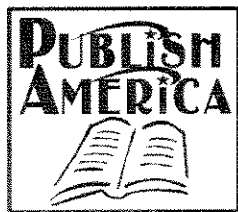


Finding Strength

by
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*To my family,
biological and not.*

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Chapter 1:

The Match

“Ooooooooooh...”

Spectators and competitors alike winced when the jab connected with Jamie’s face.

“Break!” the head judge commanded. The two combatants separated and stood on their respective lines.

Jamie absently rubbed his sore nose with his sparring glove. Beneath his padded headgear and close cropped, dark brown hair, his blue eyes were focused across the ring. At only five feet tall, he was six inches shorter and two years younger than his fourteen-year-old opponent. Their match was the first match of the red/brown belt division for eleven to fourteen-year-olds.

“Warning, White corner. Make contact to the face again and your opponent will be awarded a point.”

Sam glared, then shrugged, unbothered by the judge’s warning. Tucked behind his red belt was a white cloth to show that he was in the White corner. Jamie’s belt had no cloth because it was red and he was in the Red corner.

The competition was taking place in a large, high school gymnasium. It was the 4th year of the Treymark *Tae Kwon Do* Tournament Circuit that hosted six statewide tournaments annually. It was a well-attended circuit due to its reputation as being fair and impartially judged.

The bleachers were full of parents, participants and numerous spectators. Banners depicting school logos hung from the rafters above each school’s section. Beneath the banner for the Culver School

for Martial Arts, friends and family were watching Jamie and cheering him on.

“Competitors, fighting stance,” ordered the head judge. He paused to make sure both boys had their hands up before signaling them to continue with a chop of his arm and a *ki-hap*. “*Hiah!*”

Immediately, the two continued. Jamie tucked his elbow to block a sidekick aimed for his ribs. It was hard and pushed him back a step, but when his taller opponent tried to follow it with a turning back kick, Jamie quickly stepped toward him while his back was turned. Sam’s kick missed, exposing his chest momentarily, but Jamie hesitated and skipped back to throw a roundhouse kick that his opponent easily blocked.

Sam lifted his knee like he was going to kick, then leaped forward with several fast punches instead. None got through. The first few were blocked by Jamie’s rapidly moving padded gloves. The last one, though, forced him to duck.

Jamie knew he needed to attack to score a point, but he was afraid his opponent would strike first if he tried. Sam, as if knowing his doubts, hit him with a vicious kick that knocked him out of the ring even though it was blocked.

“Break! Warning, Red corner. Step out of the ring again and you will lose a point. Understood?” asked the head judge.

The ring was a square formed out of tape on the gymnasium floor. Just outside each corner, a judge watched intently, holding both a red and white flag to his or her sides. The head judge controlled the action from within the ring. He was the fifth vote. To get a point, three out of the five judges had to agree.

“Yes, sir,” Jamie said, his words slurred by his mouth guard. He understood the rules. One foot could step outside the tape boundaries, but at least one had to remain in the ring at all times.

“Ready... *Hiah!*”

Again, Sam jumped forward aggressively. Jamie sidestepped and threw a roundhouse kick at his opponent’s stomach. It slipped beneath Sam’s guard and found its target. *I got him!* he thought in triumph, just before he felt a punch land solidly on his chest, making him stumble

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backwards.

“Break! Judges’ call.” At the head judge’s command, each judge simultaneously indicated who they saw score the first contact. “Four-white. Point, White corner.”

No one saw that I got him first! Jamie raised his hands to continue. *If I lose another point, it’s over.*

“Competitors, ready... *Hiah!*”

Sam smiled before attacking; his black mouth guard made it look like he was missing all of his teeth. *I hope I don’t look like that after this is over,* Jamie thought. The next instant he was dodging his larger opponent’s leg. The ax kick that was intended to drop on Jamie’s shoulder fell harmlessly in front of him.

Sam was off-balance because he had expected to connect with his foot but missed. As he put his hand down to catch himself, Jamie saw his chance to score and thrust out a center kick, hitting him squarely in the ribs. Sam’s arm gave out, flopping him unceremoniously to the floor. He hopped back to his feet, growling and trying to attack again, but he was restrained by the head judge’s outstretched arm.

“Break! I said break! Back to your lines. There are no points to be awarded. You can’t score when your opponent is down, Red. When his hand or knee touches the floor, he is down.”

Jamie’s shoulders drooped a little. He had thought for sure he would get a point this time.

“Fighting stance... *Hiah!*” the head judge commanded.

Both competitors were breathing harder than normal. Sparring was usually very tiring, but waiting and anticipating their matches all day made it worse, not to mention the difficulty they had trying to breathe around their mouth guards. This time, neither was as quick to move off the head judge’s *ki-hap*.

They circled each other briefly, trying to catch their breath. Jamie and Sam threw an occasional jab just to test each other’s defenses, but neither attacked with anything threatening.

Sweat leaked from beneath Jamie’s headgear and dripped off his short, matted-down hair. He blinked as the sweat ran over his eyebrows and into his light blue-gray eyes, stinging and blurring his

vision. Droplets clung to the ends of Sam's longer, sandy-colored hair, too. They fell off and slid down his face without seeming to bother him.

Another bead of sweat got into Jamie's eye and he tried to wipe it away with his sparring glove. For a split second, he took his mind off Sam. That was enough. Partially blinded by his own hand, he didn't see the punch coming. It hit the hand he had over his eye, driving his own glove into his face. Then a kick blasted him in the stomach and knocked him off his feet.

"Uhhhhhg..." Jamie grunted, as he fell to the gym floor. His head made a dull thump against the wooden ground but was protected by the padding of his headgear.

One of the corner judges helped Jamie back to his feet. Even though the blow to his head was somewhat absorbed by his protective padding, his head still started to pound with a mild ache. His eye hurt, too. And it was still blurry, now more from his glove having been knocked into his face than from the sweat.

I can't believe I just punched myself in the face, Jamie thought. Now I'm the one that looks stupid... and I think I brushed my contact out with my glove!

"Judges' call," said the head judge.

Fully expecting to have lost the match, Jamie's head dropped when all five judges pointed white flags toward Sam. What he failed to notice was that they were indicating a flagrant foul. Their hands were moving the flag in a circular motion rather than holding it straight and steady.

"Point, Red corner." Then the head judge turned to Sam. "You do that again and you will be disqualified. I've already warned you once about contact to the face. Do you understand me, young man?"

Sam just glared at Jamie, ignoring the judge.

"I said, 'Do you understand me?'"

Sam curtly nodded.

"Touch gloves," the head judge ordered. They reached across and tapped each other's extended fist. Sam's jaw was clenched tightly around his mouth guard. "Keep it clean, guys. Next point wins. Let's

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finish this match cleanly, okay?"

Both young men nodded.

When the head judge's arm slashed downward to continue the match, Sam immediately pounced at Jamie with several rapid kicks. Jamie blocked the ones from the right with little difficulty, but the kicks from the left were hard to see. Somehow he managed to get an arm or leg in front of each attack, but the more they came from the left, the more off balance Jamie found himself.

Knowing he was in trouble, he blocked a kick with his shin and immediately followed up with a kick of his own. Without setting the blocking leg down, he thrust it out with a quick snap that Sam barely stopped. As it was, Sam had to jump back to get his arm in the way.

The two competitors stared across the ring at each other, and Jamie knew something was wrong. Sam smiled. He faked a jab and Jamie flinched, raising his hands to protect his head. Standing with his left side forward, he never saw the strike coming. When Jamie lifted his guard to block the jab, Sam launched a kick under his arm, hitting him in the ribs with his padded foot.

"Break! Judges' call," said the head judge. Once again, all five judges lifted the white flag. This time, though, no foul was called. It was a legal point. "Point, White corner. Two-one. White wins."

After bowing to the judges and to Sam (whose return bow was none too respectful), Jamie left the ring. He took off his sparring gear, put it in his duffle bag, and watched the rest of his division spar with little interest. He was ready to go home. He saw Sam defeat three other opponents and win the division's sparring championship. Sam's name would be engraved on a plaque with all the previous winners, and he would go home with a large and engraved championship trophy.

Jamie got up and walked over to where his dad and the others from his martial arts school were waiting, dragging his sparring gear behind him.

"Good try, Jamie. I'm proud of you," Mr. Martin said, putting his arm over his shoulders. Jamie knew his dad would have said that no matter what. Others from his school told him how well he did, too.

He just nodded and mumbled in reply.

“Jamie, come here.”

Jamie looked at his *Tae Kwon Do* instructor hesitantly, not really wanting to talk, but his dad nudged him from behind to get his feet moving. He walked over to face his instructor, alone.

Master Reanold bent down and put his hand on Jamie’s shoulder. “Look at me, Jamie.” He waited for him to lift his eyes before continuing. “You have nothing to be ashamed of. You were sparring a larger, older opponent, and you made him work harder for the win than anyone else.

“But there is one important lesson for you to learn in this. He didn’t beat you. And you didn’t lose because the judges didn’t see the kick you landed.” Jamie’s eyebrows lifted in surprise. He thought that no one had seen his kick land, but Master Reanold’s eyes always seemed to catch more than most. He should have known. “You beat you. I watched you handling him. You were holding back because you did not trust yourself. You did not believe that you could do it. As a result, you hesitated and failed to act in time.”

He straightened and gave Jamie’s back a firm pat. “I know you, Jamie, and I know what you are capable of. You need to find your confidence. If you do, next time you will win.”