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Woo-hoo for Wushu

It's an ancient Chinese secret -- and a sport

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China's official wushu performance troupe puts on a demonstration at the Sharaton Centre Hotel, in advance of the 10th world wushu championships, being held Oct. 24-29 at the Ricoh Coliseum.

It rolls off the tongue easier than hockey, football or baseball, yet the sport of wushu remains -- in North America at least -- very much a niche sport.

For those curious about sports other than the ones that dominate the nightly highlight reels, this presents an opportunity for a new experience that includes the best practitioners of this particular sport when the world wushu championships begin Saturday at the Ricoh Coliseum.

Toronto is hosting the 10th world championships, which run through Oct. 29. Over 1,500 athletes from more than 80 countries will compete in the six-day tournament.

AT THE MOVIES

A good number of Canadians probably have experienced wushu at some level, most likely at the theatre where the likes of Jet Li, Jackie Chan and Bruce Lee have exposed the rest of the world to this treasure of Chinese culture. But for most in these parts, the mention of wushu brings only blank stares.

Alan Tang would like to change that.

Wushu, which translated literally means martial arts, is a two-pronged sport. On the one side is the sparring and combative side known as sanshou. The other group of wushu is taolu, which contains more ritualistic elements performed in precise routines. Of the two, Canadians are far more advanced in taolu where Canada is considered a top-10 nation. Sanshou is growing in popularity here but remains in its infant stages.

Tang, chairperson of the host organizing committee, is a lifelong practitioner, follower and lover of all things wushu, and being able to bring the world championships to his own backyard speaks to his passion and dedication to the sport.

Tang uses Canada's two main winter sports to best describe the two forms of his choice of sport.

"Like figure skating, taolu is routine-based while sanshou, which translates as 'free fighting' -- is more like hockey."

Kitchener's Zack George is Canada's top Sanshou practitioner. This will be his third world championships, but second as a competitor.

"This will really put a face to the sport," George said of having the world's right here in Canada. And while the odds are long for Canada to come away with any medal in the Sanshou side of the competition, George goes in with plenty of confidence.

"We hope the draw goes well -- a ray of light comes down from heaven and you draw a country you match up well against," he said. "But everybody has a puncher's chance. If you can throw a kick and a punch, you do have a chance. Mentally, whoever is confident and prepared to stand in there in front of such intimidating fighters stands a chance."

Realistically Canada's best chance of a medal comes in taolu, where 18-year-old Margherita Cina of Mississauga already has succeeded on the world stage.

She's a two-time world junior gold medallist in the sport and is the current Canadian champion.

"Marguerita is a perfect example that wushu is not about (where you're from) but it's about dedication and training, and she has excelled to the point where she is the top female athlete in our country," says Chan, who has been coaching Cina for the past 15 years.

Tickets for this event are available at Ticketmaster.

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