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Bradley So (Lawyer) of Queen City Law comments on his recent experience representing New Zealand in WAKO World Kickboxing Championships in Macedonia Oct 2011

"He who is not courageous enough to take risks will accomplish nothing in life"
– Muhammed Ali.

In October this year, I had the privilege to be part of the New Zealand national kickboxing team and participated in the WAKO World Kickboxing Championships in Skopje, Macedonia. "Hard work, determination" were the words that I repeated in my head for the last 4 months. It was my first time being part of a tournament with over 54 countries and 823 athletes. The fear of the unknown, the fear of failure, and more importantly the fear that I'm not good enough was plaguing my mind. In the end, the opportunity of a lifetime outweighed my fears. I had to see if I was up for the challenge.

Martial art has been a big part of my life and I have been doing it ever since I can remember. My brothers were martial art junkies and I was their favourite toy. Both my brothers were at least 10 years older than me. You could say that I was a training dummy at a very early age. We started with Tae Kwon Do and by the time we moved to New Zealand we made the transition to Kickboxing and finally Mixed Martial Art ("MMA").

I've always looked up to fighters and respected their dedication to the sport. To me fighting was the ultimate test of courage. You are putting your heart and soul to the test once you step into the ring. I have always wondered whether I had the courage to take that step. It was not until I started to work at Queen City Law that I made a promise to myself that I would take this challenge before I reach 30. Initially, my main focus was MMA but my coach asked me to try out for the NZ Kickboxing team for the World Championships in April this year.



During the trials, I didn't expect to be selected given the calibre of athletes. You could say I had the least fighting experience in Kickboxing. I felt like it was by divine intervention that I was chosen. Although I was hesitant to take the offer, it was the best decision that I would make.

I am very lucky to have one of the best employers in town. When I informed Marcus, the principal of Queen City Law, he was ecstatic and gave me full support in my training. It goes without saying that Queen City Law provided me with a work life balance required to reach my goal. In the last four months, I trained 6 days a week which consisted of training in the morning and after work. KFC, McDonald's and alcohol was out of the question, although the Rugby World Cup opening was one exception!

Soon enough it was time to fly to Macedonia and just like before an exam, you always questioned whether you've done enough. There were no egos or personalities that clashed and everyone got along which made this trip extra special. Everyone was on the same boat, we didn't know what to expect. By the end of the trip everyone had their own nickname. I was pumba for reasons I cannot disclose.

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After 30 hours of flight, we finally arrived in Skopje Macedonia. We arrived at our hotel very late at night. It wasn't until the next day that I realised that I was there not for a holiday but to represent NZ. There were four other countries that were staying at our hotel, France, Mauritius, Madagascar and South Korea. My nerves started to kick in as we had to weigh in to see if we met our target weight. I couldn't help but think "What did I get myself into?" There were so many athletes in one room but you could see that everyone was feeling the pressure. Being Kiwis, the NZ team was probably the only team that still had a smile while waiting. We would say hi to the other competitors and have a blank response in return. You could tell that each athlete was checking whether you would be the person they would be fighting. We would do the same, I would ask my teammate: *He's too tall to be my weight division right?*

It was quite intense, when you went to the toilet you could hear some of the athletes forcing themselves to spew to drop the extra weight. It was finally our turn to test the scale, the whole NZ team ended up being overweight by 1 or 2 kilos over their weight class. It was probably because of the water retention during the 30 hour flight. We were still extremely jet lagged. Everyone was in a panic but luckily we found a quiet room to shed extra 1 or 2 kilos. I used the skipping rope as going to the toilet was not an option for me. After 30 – 40 min, everyone finally was within their weight class. That night, we were given the draw cards and I was informed that I would be fighting the next day against Montenegro. I was tempted to Google his name but chose not to as it wouldn't make a difference anyway, it would probably make me even more nervous.

The next day everyone including the other countries in our hotel was taken by bus to the stadium. It was our first time to finally see the stadium and we were in awe. There were 3 rings that were beautifully made and the stadium was still very new. I thought to myself, if I get knocked out at least I'll get knocked out in a nice ring.

It soon became apparent that New Zealand would be one of the smaller teams. Each team would have their flags on the stands and the New Zealand team would be in one little corner. We only had 8 fighters compared to Russia, they had at least 50 and the French team had two separate teams. At least I could say, that we had the best uniform.

It was two hours before my fight and my coach told me to start warming up. We put on the wraps and did some pad work to warm me up. The whole team would be there to give me support. It was a great feeling. You could see the fighters doing the same. I think the only awkward part of the warm up was when I had to get oiled up to warm my muscles and make it numb. The Croatian team had a blonde goddess rubbing down each fighter. I had to quietly call out to my teammate – "Bro can you rub me down?"

I was quietly listening to my music and was doing some light shadow boxing when my team mate grabbed me by the shoulder and said "it's your turn mate". We slowly walked towards the ring like



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I was quietly listening to my music and was doing some light shadow boxing when my team mate grabbed me by the shoulder and said "it's your turn mate". We slowly walked towards the ring like it was my last walk from death row. I entered the ring and I finally got to see my opponent. He was very tall he was probably 6 ft tall while I was around 5 ft 7. So I knew from the get go that I had to cut the distance and I would use my hand speed to counter every time he kicked. By the time we touched gloves, the nerves were distant memory. It was all on! The first round went well, I felt like I kept my composure and we traded blows. I came out on top as I landed cleaner punches. The only thing that bothered me the most was his legs, there were so long and he was making the most of his height. He was scoring points from his leg kicks. I would be very cautious in attacking without faking as he might catch me with a front kick in my chin. I wasn't breathing hard so my fitness was doing fine. In the second round, he knew that my strength was using my hands so he quickly adjusted by hugging me every time I would get too close. My coach told me that he had the second round and so I had to give it my all in the final third round to get the win. I started strong in the final round with a clean straight right, right down the middle it rocked him pretty good. He would still continue to do the same and kept hugging me when I got close, it was very frustrating. Time went by pretty fast and the round finally ended. If I didn't win this fight, I would be out of the tournament.

The referee called us in the middle of the ring and raised my opponent's hand. It was devastating. All that hard work for nothing! I slowly walked back to my corner with my chin down. My coach hugged me and said: "you did good mate, you got nothing to be ashamed of that was a close match". Two out of the three judges scored against me.



It was a good learning experience for me even though I didn't come out on top. I learnt a lot about myself, that I had the courage to take a risk in something that I am passionate about. I had the determination to pursue my goal. I could say that I would have no regrets, that I did my best! I hope to bring this mentality in law, mirroring the determination and tenacity when advocating for my clients and helping them through their difficult cases. My goal now is to prepare for the next world championship in two years time. I hope that with the extra experience, I can come out on top.

Before I went to this competition, my friend asked me why I enjoyed Kickboxing so much? I couldn't really answer him at the time. However, I think I can now give him an answer. One of my team mates coach gave us a quote before we fought that really made sense as to why I enjoy my sport. The quote said the following;

"Love the game for the challenge of working harder than you ever have at something. Love the game because it takes all team members to give it life. Love the game because at its best, the game tradition will include your contribution. Love the game because you belong to a long line of fine athletes who have loved it. It is your legacy. Love the game so much that you will pass on your love of the game to another athlete who has seen your dedication, your work, your challenge, your triumphs.....and then that athlete will, because of you, love the game."

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