping them achieve many of the lofty benchmarks they set for themselves. Rhee, the son of a martial arts master in Korea, began training in the arts at four years old. He earned a black belt at an early age and focused on becoming one of the best fighters in the world. He embarked on a course of enrolling in every possible Tae Kwon Do tournament he could compete in. During those years he spent virtually every Saturday and Sunday at a martial arts tournament testing his skills. Phillip became nationally known in the Tae Kwon Do community for his proficiency in sparring, while, his brother, Simon for his skill in poomsae.

Through dedication and constant hard work, Phillip earned a spot on the United States Tae Kwon Do Team when it competed against South Korea in the 1980 Asian Games. As a Korean-born martial artist, he faced extreme opposition from the Korean fans for fighting under the banner of the American flag against the team of his birthplace. To make matters more difficult, he faced the highly revered captain of the Korean Team in the finals,



a fierce and beloved competitor. The match is still considered one of the most memorable in the history of modern Tae Kwon Do tournament sparring. Rhee, the underdog, won the respect of the fans and the Korean Team in the end. The iconic image of the two athletes embracing after the match became the symbol of the fraternity of the martial arts and spoke volumes about the competitors and their art.

“It wasn’t about politics. It wasn’t about the medals. It was about the spirit of the athletes.”

It was this historic match that became the basis for Rhee’s hugely successful film *Best of the Best*, which became an instant martial arts classic and spawned a series of sequels and spin-offs. Former UFC light heavyweight champion Chuck Lidell dubbed Rhee’s classic competition film his favorite.

In more recent years Rhee has continued making martial arts action films and has continued to teach Tae Kwon Do and Hapkido at least once a week in Los Angeles, where he still resides. He considers engaging with students his way of paying back to the Tae Kwon Do community he loves so dearly.

“As a member of the martial arts community, I feel an obligation to give back to society and to the children in particular. We are the gatekeepers and character builders of the next generation.”

As an instructor, Rhee has always made the personal development of children as important as the development of their physiques. He created a system of rewarding students for high academic performance outside of the dojang, through which they earn patches that they proudly display on their uniforms. He also has made anti-bullying a central

tenet of his children’s program. Anti-bullying, Rhee believes, should be a key component of any children’s Tae Kwon Do and martial arts program. It is obvious to even the casual observer that, for Rhee, this approach to instruction is one where he gets as much as he gives from his interaction with developing minds.

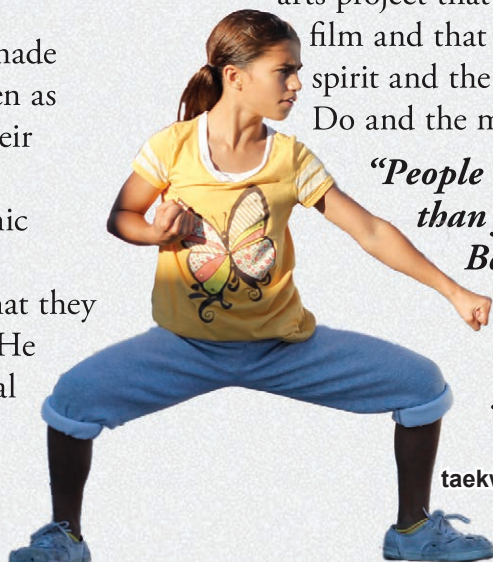
Phillip Rhee, in a world where mixed martial arts are so pervasive, has been a strong advocate for traditional martial arts training, with an emphasis on discipline and respect.

“Only when a tree has roots that are deep and strong will it truly be able to weather any storm.”

Rhee makes it clear that he is not against mixed martial arts training. He has studied and taught several styles. He is a strong proponent, however, of having a solid foundation in one style before commencing study in other styles. This is what he sees as the current deficit in much MMA training camps.

Phillip Rhee, though still a young man and martial artist, has accomplished more than most practitioners do in a lifetime. While others might have been content to rest on their laurels, Phillip Rhee is not wired to live off past fame or accolades; he is always determined to do more. As a mature martial artist and family man, he really wanted to use his personal experiences to create a martial arts project that would be a good action film and that also would capture the spirit and the essence of Tae Kwon Do and the martial arts.

“People are touched by more than just action in a film. Best of the Best proved that. I wanted to make a meaningful film with a heart.”



Unlike when Master Rhee developed *Best of the Best*, he now had a teenage son whose development and character were foremost in his mind. He wanted to develop a project to remind his son about what the martial arts had contributed to their family's life, and he wanted to highlight a lesson that has been with Rhee since he was a young boy--the fine distinction between opportunities and choices in a child's life that can differentiate "the path of thug from the path of the warrior." He wanted to remind his son of the value of always choosing the warrior's path, even though it may be the more difficult one.

Once conceived, Rhee, as he has throughout his life and career, embarked on a journey to create a film which told a martial arts underdog story in a relatable way to an audience of families. The product of this labor of love is *Underdog Kids*, a family-oriented martial arts film about a group of unlikely martial arts students who face off against the privileged and reigning Beverly Hills martial arts champions. The film was written, directed, and produced by Rhee, who also stars in the film as an aging fighter who forms a bond with this group of inner-city kids. The film also features Beau Bridges, Tom Arnold, Ted McGinley, and a number of up-and-coming child actors in leading roles.

Rhee's passion for the project and the subject matter so moved people along the journey that they practically donated their skills to the project. These benefactors include Arturo Sandoval, who created the score; Simon Rhee for the stunt choreography; and Jim Bolt for the sound mixing. All these contributors are accomplished in their fields, and all

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compensation far in excess of what Rhee's new martial arts film had budgeted for, yet they joyfully participated without concern for commercial gain. The film also features cameos by such martial arts legends as Dan Inosanto, Jun Chong, Don "the Dragon" Wilson, Benny "The Jet" Urquidez, and Richard Norton, who all lent their talents to the film out of their respect for Rhee and their belief in the power of martial arts to empower kids to achieve greatness.

It is Rhee's hope that *Underdog Kids* will capture the hearts and minds of filmgoers with its positive message in a way that hasn't occurred since Ralph Macchio defeated the Cobra Kai in *The Karate Kid*. Rhee is the first to recount how films like *Enter the Dragon*, *The Karate Kid*, and *Best of the Best*, noticeably increased the enrollment in Tae Kwon Do dojangs across the country. Will *Underdog Kids* be the next film in this lineage to inspire greater interest in traditional martial arts training? That remains to be seen.

Regardless of what happens with *Underdog Kids* at the box office, it has already achieved the goal of inspiring people through the martial arts, something that has become the hallmark of Phillip Rhee's life and career. The film was forged in the life, struggles, and adversity of an upbeat man and martial artist, an underdog man who wants his students and fans to always remember that "Tae Kwon Do is the convergence of mind, body, and spirit. It transcends all classes, all races, and differences in people. Tae Kwon Do saved my life, and for that, I will always be grateful." **TKD**

