



*“Try to learn as much as possible, because then you will know from where or whom you can get help.”*

# MARTIAL HEART

**MR LAI HAN SENG**  
Han Academy Pte Ltd

Han Academy Pte Ltd operates under the name of J H Kim Taekwondo Institute (Bukit Timah). The taekwondo school based at Singapore’s The Grandstand provides a comprehensive range of lessons. Started in 2012 by Mr Lai Han Seng, the school has become well-known for its focus on not just competitive taekwondo, but taekwondo that has practical, self-defence applications in real life.

Indeed, unlike many other taekwondo programmes that over-focus on competitive and sports taekwondo, Han Academy provides a holistic training that covers both competitive and practical aspects of the martial art. “It’s not just for winning competitions or performing artistic routines,” shares Mr Lai. “I also believe that taekwondo is an important life skill. It is something that people can use in self-defence situations.”

The school differentiates itself from others by offering lessons to a wide range of ages; from children as young as 3 to adults, Han Academy is able to tailor its instruction and classes to suit just about anyone. “We have different class for different age groups, such as special classes for 3 to 5 year-olds, 5 to 10 year-olds, teenagers, and adults; all conducted separately,” Mr Lai explains.

The school’s comprehensive range of classes helps accomplish what Mr Lai calls his main motivation. “I want to fulfil whatever it is that our students need from taekwondo,” he explains. “In some other places, because of time or space constraints, they cannot focus on each student’s individual needs.” At Han Academy, the large school area – at over 7,000 sq ft – is outfitted with the latest equipment and safety measures, such as thick floor mats and wall-to-wall mirrors that enable students to monitor their own movements. The school’s highly-trained and experienced teachers are able to communicate with students and parents on specific needs and desires, improving in fine detail each learner’s technique.

## Up Close & Personal

### What advice would you give to aspiring entrepreneurs?

They have to work hard; it’s definitely not an easy thing. Being an entrepreneur is not about easy money, and it’s a lot of hard work. You also have to be humble. I’ve been doing this full-time for 8 years, and every year brings new experiences. If you just want to stick to what you think is correct without looking at the surrounding situations, without adapting, then that’s not going to be helpful. Try to learn as much as possible, because then you will know from where or whom you can get help, and you will find it much easier to work within regulations and rules.

### What is the main driving force and motivation for you?

My main motivation in life is to help people. Taekwondo is one of the few areas that I know very well, so I want to use it to help people.

### Did you have any previous experience as an entrepreneur?

Actually, when I was an undergraduate in NUS, I started my own IT business with some friends. Ultimately, it didn’t work out after a year, but it helped me learn how to run a business. It gave me insights into what kind of mistakes I had to avoid when I started Han Academy.

### How do you measure success in life?

To me, because of my personal motivation, I would think that I am successful when all my students are happy. People would tell me that it’s impossible, that I shouldn’t be trying to keep my clients happy all the time. But to me, I don’t see it as a business; I don’t see it as just for the money, because obviously there are a lot of easier ways to earn money. What I want to do is to do my best and to keep everyone happy. That’s my aim in life.

Mr Lai admits that the school’s standards are not lax. “I tell people not to come here if they’re looking for an easy black belt,” he says, “But if they want to learn something useful, and want to really earn the black belt, then this is the place.”

He himself had first started taekwondo at the age of 12, achieving a junior black belt at 15 and a senior black belt at 16. “I never thought that I would be doing taekwondo full-time,” remarks Mr Lai. Despite that, his interest in the art never faltered, and even whilst he was working in a full-time job he did a part-time Sports Science degree. In 2007, a friend invited him to join his taekwondo school, where he helped to establish the branch in The Grandstand that would eventually become Han Academy.

As a standalone school, Han Academy is today one of the largest in Singapore, with over 700 active students, and recently Mr Lai has begun managing a second school in Serangoon. Bolstered by a fast-growing reputation for attentive and nurturing taekwondo classes, Han Academy is undoubtedly set for greater success in time to come.