



The Real Karate Kid

Freddy and his friends had a problem with Doug. Doug was the class bully. He was easily the biggest kid in class. He was loud, pushy, and liked to pick on smaller kids, like Freddy. Doug was just plain mean. So mean that everyone called him Dog behind his back.

One day Freddy was waiting in the school cafeteria line when he felt a shove from behind. He turned around to see Doug standing there with a grin on his face. “What’s going on, Chump?” Doug said.

Margaret, the girl Freddy liked, passed by on her way to drop off her cafeteria tray. “Doug, why don’t you pick on someone your own size?”

Doug put on a show for Margaret. “He *is* my size. He just needs to be stretched out a bit.” Doug picked Freddy up under his armpits. He raised him above his head. “See, now he’s taller than me.”

“Put him down,” Margaret said.

“Whatever you say,” said Doug. He carried Freddy over to a coat rack and stuck him on a hook. Freddy hung by his collar from the hook, with his feet dangling off the ground. “Maybe this will make you taller, Chump.”

The school bell rang and all the kids, including Doug, skedaddled to their next class. Margaret found Mr. Skinner, the PE teacher, and together they helped Freddy down from the hook. Freddy wasn’t hurt. His shirt wasn’t even ripped. But the emotional pain he felt was far worse than any punch in the nose or black eye. Doug had embarrassed him before the entire cafeteria! Worse, Margaret had seen the whole thing.

That night at home, Freddy was unusually quiet. His mom tried to get him to say what the matter was, but Freddy refused to talk. It hurt too much.

After dinner, a commercial on TV caught Freddy’s eye. It was an advertisement for a local martial arts studio. The commercial showed kids who were Freddy’s age practicing some type of fighting. The kids were all fighting bigger opponents. They blocked punches, threw kicks, and flipped attackers to the ground. The last kid in the commercial was even smaller than Freddy. After knocking over a big bully, the kid looked into the camera and winked.

“That’s what I need. If I can learn what they’re doing on TV, then I’ll be able to take on Doug in front of the entire class.” Freddy grabbed a pen and wrote down “Master Kim’s Tae Kwon Do Studio.”

Freddy told his parents about the commercial. He begged them to let him take martial arts. His parents were easily convinced. They knew that Freddy had seemed down lately. They hoped that martial arts would boost his confidence and self-esteem.

Freddy showed up early for his first tae kwon do lesson. He was motivated by the hope that he would soon learn how to give Doug a good thrashing. The trouble was, Freddy wasn't even sure what tae kwon do was. He thought all martial arts were the same. Tae kwon do was probably the same as kung fu, Freddy thought. Maybe he could be just like Bruce Lee, beating six bad guys like Doug at once.

"Hello," said a tall Korean man with a shaved head. "My name is Mr. Kim, and I run this studio. May I help you?"

"Yes. My name is Freddy. I want to learn TAY KOOYAN DOO."

"It's pronounced TIE KWAN DOE. It means 'the way of kicking, blocking, and punching'."

"Cool," replied Freddy.

"Why do you want to learn tae kwon do?" asked Mr. Kim.

"Because I want to beat up a bully who's been picking on me."

"I see."

"Can you show me how?"

Mr. Kim thought for a moment. "Of course I can. But before you learn how to defend yourself, you need to learn the basics of punching and kicking. Once you do that, you will earn your white belt. Then we can discuss how to take care of bullies."

"Great," said Freddy. "I'm ready to get to work."

Mr. Kim showed Freddy how to stand and hold his fists. He demonstrated how to yell “Hiya” in order to intimidate an opponent. Over the course of many more lessons, Mr. Kim taught Freddy how to do different kicks. Freddy was a good student. In no time, he earned his white belt.

“Now will you show me how to beat up that bully who’s bothering me?” Freddy asked his teacher.

“Of course I will,” said Mr. Kim. “But first, you must earn your gold belt.”

“What’s a gold belt?” asked Freddy.

“It’s the next level after white belt. You see, there are many different levels of expertise in tae kwon do, each represented by a different color of the belt that students wear with their uniforms. The belts go all the way from white belt, which is for beginners, to black belt, which is for experts.”

“After I get my gold belt, will I be able to beat up the bully in my school?”

Mr. Kim smiled. “We’ll see.”

Freddy worked hard. He practiced and memorized many different combinations of fighting moves. Sometimes, he put on protective head gear and padded gloves and shoes so that he could fight other students in class. No one got hurt, and it was a lot of fun for Freddy to try his tae kwon do moves on another fighter. Freddy was a good student. Each time he earned a new belt, he asked Mr. Kim if he could learn how to beat up a bully. Mr. Kim always put Freddy off, saying he needed to earn his next belt.

Finally, the time came for Freddy to test for his black belt. The test was very difficult. Freddy had to perform by memory many different fighting moves in front of a panel of his

teachers, including Mr. Kim. It took him almost an hour to complete his routine, and he was out of breath when he finished.

No time for a break, though. He next had to fight the other students in his graduating class. His teachers judged the fights. Each fight was three minutes long. The judges gave each fighter one point when they landed a punch, and two points when they scored with a kick. Freddy's first opponent was a kid his own size named Nelson. Nelson knew his fighting combinations, but he was a timid fighter. Freddy had to be aggressive.

Freddy and Nelson bowed to one another. Mr. Kim nodded, and the fight began. Freddy took the action to Nelson right away. He landed a front punch to the side of Nelson's headgear and scored one point. Nelson was shaken because Freddy had scored so quickly. He was then so worried about Freddy's punches that he never saw the sidekick that Freddy next landed to his chest. Two more points for Freddy. Nelson landed one punch of his own just before the fight ended, but it wasn't enough for him to pull out the fight. Freddy was the winner.

Freddy fought three more fights. He won each one handily. Mr. Kim was impressed. He instructed one of his older students, a black belt named Josh, to fight Freddy last. For the first time that day, Freddy was nervous. Josh was two years older than Freddy and at least a head taller. Worse for Freddy, Josh was probably the toughest fighter in the entire school.

As Freddy and Josh bowed to one another, Freddy's mind was racing. "How am I going to beat this guy? He's so much bigger than me." Freddy started off quickly with his favorite one-two punch. But Josh blocked Freddy easily with this left hand, and counter-punched with a jab to the side of Freddy's head. One point for Josh.

Freddy re-adjusted his head gear. He was angry at himself for letting Josh score so easily. “I know what I’ll do. I’ll pretend Josh is Doug. Nobody makes me madder and more determined than Doug.”

Freddy looked at Josh and tried to picture him with Doug’s face. Mr. Kim barked at the fighters to resume the fight. Freddy launched a fury of kicks and punches right at Josh’s face. This was not allowed. For safety reasons, fighters were only allowed to land punches on the side of the head, which was protected by headgear. Freddy got so mad imagining he was fighting Doug that he forgot what he was doing.

“Break!” shouted Mr. Kim. “Punches to the face aren’t allowed, Freddy. You know that. I’m awarding a point to Josh. The score is now two to nothing. Resume!”

Freddy was embarrassed because Mr. Kim had corrected him. He also lost his concentration. Before Freddy could re-focus, Josh nailed him with a side kick to the chest. The kick knocked the wind out of Freddy. Freddy bent over, hands on knees, trying to catch his breath.

Mr. Kim wasn’t sympathetic. “Shake it off Freddy. You can’t give up in the middle of a fight. Now is the time for you to earn your black belt.”

Everyone in the studio watched Freddy. Freddy was still doubled over. He wanted to cry.

“Freddy! Look at me.” Freddy turned his head toward Mr. Kim. “Use the lessons I’ve taught you. If you ever want to get rid of that bully, you can’t let your anger or fear rule you.”

Mr. Kim’s words had a calming effect on Freddy. He straightened himself up, and raised his fists. Josh rushed in to finish Freddy off, but Freddy was ready. Josh threw the first punch. Freddy dodged it and landed one of his own. Josh tried a round kick to the side of Freddy’s head. Freddy ducked, and scored with a jump kick straight into Josh’s chest. Three points for Freddy.

The fight was now so competitive that Mr. Kim ordered Josh and Freddy to fight three more minutes. At the end of the fight, both were exhausted. Josh ended up winning the fight by one point. But Freddy had won the respect of Mr. Kim.

And his black belt. At the end of the test, Mr. Kim tied Freddy's black belt around his waist in recognition of what a good student he was. "You showed me something today, Freddy. You showed me you could overcome your fear and anger. You gained maturity and confidence today."

"Thank you for everything you've taught me, Mr. Kim."

"Do you still want me know to teach you how to beat up that bully?" asked Mr. Kim.

"No," replied Freddy. "I don't think that's necessary."

Freddy was right. Doug never bothered Freddy again. It wasn't because Freddy beat Doug up. But he knew he could defend himself if he had to. After learning tae kwon do and Master Kim's many lessons, Freddy had changed. He walked around with a new, quiet confidence. He was no longer afraid of Doug. Everyone noticed it, especially Doug. Doug stayed clear of Freddy. Martial arts had taught Freddy how to handle bullies—without even having to throw a punch.