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Wushu competitors set to put on a show

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This weekend, fans of Jackie Chan and Jet Li can witness first-hand the martial art -- Wushu -- that helped make the two movie icons world famous.

The first of five provincial qualifying tournaments will be held at Elgin Barrow Arena in Richmond Hill starting today, featuring the traditional Chinese martial art.

The top qualifiers from the five provincial events, including this weekend's, qualify for the Canadian championships, Aug. 15-16 at the Magna Centre in Newmarket, with the national team then moving on to the 10th world championships, which will be held at the Ricoh Coliseum on Oct. 24-29. That event will feature 1,500 participants from more than 85 countries.

Alan Tang, chairperson of the host organizing committee, said the world championships will be one of the biggest sporting events held in Ontario -- even if it is flying under the radar at this point.

"I would put it on par with the (2007) FIFA Under-20 World Cup," said Tang, who is also a Canadian team Wushu coach.

Tang said Wushu has grown 400% as a participation sport in Canada during the past three years and has become a true international event, as evidenced by the fact Toronto has been chosen to hold the world championships this year, the first time it has been held in Canada.

The International Olympic Committee allowed organizers of the 2008 Beijing Olympics to stage a Wushu event during those Games and Wushu officials are hoping the IOC makes the event an official medal sport by the 2020 Olympics. Currently, the combative sports represented at the Olympic Games include boxing, judo, taekwondo and wrestling. Karate, a Japanese martial art, also has been pushing for inclusion in the Olympic Games.

Tang believes that Wushu, particularly the full-contact Sanshou style on display this weekend, is one of the most exciting and appealing of the martial arts. Sanshou features full contact strikes, kicks and throws, similar to other martial events, but with a Chinese "flavour."

"It's like music," Tang said. "The main difference between the martial arts is, No. 1, the culture. Karate is from Japan, taekwondo from Korea. The main difference is what we call the flavour, rhythm and style.

"Everybody sees Wushu all the time, when they see Jet Li and Jackie Chan. These competitions (the provincials, nationals and worlds) will allow people to understand what they are seeing."

Another well-known practitioner of Wushu is former Olympic medalist and world champion figure skater Elvis Stojko, the official Canadian Wushu ambassador. He has credited Wushu with helping making him a better all-around athlete.

"The sport is now breaking into the mainstream Canadian market," Tang said, adding that the Canadian team is ranked in the top 10 in the world.

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