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Dad in Iraq sees son's tae kwon do test

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CEDAR RAPIDS, IA - Spencer Bodensteiner gritted his teeth, sprinted on a diagonal line across the room, jumped over four kneeling tae kwon do classmates and kicked a board in half.

The 8-year-old landed on his feet to a round of applause from spectators who surrounded the room. But his father, who has been serving with the Iowa National Guard in Iraq since October 2005, couldn't be in the room.

He still had the best seat in the house.

Army Sgt. First Class James Bodensteiner, 37, watched through the eye of a video camera from the airport at Al Asad, Iraq, as his son tried to earn a temporary tae kwon do black belt at Jung's Tae Kwon do Academy in Cedar Rapids.

The Freedom Calls Foundation, a charity from New York, helped set up the video-conferencing equipment.

“It means the world to me,” James Bodensteiner said. “Ten years ago we wouldn't have been able to do this.”

Bodensteiner's wife, Margo, said he'd tried to take time off to come back but couldn't.

Instead he and his family in Iowa talked to each other through television screens hooked up over a satellite link.

Bodensteiner is scheduled to come home in spring 2007. His son, Spencer, read an essay saying tae kwon do helps him forget that his father isn't home. But he doesn't mind talking to him in a video-conference.

“It's the second-best thing to having him here in person,” he said. Justin Schmidt, 20, of New Hampton, and a Jung Tae Kwon Do Academy instructor, is also in Iraq. He sat on the couch next to Bodensteiner and watched the kids, some of them his own students, kick and punch their way through the forms, recite memorized definitions and explain the meanings of the American and Korean flags.

``It's been so difficult for him to be away from his dad for so long," Margo Bodensteiner said. ``Mom's nice to talk to, but there's some things he'd just like to talk to Dad about."

After the black belt test, the Bodensteiners were able to talk with each other in private for half an hour.