

How a Black Belt Can Hurt You

Having a belt system in any martial art has several purposes. One is that students know who to trust as far as who to learn from. Belt color will let you know to trust the darker colored belts and to take advice from white belts with a grain of salt. There are white belts in most schools who feel they are ready to teach!

You also know who to watch as an example of good technique. If I have a choice of who to watch between a black belt rolling with a blue belt and two blue belts rolling with each other, I will watch the black belt.

Another purpose is motivation. Students use rank testing to set goals and measure their progress. For many people, getting good for it's own intrinsic value is often not enough. It helps to have several reasons to train, like "I will test for my blue belt by February," or "I will compete in March so I have to be ready."

The Problem With Belts

There is a major problem with giving yourself external motivations for training. Once you achieve the goal, you will need to set new goals, if the benefits of training themselves are not enough to keep you going. If you train to get a belt, you will lose motivation once you get the belt. If you train for tournaments, and at some point stop competing, your motivation for training is gone.

The black belt becomes a stopping point for many people because for most systems you have to demonstrate a lot of physical skills to earn the black belt. Once you are a black belt, the major factor for getting or degrees (called dan rankings in the Japanese arts) is time. So in order to get a black belt in a stand up martial art, you may have to demonstrate sparring, forms, as well as combinations in the air and on pads.

To get the 1st degree black belt and beyond, you may only need to be teaching for a certain amount of time- like a year or two years. Or sometimes not even teaching- just that one or two years have passed since you earned your last belt. This system of ranking is understandable to some degree. You may not ask an older practitioner of many years to do sparring and lots of hard physical training. Out of respect, if they have been dedicated to the art, teaching and training, I think it is appropriate that they could earn higher degrees without having to go through a formal test. But the problem is that some martial artists aren't do not continue training their art. They become fat black belts!

It is less common in BJJ in America, because BJJ is newer in America, but is very common in other martial arts that have been in the U.S. for a long time. It is a disgrace!

CENTENNIAL

I have to say that there are martial artists that are slightly overweight because of their eating habits, genetics, or metabolism. They may train hard and for whatever reason not be slim. I am not saying that any martial artist who is not slim doesn't train hard. This post is about martial artists that don't train anymore. There are many practitioners that earn their black belt, and stop training. Or stop training with intensity. I have seen too many martial artists treat training as a *goal to be achieved* rather than a *lifestyle*.

I have been to several martial arts business conventions. I used to belong to EFC (Educational Funding Company), which is a billing and consulting group for martial arts school owners. They have a yearly convention where school owners and their staff go to learn how to improve their schools.

The first year I went, I went to the gym to work out. I figured that the gym in the hotel would probably be small, and with over 1,000 martial artists staying there, I would have to wait to get on the machines. The gym was empty! And the sad contrast was that the bar was packed!

And I have been around some of the most successful school owners when they socialize. They are not talking about their art or training. They are talking about what kind of car they drive, their new house, new marketing strategies, etc... I am not saying it is bad for them to be talking about what kind of car they drive. My point is that people think about and talk about what is important to them. When I don't hear any talk about their art form, and their training, it confirms for me what I can see by their waistline- they no longer care deeply about martial arts and they no longer train.

Black belts and school owners are examples for their students and others who practice their art. When they no longer train, they are setting a poor example. I may not be making friends with this post, but it is a teaching point. What are your motivations for training? What are the benefits?

Different Qualities of Black Belts

I have noticed over years of training that there are different qualities of black belts. When I compare myself to any of the Machado brothers, I see that I have a long way to go. That doesn't bother me, it excites me. I really enjoy the journey. Black belt is a beginning. It means to me that I have a good command of the basics, and I can put the basics together with decent timing. This is where the journey can get deeper.

Think about a painter that learns all the basics of painting. At this point they can create masterpieces that people may love and be fascinated by for centuries. It is their command of all the basics that is the foundation for creating beautiful art.

TAEKWON-DO

Jiu-Jitsu and any martial art is exactly the same. A practitioner that continues to develop his technique, timing, strategy, and continues to innovate his art form creates tremendous beauty. I talk about the Machados because they are my reference point for so much of my Jiu-Jitsu training, but have you ever seen Roger Machado roll? It is amazing. It is similar to watching someone do ballet, or Tai Chi, except that he is moving in response to a resisting partner! His Jiu-Jitsu is beautiful.

Have you seen Bruce Lee move? His speed, power, and control was amazing. And speaking of the legend, did you know that he was not a black belt? One of the greatest technicians of the last century earned no belts. He was completely focused on the evolution of his physical and non physical skills, and his art. I highly respect practitioners that never stopped training and trained until the end of their lives: Morihei Ueshiba, Mas Oyama, Helio Gracie, and others. Bruce Lee's number one student, Dan Inosanto, is in his 70s and still rolls with anyone in class. I smile when I think about being on the mats when I am in my 70's and beyond and still rolling.

Dan Inosanto, black belt under the Machados.

Earning a black belt in any martial art, and especially BJJ, is a huge accomplishment. It is a disservice to see it as any kind of end. It is a new beginning.

Here is a list of some of the life improving benefits of training, outside of doing it as a career or stream of income:

- state of inner peace from getting into "the flow" or *mushin*
- confidence
- stress release
- cardiovascular fitness and flexibility
- friendship with training partners
- meeting new friends
- training the brain to think strategically
- training the personality to not meet energy head on but redirect it
- realistic self defense ability
- humility in winning and losing
- the increased sense of having partners, not opponents (quote of Sifu Robert Brown)
- respect of others
- be part of something much larger than myself- an ancient martial arts tradition
- service- help others experience the benefits of being a martial artist
- become more creative by innovating new techniques and combinations
- discipline the thoughts and emotions by treating practice as a moving meditation- little to no thinking and practicing calmness