

1st Open Black Belt World Championship

It happened for the first time in history, a black belt championship featured in theatres across the country - the 1st Open Black Belt World Championship (OBBWC) made its debut on October 20th, 2007, featuring pure martial arts.

"We have taken the first big step by making the words, 'lights, camera, action' become synonymous with martial art championships," organizer and host of the OBBWC, Grandmaster Werner Leuschner said. "For the first time in history, we are bringing martial art championships to the big screen."

Taping of the thrilling two-day event began with the opening ceremonies where Northern Leg Southern Fist performed the traditional Lion Dance.

After the introductions of the international competitors and world renowned grandmasters, martial art personalities arrived to treat the crowd with their extensive knowledge and skill. Legends such as Bill "Superfoot" Wallace, undefeated kickboxing champion and fastest kick clocked at 100km/h; Don "the Dragon" Wilson, holder of 11 world titles in 3 different weight classes and actor/producer of 24 films ('Batman Forever' and 'Last Sentinel'); Michael Jai White, superstar martial artist/actor ('Spawn', 'Exit Wounds', 'Undisputed II' and the upcoming Batman movie 'The Dark Knight'); Cynthia Rothrock, action film star, appearing in over 40 films ('China O'Brian' and 'Tiger Claws I, II, & III').

Other thrilling VIP additions were Chad Netherland, a breaker of ice blocks and a ripper of phonebooks and decks of cards lengthwise, and his father, Dan "the King of Breaking" Netherland, who attempted to break his previous Guinness Record of smashing 20 bricks in one blow.

A warm welcome speech followed, given by the host, Grandmaster Leuschner, who himself is no stranger to the martial arts' world. His 30 year plus extensive career in the arts has awarded him the gold medal winner as the European Champion in Philippine Stick Fighting along with holding his 8th gold sash in Wing Chun Kung Fu and his 5th Gold Sash in Escrima. Styles under his belt also include Karate, Tae Kwon-Do, Jiu-Jitsu, Hung Gar, Kick Boxing, Thai boxing, Southern Praying Mantis, and Thai Chi. Grandmaster Leuschner's address centered on his purpose of hosting the OBBWC.

"I want to see martial arts get the same respect and popularity as other recognized sports," he told the crowd. "We will need the cooperation of many martial artists to bring this much needed goal into fruition. Politics must be lessened, prejudices must be overcome, and community spirit must be instilled. Let us work together in friendship so we can realize this success."

Success was evident at the OBBWC. Numerous recognized disciplines competed side by side. The two-day event featured sparring from WTF Tae Kwon Do, Kung Fu, Karate, Kickboxing, along with forms competitions that included Chinese, Okinawa, and Korean styles.

The event encompassed everything needed for entertainment. A heavy-weight kickboxing round even supplied the OBBWC with a knockout fight.

Aside from the numerous fights over the two days, the addition of performances helped to draw new spectators to the sport.

Grupo Uniao Na Capoeira performed a 400 year old Brazilian martial art dance, which included skilled martial art sequences and spectacular acrobatics. For the weapon lovers, Yudh Gatka Akhara dazzled the audience with their skill in an incredible performance of knife, sword, and stick fighting. Two students

from the Quebec Sifu Toy Chinese Martial Arts School performed a humorous and acrobatic show. Grandmaster Germon Miller displayed an artistic African martial art dance and students of Grandmaster Philipman Chow demonstrated their art through engaging forms all done to music.

And if that wasn't enough entertainment, nine international grandmasters performed for the crowds their impeccable martial art skills from their unique lineages. The OBBWC was honored to have Grandmasters Robert Cutrell (Chun Ji Do), Gary Lam (Wing Chun Kung Fu), Son Myung Soo (Tae Kwon Do), Mo Chow (Hung Gar), Darrell Lafrance (Kumo Jiu Jitsu), Philipman Chow (Seven Star Praying Mantis), Germon Miller (African Martial Arts), John Scott (Tai Chi Chuan), and Klaus Schumacher (Hap Ki Do) attending.

Also on the agenda were the performances of the VIPs who shared their experiences and insights of their art. And although each was of a different style, everyone benefited from them.

Michael Jai White said it well, "We are in a brotherhood of martial arts. We should all learn from each other so we can then evolve. If you can take a piece of what I'm doing and make it part of your repertoire - 'wonderful!' That's what it's all about."

Dr. Dan Netherland dramatically raised the tension in the dojo with his attempt to surpass his current world record of breaking 20 bricks with one blow. He explained how important power breaking is to martial arts that normally focus on speed and accuracy.

"Students need a calibration of what damage their techniques can do," Dr. Netherland stressed. "This gives them balance when striking, and confidence in their ability. And confidence reduces aggressiveness because they know how bad they can hurt people, and can choose to walk away."

Although each performance was a learning experience, the event was not without its humor. When Master of Ceremony and radio personality John Harada asked veteran Bill Wallace whether he could still kick his foot over his head like he did fifteen years ago, the martial art VIP replied, "I would rather just kick you in the head. If you find out you put your foot over someone's head that's a miss, right? And then, you're an awful great target." Whether with their awesome skills or entertaining speeches, the VIPs energized the crowd between the competitions.

Forms competitions were as enjoyable as the sparring with the demonstration of extraordinary music and weapon katas. In the Okinawan forms, suspense rose by an unexpected tie breaker.

Tae Kwon Do and Kickboxing had a particularly strong presence at the event, sporting the uniqueness of international black belts that added intensity to the tournaments.

"When the sparring started, I was almost off my seat," said a spectator of Toronto.

The two-day event was shot in high-definition video for future broadcast. Other events like boxing and wrestling have successfully been broadcast on the big screen and Grandmaster Leuschner thought it a great idea to show martial art championships as well.

When the OBBWC came out in theatres across Canada, it gave martial art championships an exposure that had long been overdue - it was a huge step for the martial art community.

Pat Marshall, vice-president of communications and investor relations for Cineplex said: "We are pleased to offer our guests this exciting opportunity to see martial arts championship matches on our giant screens across Canada. It was a great show seeing these talented athletes dominating our 50 foot screens."

The OBBWC was a success and Grandmaster Leuschner is already planning another OBBWC where he hopes to attract other Hollywood

heavy-weights like Chuck Norris, Jackie Chan, Jet Li, and Chiu Chi Ling.

The first OBBWC was a huge learning experience for Grandmaster Leuschner and he knows that changes will be necessary to make the next OBBWC bigger and better. The addition of a mixed martial art and Escrima division as well as two-day preliminaries to make competitors earn a spot in the broadcasted quarterfinals are but a few of the changes expected.

"The idea of the preliminaries is to have only the best of the best competing in each art so to keep standards high at the OBBWC," said Alex Leuschner, administrative promoter of the event, "and also give sports viewers the best martial art fights to watch.

"My father's purpose is to elevate the status of martial arts to that of other sports and this can only be done with first-rate fights."

The OBBWC 2007 was a great show and a notable beginning, an event that none who participated in will forget. The display of martial art spirit and camaraderie between the disciplines was remarkable to see.

When and where is the next OBBWC?

"Right now our focus is on promoting the DVD to get more exposure," Grandmaster Leuschner said. "It will be released throughout North America and Europe. From there we are planning to get it on TV. Once that cycle is completed, we will work on the 2009 OBBWC. The exact date and location has yet to be decided."

So if you missed the live event and the movie, you have the opportunity to see it on the upcoming DVD.

A hat off to Grandmaster Leuschner's outstanding martial art show, the 1st OBBWC - The second is eagerly awaited.

"One man doesn't make the show," Grandmaster Leuschner emphasized. "Gigantic things always need a group effort. I want to thank all martial artists and organizations that helped me with this mega event, especially my family, without them the OBBWC wouldn't have happened."

For more information on the OBBWC DVD and the 2009 event, visit the official OBBWC website at www.obbwc.com