

SPORTS

TAEKWON-DO

Passing the Torch

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Austin Olah was one of four original members of Friendly City Taekwondo. As his teacher, Don Edmiston remembers the youngster's first day in 2002 when he was just four.

"When I looked at him for the first time, he cried," Edmiston said. "He's turned into a good little man." Olah, now 11, is still with the club and has earned his black stripe.

Success stories like his are what Edmiston will miss most as he hands over the school to Jeff Phipps.

"I did it to bring a better aspect into kids' lives," Edmiston said of his original intentions. "My most enjoyable moments were watching kids turn into better people."

Injuries and work commitments forced the longtime taekwondo coach to sell his school to Phipps, one of Edmiston's most accomplished students.

"I'm just moving on to a different part of my life," Edmiston said. "I'm not going to school and teaching the way I want to teach. I offered to give it to Jeff, and he agreed to run it the way it should be run."

Phipps, a second-degree black belt, has been running the school since April.

The Woodstock native won a bronze medal at the Eastern Canadian championships this year and qualified for the International Taekwondo Federation's Ontario team.

He competed at the Can-Am Games in the spring.

"He's more than proven he's capable of taking over," Edmiston said.

Phipps has already changed the school's name to Thames Valley Taekwondo, and his fiance Tineke Smit will incorporate a personal fitness component in the future.

"The most important part is it's the same taekwondo," Phipps said. "We (Phipps and Edmiston) trained together for 14 years ... hopefully we (Phipps and Smit) can run it just as good."

Edmiston started the school in 2002 in a banquet room at the Quality Inn -- six years after he started teaching.

"It was tough at the beginning," he said. "It was a big gamble. In the end, I don't want to keep taking people's money and letting someone else do the work. I have to pass it on to someone else."

From its modest beginning, the school quickly grew to an average of 50 students per year and moved to its current location at the Springbank Plaza.

Edmiston tested eight black belts and 10 red belts over six years, and his students won countless medals both locally and abroad.

Giving up his school is "the hardest thing I've ever had to do in my life," he said.

"Everything I wanted to achieve in taekwondo, I've achieved. I won medals in provincial, national and international (competitions). I ran a school and helped kids and adults reach their goals.

"My goal was always to help kids and adults become better people."