

Grandmaster Florindo and his Place in the History of Argentine Taekwon-Do

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Originally published in Totally TaeKwonDo magazine 108th issue



Grandmaster Pedro Florindo (68), a celebrated martial arts personality, died in his hometown of Buenos Aires, Argentina on January 13, 2018.

He was a rare example of an early champion, an innovative teacher of traditional Taekwondo, and a successful coach who was well known at international circles.

Florindo came from a working class environment, and as a teenager had some basic knowledge of boxing, quite useful in his environment. At 18, he started learning Korean Karate under Lee Kae Won for some months until mandatory military service interrupted his training. Upon its completion, he went back to the dojang (one of the few martial arts centers in Northern Buenos Aires) to find that a new instructor was in charge. It was Lee, Chong Seo, an impressive 6th Dan in Moo Duk Kwan and Hapkido black belt. In Korea, Lee had learnt from Hong Chong-Soo, with frequent access to Founder Hwang Kee). Out of respect to Master Kim Han Chang, a 5th Dan who was the first and seniormost instructor in Argentina, Lee concealed his true rank saying he was 5th to whoever asked him. Lee was an impressive kicker, acrobatic and precise. At a time when Taekwon-Do was very similar to Japanese Karate, Lee's spinning kicks were a clear example of what the Korean art was about. There are many stories of his unusual skills. In one occasion, when sparring with a student, he jumped forward straight

over his opponent's head lightly "walking" on his shoulder, and swiftly kicking him in the middle of the shoulder blades, to be brutally expelled into a wall without understanding what had happened. In his classes he would use a wooden frame with sharp nails protruding to the inside, and ask his students to perform kicks through the frame, many of whom would get home with breeding ankles.



Florindo's teacher Master Lee Chong Seo

Those who were able to cope with Lee's rigors became very good. Pedro Florindo and Carlos Verdún were at the top of that group.

At that time all Taekwon-Do in Argentina worked under the International Taekwon-Do Federation banner, and General Choi used to visit the country frequently. The most relevant Korean masters by the mid 1970s were Kim Han Chang, Choi Nam Sung, Chung Kwang Duk, Lee Chong Seo and Yang Dae Chol, all of them based in Buenos Aires. Other instructors (such as Kim Young Whang and Kim Sung Su) taught in other provinces. The first national tournament was held in 1975, and competitors were required to wear chest guards, which contrasted with the customary way to conduct sparring at the dojangs, with no protection and a particularly violent sort of "non contact".

Verdún became the heavyweight champion, and Florindo came up with a second place as middleweight under Carlos Ouro, inaugurating a classical rivalry. Ouro was a tall and highly talented athlete; Florindo was five inches shorter, aggressive and with some unexpected kicking combinations. Along the years, Ouro –a student of Choi Nam Sung- prevailed twice, Florindo once, and one was a tie.



Florindo vs. Ouro

Florindo used to cross train with Karate stylists, and also participated in the open-style circuit, winning a South American championship organized by Robert Trias' USKA branch in 1977. As a fighter, Florindo had a very nasty side kick that he used either stepping in or spinning, and he also liked to rush into opponents with a combination of straight punches as typically seen in Shotokan karate. His physique was rather stocky and not very flexible, but his dedication and intelligence overcame any athletic disadvantage.

When his instructor Master Lee decided to discontinue teaching Taekwon-Do, Florindo and Verdun decided to follow with Master Yang Dae Chol, a former Junior Korean champion at the KTA who came from Ji Do Kwan. Yang was the son of a Korean Army Colonel and, as it would be expected from a former champion, his sparring training regime was very demanding, with a kicking style and footwork that reflected the newer trends in Korea. Lightning fast kicks, and painful contact were the norm at Yang's.

Florindo and Verdun participated in the 1977 WTF Chicago World Championships. The lack of information at the time was so big, and their understanding of what was happening in Taekwondo politics so low that they expected to see General Choi in the event.

During the two following years new Korean teachers arrived to Argentina, promoting the World Taekwondo Federation. The most important of them was Ku Yong Chae, a proponent of a modern and dynamic Taekwondo who was a Vietnam veteran and had a strong dislike of communists, a category which included anything ITF. Ku was sponsored by Edgar Perez Colman, the Argentine ambassador that was returning from Korea and caused the WTF to be officially recognized by the Argentine Government. As events unfolded and political pressures from the Korean Embassy in Buenos Aires became clearer, the Korean masters that had previously belonged to the ITF started to reconsider their situation.



Kim Han Chang's signature scissors kick

The spark of Taekwon-Do in Argentina had been ignited by Kim Han Chang. Kim had suffered the Korean war as was looking for a fresh perspective in life. After finishing his University studies, during late 1966 he mentioned his intention to travel to Argentina to his instructor Uhm Woon Kyu and senior Park Hae Man, they instructed him to contact General Choi, who was then in charge of dispatching instructors overseas. Kim trained in General Choi's house at the fancy Han Nam-dong district in Seoul for about eight months where he learnt the new ITF patterns. Prior to his departure he was promoted to Fourth Dan and entrusted with the mission to spread Taekwondo under the ITF supervision. The trip on a Dutch cargo vessel took two months navigating through the Indic Ocean, Madagascar, South Africa, across the Atlantic to Brazil, and finally Buenos Aires.

At that time Kim was 29. At the deck of the ship, he met Choi Nam Sung, 31, and Chung Kwang Duk, 18, who were both heading to Paraguay to settle and hopefully prosper at commerce. The three had a

deep interest in the martial arts, and Kim convinced them to teach Taekwon-Do under the ITF banner. Choi had endured a rough infancy and liked tough training methods that helped him to develop his notable strength; Kim had a more privileged situation and a flawless technique. Actually, Grandmaster Kim enjoys legendary status in Argentina. Chung, whom they considered their “little brother”, was passionate, strong willed and ambitious in everything he undertook. Although he moved to New York on the late 70s, he would become a significant figure in the Argentine ITF Taekwon-Do scene until the early 1990s.



During the 70s with Daniel Cirelli and Gustavo Perez Florindo liked to highlight the streamlined sidekick he learnt from Master Lee



The new political circumstances in Korea and the instructions to cut all connections with Gen. Choi disturbed Kim. He even flew to Korea to speak with his seniors at Chung Do Kwan, and confirmed the situation. After careful consideration and pressed by the threat of treason, in 1979 he decided to join the WTF, leaving his students free to decide their own way. Other masters followed similar paths, and Chung Kwang Duk became the only Korean instructor in Argentina who remained in the ITF. Argentine Taekwondo was split forever. As a general rule, the most senior Argentine students decided to continue in the ITF, while the newer black belts understood that their obligation was to follow their teachers and trust their decision.

(in the picture, General Choi with Master Kim Han Chang, and Florindo sporting a moustache behind them at center)

In 1979 master Jong Chan Kim visited Buenos Aires and gave a technical seminar which was an eye-opener to all students, as there were substantial differences with the prior karate-like style. On that occasion an exam was held in which the 21 seniormost instructors were awarded 4th Dan: Enrique Eiriz, Javier Dacak, Pablo Trajtenberg, Héctor Marano, Carlos Mattos, Pedro Florindo, Ricardo Gurtler, Sosa, Emilio Casagrande, Vargas, Miguel Nasini, “Mito” Ramisch, J. Sanchez, R. Sanchez, Sanz, Pintos, Aquino, Diehl, Grispino, Desimone and Luque. There were also 3rd and 2nd degree promotions. Florindo and Casagrande were rather strange cases since until then they were quite identified with Taekwondo competitions that were the strong point of the WTF.



With student Claudio Iedwab

By 1980 Florindo founded the Escuela Argentina de Taekwondo, with the support of associated instructors Armando and Jorge Carabajal, Jorge Rogers, Carlos Gómez de Olivera, Francisco Taboada and Francisco Beloso, among others. Florindo was a successful instructor who produced an impressive number of students (among them Claudio Iedwab, an undisputed champion until some years later he settled in Toronto, Canada and would deserve an article himself). Florindo taught in one of the main clubs in Buenos Aires (Gimnasia y Esgrima, “GEBA”), and offered an innovative training program which was implemented and supervised by a qualified staff of instructors including Gustavo Pérez and Jorge Rábago. By that time he was studying Physics at University, but his job as Taekwondo instructor and the need to support his family prevented him from completing his studies. It is clear that such knowledge benefitted his approach to the martial arts, as he always loved to talk about vectors, angles, forces, etcetera. His dojang at Sucre street and GEBA were places where Gen. Choi gave seminars throughout the years (I learnt at Sucre and recall receiving Master Tran Trieu Quan on a 1984 visit). His organization grew across the whole country and by the mid 1980s it included more than 10,000 students. Florindo was appointed ITF Director, and by that time roughly one third of the Argentine Taekwondo population was under his leadership.



The early members of the Escuela Argentina de Taekwondo, circa 1981

By that time he used to put together competitive teams who had great performance at national and international competitions. Among those, Eric Calvo, Daniel Burban, Laura Miceli, Juan Sunini, Mari Potenza, José Luis Soler, Marcelo Bordiez, Marcelo Cremona, Brian Mutri, Rubén Sánchez, Guillermo Longo, Julia Jakimczuk, Marina Serrano, Manuel Adrogué, Víctor D'Amore, Ezequiel Borracer, Lucas Villa, and Gabriel Provale.

In the following years, there were some frictions among the local Taekwondo organizations. The two other significant players were the group led by Héctor Marano and Pablo Trajtenberg (two talented and senior instructors originally taught by Choi Nam Sung) on the one side, and Chung Kwang Duk's on the other side. Without entering into unnecessary detail, one aspect that may have tilted the balance against Florindo is that he was very "personal" in the way he conducted his group. His students wore a Moo Duk Kwan dobok (except at ITF competitions), and in some ways he was justly considered a bad example for spreading the ITF way. Gen. Choi seemed to like him, but at a certain point Florindo had become disruptive, and Marano / Trajtenberg provided a more solid and reliable platform to ensure that ITF style would keep growing in the 90s.

Florindo's relationship with other organizations was less than ideal, and his inquisitive and rebel nature (he would not accept instructions unless good reasons were attached) resulted in his departure from the ITF. Such situation did not decrease the number of students, since among his group, the figure of General Choi was not as central as it had become in the teachings of other groups, and Florindo was a very charismatic and attractive figure, considering he combined the abilities to explain (teach) and perform, that he had a strong background in traditional TKD (even Hapkido) and one of the very few senior masters with a fighting past. He was usually found in the covers of the local Yudo Karate magazine. In 1991 he published "Trabajo especial de piernas para el Tae Kwon Do" (Special Leg Training for Tae Kwon Do), in which he addressed all aspects of training for kicking including muscular development in terms of strength, flexibility, kicking exercises, anatomy and some concepts related to combat.

In the early 90s Florindo organized annual tours to the United States in which we, his students, had the chance to meet and train with top instructors as GrandMasters Ji Han Jae, Sihak Henry Cho, Hee Il Cho, Myung Kwang Sik, Jun Chong, Phillip Rhee, Dan Inosanto, Henry Tae Joon Lee, etc. I performed as translator and assisted in the planning of such memorable trips where we had the opportunity to train Taekwon-Do, Hapkido, Hwarang-Do and other disciplines under some of the most famous figures in the world of 20th century martial arts. In total, around 100 instructors joined him in those trips, and their martial arts minds were open forever. A gap widened between their “enlightened” plural perspectives and those of other groups who had contact with General Choi and considered him to be the only and undisputable source of Taekwon-Do knowledge.



On 1993 he became a founding member of Taekwondo International, a British-based organization under GM David Oliver, who was highly regarded by Florindo. I had the chance to travel with him and Jorge Carabajal to Leicester for the inaugural meeting.

At that point Florindo became the first Tae Kwon Do leader in Argentina to operate outside the traditional ITF – WTF binary perspective. He was the first “independent”.

In the following years he consolidated his prestige internationally, but also evidenced his lack of abilities to adapt to the growth of his senior associates and to allow them to display their actions as leaders themselves. His success in organizing international sparring teams was at the expense of not being able to lead his organization to its next stage. His associates could simply not understand a man who kept inventing new projects and ideas but failed to minimally secure all they had already achieved.

Florindo was in several ways unique. He had been blessed by being a student of both Lee and Yang, whom Grandmaster Kim Han Chang himself once told me they were the best among the more than 20 Korean masters that settled in Argentina during its first 20 years. Florindo had the hunger to become someone in life. He did not care for money, position or power, just deeds. He cared little about conventions. Since his childhood he was a fighter as well as a rationalist. He respected tradition to the extent it proved useful under his humanistic approach to the martial arts. He was playful, yet attentive. He was provocative, charming, and his passion for the martial arts contagious. He was so good at it, you wanted that for you.



Florindo once had a closed-door sparring session with the extraordinary Bill "Superfoot" Wallace. Both were in their mid 40s and active. Witnesses tell that in their brief encounter the Champion did not find Florindo as submissive as he expected. The snapshot shows the farewell handshake. An interesting moment.

After he joined Taekwondo International, Florindo put together several teams which gained prestige in the European open tournament scene. On the year 2000 World Championships at Eindhoven, Netherlands, the Argentine team won the first place with Pedro Florindo and Edgardo Villanueva as coaches to a truly non-political group that showcased some of the best fighters in the country (M. Cremona, J. Sunini, P. Ferreiro, F. Figari, E. Borracer, y A. Gattembank).

The 2002 Taekwondo International World Championships were organized in Miami, USA, by Florindo and assisted by Eric Calvo and other students. The Argentines won a first place against the notable team presented by the Taekwondo Association of Great Britain.



Florindo with student Leo Salguero at his Miami dojang

Some years later Florindo faced personal situations that affected his organization and other areas of life, thus retiring from Taekwondo International. Several of his students such as Master Victor D'Amore have remained active in such entity, keeping up the Argentine reputation.



Florindo with student Manuel Adrogué and at right with Grandmaster HC Kim and students Adrogué and Cremona

As a teacher, Florindo had a special aura that captivated the audience like a master magician. He was rather informal and liked to make people feel comfortable, making jokes as he explained. At seminars, he liked to surprise with skills and knowledge, talking about psychology, strategy and technique. On one occasion in 1996, at a seminar he was teaching a counterattack against a spinning hook kick, in which he used his rear-leg twisting kick to the stomach sneaking under the attack. That was typical

“out of the box” Florindo, showing unusual things. At that point a loud voice was heard from the back of the hall saying “that is fake, it doesn’t work in the real situation.” Florindo invited the challenging black belt to step up and try for himself. Of course, one factor that makes the technique work is that it is unexpected, but anyway... The guy went and tried his best “real” spinning hook kick to Florindo’s face: he was nailed with a twisted kick that put him down immediately bent to his knees grasping for breath.

In his later years, Florindo could redirect or render useless an opponent’s attacks with minimal motions of his arms, shoulders or hips. He would use distance and timing in ways hard to perceive, frustrating anyone sparring with him. He would not telegraph his motions and his strikes, even in relaxed situations with his students, were always sharp and painful. He had perfect control of his strikes, and liked to hit with his protruding knuckles slightly stronger than you would expect to receive. His reflexes were otherworldly. About seven years ago, I visited his dojang and had a light sparring session. I was a lightweight, fast 6th Dan in my early 40s, and we were mostly playing (seriously, as you always did with him). At a point he got me right in the middle with his spinning side kick and, without planting his foot, did a roundhouse kick, his instep barely touching my face. He was over 60 years old and not in perfect shape, but his Taekwon-Do level was extraordinary.

On 2017 he was awarded 9th Dan by GM Kim Han Chang, the father of Taekwondo in Argentina. Grandmaster Kim recognized him as one of the top Taekwondo masters born in Argentina.



Florindo received 9th Dan from Grandmaster HC Kim

Florindo was very charismatic, and people liked his simple and friendly manner. He always asked people about their families by their names. Students were very fond of having access to such a legendary martial artist with an unassuming personality.

Partially the humbleness of Florindo may be explained in that he did not care about the past, he always looked to a future with projects to fulfill and skills to master. He was almost an addict to challenges, like a naughty boy with a grin in his face that wants to prove he is the boldest at the neighborhood. He never hesitated to risk it all to gain a little more.

I cannot help but think about some lines of the great poem by Rudyard Kipling...

*If you can dream—and not make dreams your master;
If you can think—and not make thoughts your aim;
If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster
And treat those two impostors just the same;
If you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken
Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,
Or watch the things you gave your life to, broken,
And stoop and build 'em up with worn-out tools:*

*If you can make one heap of all your winnings
And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss,
And lose, and start again at your beginnings
And never breathe a word about your loss;
If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew
To serve your turn long after they are gone,
And so hold on when there is nothing in you
Except the Will which says to them: 'Hold on!'*

*If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
Or walk with Kings—nor lose the common touch,
If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you,
If all men count with you, but none too much;
If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
And—which is more—you'll be a Man, my son!*

We his students for several decades have experienced admiration, gratitude, joy, and sometimes exasperation as he very much exceeded Kipling's standard. Some of us left his organization years ago, some few remained by his side (Eric Calvo, Daniel Castera, Hernan Diaz Rentsch, Walter Lee, Leonardo Salguero, Sergio Cantore, etc.), but we are all proud and feel blessed to be his students.

In the last months his health was rapidly deteriorating, but his martial art skills seemed unaffected. He had lost weight but managed to keep his invincible image intact to us his students, like a magician, concealing from us his condition at plain sight. He always said a martial artist should not expose his weaknesses. Last month he died unexpectedly in his apartment. We were struck in surprise and with pain, as he used to like.

Always a rebel dreamer, Argentine Taekwon-Do owes him so much. If there is one phrase that we can say that guided his life, is the mythic motto of Star Trek's Enterprise:

"To boldly go where no man has gone before".



Manuel Adrogué, a 7th Dan, was a student of Grandmaster Florindo since 1983. He is a member of the Allied International Taekwon-Do Council under Grandmaster Park Jong Soo. For more information, see <http://taekwon.com.ar/index.php/english/>