

Wollesen having a senior moment ... in Taekwondo

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Almost 10 years ago, when Woody Wollesen announced at age 53 he intended to take up Taekwondo, the oldest form of martial arts, most around him thought he'd gone a little crazy — even his own mother. After all, if anything, most people are slowing down at 53, not thrusting themselves into full contact sports. But Wollesen excelled rapidly and within five years he'd achieved black belt status — the highest level.

Now, 62, the Germantown resident is coming off his fifth Maryland state senior title and national appearance, where he won two silver medals in San Jose in November.

“Oh sure, she thought I was crazy,” Wollesen said of his mother's reaction to his newfound hobby. “She said, ‘What is wrong with you?’”

It didn't matter. Wollesen, a natural athlete who was an all-state basketball player in his native Birmingham, Ala. during high school, had found his calling, so to speak. The financial services executive first started Taekwondo in a parent-child class with his children Katie, now 17 and Matthew, now 14. The two ascended the ranks as well, but eventually ventured off into other endeavors. Wollesen remained on track, eager to embark on the challenges in front of him.

“Taekwondo is a journey,” Wollesen said. “It's a sport, it's an art. There are all these challenges you go through. But it's a journey, and in my view, it's a way of life. What really develops over time is the positive benefits, the concentration, the self-control, the focus. And aside from all the physical attributes, just about every challenge you meet in life, in one form or another, you meet it in Taekwondo.”

While Wollesen thoroughly enjoys sparring now, he was a little hesitant at first, before he felt comfortable enough with his ability to match up against the best. And, with the mastery of any task, it took a while, though less time for him than most — it normally takes five to seven years to reach black belt status. In Taekwondo, which primarily focuses on kicking, on using technique and agility to overcome opponents, there are six belt colors — white, yellow, green, blue, red and black. Within each color, there are several levels and once the black belt has been reached, there are nine degrees, with each degree host to several levels. In order to advance, one must endure a five-hour test of skills. Currently Wollesen is a second degree black belt at the ninth level — there are 14 levels — and is eager to reach the third degree, where he'd be at master status.

“At the beginning it was very intimidating, because people who have found the techniques, [against them] you're having to use muscle, pure power to do certain things where as every type of sport, technique is a shortcut,” Wollesen said. “In Taekwondo it takes a long time [to master techniques], and it needs a lot of practice. Certainly one thing I like about it is it's extremely challenging to master, to become a black belt. Literally hundreds begin and only a few get there. It's really a goal in itself. Perhaps I'm a goal-oriented person, but I really wanted to make that black belt, no matter what it took. And it took a lot.”

As if becoming a Taekwondo black belt late in life wasn't impressive enough, at age 58, looking for some summer off-season training, Wollesen began to dabble in some track and field events. In the summer of 2001 he began teaching himself the discus, shot put and javelin. Merely a year later, he was competing at an elite level. And for the last three years, he's won gold medals at the Maryland State Senior Olympics Track and Field Championships in the 60-64 age category in the discus and shot put and earned silvers in the javelin. In 2005 he represented Maryland in the United States Track and Field Championships in Pittsburgh, the first time he qualified for all three events. While he didn't bring home a medal, he competed with former NCAA champions, longtime participants in the sport, and held his own, a feat he's quite proud of.

“Boy, what I wouldn't have done to learn Taekwondo in my teens or 20s,” Wollesen said. “But that was my challenge. From what we've been able to discern from research, I'm the only man or woman after the age of 50 to have taken on this martial art and rose to be champion over five years. And I'm very proud of that. But I wanted to see if I could become a black belt. And that's the important part of it. No matter what it is, everyone has a goal and the reality is, it's never too late. If I can do it, you

can do it.”

Wollesen has fought degenerative arthritis in both his knees to keep training — seven days a week at the gym and two days in the studio at East-West Taekwondo in Potomac under the tutelage of Master Parshotam Sharma. And through the years he has racked up 15 gold medals at the Maryland State Taekwondo championships in the over-50 heavyweight category and two gold medals, two silvers and a bronze at the national level. He still has a portion of his journey left, and he’ll keep at it for as long as he can, but he’ll never forget those precious winning moments.

“After my first gold medal, I literally had to sit down,” Wollesen said. “I went into a corner and stuck my legs up. The first thing that comes into your mind is your family, your kids, Master Sharma, everyone who’s helped me get here. Really, it’s being like a kid again, like being 9 years old and getting your first bike ride. It’s a rush. I figure, I, me, have a gold medal and am the champion of the United States. I mean I’m sorry, I wouldn’t trade that for anything. I’ll take a gold medal any day. No matter what you can do in this life, you’re a U.S. champion. And that’s a big deal.”