

Death sport

By Amira Ibrahim

Hisham Mohamed Hafez, a 16-year-old secondary school student, was proud of his prowess in kung fu, a Chinese form of unarmed combat similar to karate. Hafez's skills allowed him to defeat his opponents with relative ease. But when he defeated one of his trainers, Hafez paid dearly for his talents. Last week, a court sentenced trainer Mohamed El-Zawawi to one year in prison for Hafez's death.

"The incident can only be construed as premeditated murder," **Galal Allam**, Hafez's lawyer, said referring to the 1998 incident. "This is the first time somebody died while training in this game," **Allam said**. "It never happened anywhere before, not in China or in Egypt."

The story began in Al-Shams Club in Heliopolis. Hafez had beaten a player in the club and had told his assistant trainer that he could beat him, too. He did, infuriating head trainer El-Zawawi. El-Zawawi told Hafez to take off his gloves and head gear. At the time, Hafez was not wearing a chest protector as well. Following several blows, Hafez fell to the ground. He rose up but fell one more time. He did not get up again. He cried, begging El-Zawawi to stop. El-Zawawi continued to pound away. When he finally stopped, Hafez was bleeding from the mouth. He bled profusely for one hour before he died. Eyewitnesses said the club's medical centre was ill-equipped to handle emergency cases like Hafez's. Hafez was rushed to a nearby hospital but by then it was too late.

Allam said El-Zawawi was a professional trainer who was experienced in the game and its regulations. "Fighting sports have rules," Allam said. "In training, players wear certain protective gear for the head and chest. The trainer deliberately made the player take these off. He knew how to direct each blow and what damage they would do."

Speaking to the Weekly, Hisham's father, Mohamed Hafez, said he was angry that the judge had reduced the minimum sentence from three years to one. "I felt the judiciary wanted to end the case any way it could. The session lasted for one hour, without the prosecutor present, and then came the ruling," Hafez senior said. "The only thing I can do is file a civil suit to get a large amount in compensation." Hafez said he would donate the money to buy new clothes and equipment for kung fu players all over the country. "The budget of the federation, LE50,000, is too small to cover all that is required," he added.

Investigations since the death have left many questions unanswered, especially about El-Zawawi. El-Zawawi had a reputation for using violence against his players and was suspended once and reprimanded twice in 1997 for violence, once against a trainer and again against a player. However, El-Zawawi backed by the club's board, was appointed the club's general supervisor in kung fu. Still, El-Zawawi was denied membership in the Sports Syndicate which, among other things, gives trainers special courses in injuries resulting from the martial arts, including injuries to the head and face.

Officials of the Kung Fu Federation said El-Zawawi had received a training certificate from the federation that should have been ratified by them first. "The federation has no authority over how the sport is run in clubs," Mohsen Bahgat, federation spokesman, said. "We have no right to interfere in clubs unless we receive an official request to suspend the trainer. Our only responsibility rests solely with the national team." According to Bahgat, the federation is limited to only issuing recommendations to clubs to follow the game's rules and to provide players with the necessary equipment.

Bahgat said the federation was never informed about El-Zawawi's past record. "We are inclined to believe that the killing was unintentional. It's a matter of fate."

Hafez's death brought to the fore questions about whether sports like kung fu should be allowed in clubs at all. For many years, kung fu was banned in Egypt for fear that it would encourage violence among youths and that it might be used against security personnel. In 1990, it became an official sport when the federation was founded. Egypt's national team has participated in three world championships since, winning a gold medal, a silver and a bronze in 1997 in Rome.

Asked if the killing would affect the image of the sport, Bahgat said its activities, in fact, "tend to grow more and more".

Kung Fu training has resumed in Al-Shams Club with new trainers but no guarantees of averting further deadly consequences.