

What makes a Black Belt?

Submitted by Sensei Mike Van Natter
Fort Erie Wado Kai

Ude uke, uraken uchi, zuki, mae geri kekomi, and yoko geri kekomi. Basic techniques all, yet from white belt on, the aspiring karateka are required to perform such techniques relentlessly.

Then, there's kata. Ah, kata. Warmly embraced by many; tolerated only to reach the next belt level by others. Regardless, kata are the heart of any true style of karatedo. Their components – essentially, basic techniques.

Next comes kumite. That moment of truth when two karateka engage in simulated combat where-in one emerges the victor; the other, the vanquished. At least this time around (whew!).

Self defense techniques are obtained as techniques are studied adopted and incorporated into the quiver of the serious student, throughout the progression of coloured belt ranks.

Eventually, persistence pays off and that long awaited (yet dreaded) day of your Black Belt grading arrives! Emerging triumphant, albeit exhausted and battered, you leave as full-fledged Yudansha. A 1st degree Black Belt. Cool! You are now part of the Knighthood of Karatedo as a Martial Arts Instructor!

When the honeymoon is over however, one soon realizes that the coveted Black Belt is merely the beginning. A time to return to Karate at its grass roots. Basic techniques. Basic kata. Having to persevere with new students unable to grasp “simple” concepts.

Remember your first day of training? I do. I distinctly remember my sensei gently, patiently guiding us rookies through the rudiments of Wado Kai. Not as an egotistical butt-kicking mercenary, but as a genuine human being. What an example in humility!

All of a sudden I realized that wearing a Black Belt is far more complex than outside appearances. Intrinsic values such as humility, sincerity, compassion and patience are required. Learning to explain the profound in a simple way. Encouraging, guiding, challenging and improving those of lesser rank. All essential components of teaching karate. Understanding what it means to be humble, yet never attaining it. For you see, humility is something that is lost the moment you think you have it.

Being a genuine Black Belt goes far beyond possessing devastating techniques and ‘one-inch punches’ with inflated egos to match.

Want to know the secret of being a good Black Belt? Ude uke, mawashi geri, uraken uchi, mae geri kekomi and yoko geri kekomi. Basic techniques practiced always and forever.

Want to be an outstanding Black Belt? Develop humility, sincerity, compassion and patience. Treat others as better than yourself and incorporate these values into your training and teaching. Power concealed in weakness. Strength is shielded with a peaceful mind and spirit. It is symbolized in the

dove and fist. It is inherent in the Shintani Karate Federation. It is personified in Sensei Shintani.
This is Wado.

Tournament Kata practice tips
Submitted by Sensei Jeff Gervin
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Proper etiquette is essential in the dojo or shiai. The following is a list of tournament rules and tips that I believe in; your Sensei's views may differ slightly.

BASIC RULES:

- a) Practice your kata at a tournament ONLY if no other karateka are competing on the floor.
- b) When your division is called for competition, remain seated quietly at the edge of the ring until your name is called.
- c) Bow at all the appropriate areas before and after your effort and do not display your emotions at any time.
- d) Be a good sport; congratulate your peers afterwards.

TOURNAMENT TIPS:

I believe that the primary benefit derived from kata competition is conquering one's own fears. To openly and honestly display one's kata in front of a crowd is a nerve-wracking experience for most people and this sometimes results in physical and emotional tension that is apparent when the kata is performed. The best way to eliminate these fears is tournament experience. However, I have been competing in kata for the past thirteen years and still become agitated prior to competitions. I have discovered what helps me overcome my fears, so if you have trouble with nervousness give these ideas a whirl.

- a) I like to perform the kata or parts of the kata at various tempos on the day of competition. This helps me to relax and gives me confidence, (Remember rule (a) above though).
- b) Being seated at the edge of the ring prior to competing is an important time to relax and gather ki. I remember Sensei Shintani saying that, when faced with a dangerous or stressful situation one should "...take a few deep breaths and then you'll know what you have to do". I remember this advice every time I must perform kata or kumite and even in my daily life.
- c) When your name is called, rise quickly and WALK into the ring. Running into the ring may make you seem eager, but may leave you flustered and confused at the beginning of your kata.
- d) After bowing to the head Sensei and announcing the name of your kata, be certain to move to the proper position on the floor before commencing. This position varies according to the kata being performed and should be calculated when practicing your kata. If your starting position is inappropriate, you may find yourself colliding with a judge (not a good idea).
- e) I attempt to achieve a state of mental and physical relaxation immediately before beginning a kata by taking a deep breath and pausing for a few seconds. I have never managed to achieve what might be called total relaxation, but it helps.
- f) Avoid "rushing" through the kata! This is one of the most common errors that I see as a judge. The most important cause of rushing is lack of relaxation.
- g) During a grading the karateka must be ready to perform any previously learned kata. This may also be the case in a tournament, but usually choice of kata is left up to the participants.

If a student chooses to perform a kata that is beyond their rank they may be judged as if they possessed that rank. Novice and younger karateka should always pick a kata that is familiar and comfortable. Experienced karateka with adequate tournament experience should strive to challenge themselves by performing longer, more difficult kata. Don't perform the same kata in tournament after tournament! Choose a kata with an adequate level of difficulty and practice, practice, practice. I believe that no kata is too difficult to be performed in competition, because the goal of shiai should be not only to win, but also to improve one's self.

- h) Above all else, don't think of your performance in terms of "winning or losing", but rather as a technical and spiritual improvement or regression. If you only keep improving, winning will be an eventual side effect!

I would appreciate hearing other opinions and pearls of wisdom about kata competition and kata in general. The above ideas are merely what I believe and kyu belt students should probably discuss them with their instructor prior to implementing them into a training regiment.

Good Luck!

TRAINING PAST 35,

By Sensei Walt Fast St.Catharines

Reprint from the Niagara North News, July 1995

In a recent Toronto column, writer David Rutherford worries about turning 37. He was a fairly good hockey player in his youth and has attempted to keep up the sport at the same level of play. It seems his body has deserted him, and every game of pick-up leaves him totally wiped for several days. He still likes to party and notices that the body has a way of paying him back for all the junk food, cigars and partying he does.

"You can fool yourself only from the neck up. Bodies aren't like temples, like some people pretend. They're more like Baptist churches."

He bemoans the fact that he should probably start doing sit-ups and watch what he consumes daily. Stretching and stationary bicycle riding are boring for him. Rutherford ends the article saying he will give this new regimen a try, but if it doesn't work in a couple of months then it's "fat city and damn the consequences".

Are his observations true? Could he still be a lean, mean skating machine at 37? I give this a qualified yes. He could certainly improve his conditioning, and play hockey to the best of the abilities that a fit 37-year-old could. It would be very hard for him to compete in a league with 20 year olds skating his legs off. Yet he could use those years of experience to become a craftier player. He could use finesse instead of brute force as his method of play. Then choose his moments or pick his spots, when the timing is right, to employ that force.

How does this relate to the martial arts? Is it possible to train in judo, jiu-jitsu, Karate, kickboxing and boxing for that matter past the age of 37? I believe it is possible in some martial arts, but not others.

Boxing and kickboxing for example are a young man's game. I salute George Foreman for his fortitude and his will. But his successes of late are more an indication of the sad state of boxing today rather than an example of an older man dominating his sport. Given a higher calibre of contenders, and shameless promoter chicanery eliminated, Foreman could never compete at that level of excellence.

What about kickboxing? I've watched two friends and fellow karate-ka train for matches this summer. The physical conditioning is grueling. The body must endure not only conditioning but also the concussive effects of punches and kicks.

Injuries set the timetable back. Recurring injuries frustrate and set up roadblocks to advancement. It takes mental conditioning to endure this regimen, yet a strong mind prevails.

The martial arts jiu-jitsu, judo, and in particular Karate can be practiced well past 37. As Karate-ka we don't have to endure the full-power punches and kicks as do kick boxers.

Karate is however very physical training. Karate is also much more than running or stationary bike riding. Karate players have many years of learning and perfecting kata to relieve boredom while keeping fit. Sparring techniques and combinations that work keep the Sensei's mind active. Karate is always evolving. Karate training is also more than skipping, bag drills and shadow boxing. What about developing an upright character? What about respect, honesty and a positive attitude toward others? These values may be present in the other sports but these are stressed as fundamentals in Karate.

What about reality in sparring as far as Karate Kumite is concerned? Sure we allow some body contact but no head contact. This is often looked upon by others as detrimental because the Karateka doesn't know what it's like to receive a shot to the head and continue fighting. It's been said that kickboxing is "more real" because they learn to take punches and kicks and soldier on. For me it's a question of attitude. While training Kata, Kihon or Kumite the Karate-ka develops a fierce composure. Though we don't deck our partners, the intensity of the techniques must be there. Karate-ka control their techniques, always with an awareness that to change the speed, timing and distance slightly would mean hitting the opponent. Karate is a game. There are certain rules we follow to play it.

Boxing and kickboxing are also games. They have rules of contact, and wear padded shin, hand and headgear. Remove their protections and the game would be altogether different. The ability to take a punch and continue would be altered. How long do you suppose a match would last if there were no gloves? How long would a match last if there were no rules and it was a street fight? The boxer may likely have his legs kicked out. The kick-boxer may fall victim of a lucky punch. The Karate-ka may get pulled to the ground and get choked out by the Judo-ka. A good street fighter might surprise everyone. The difference is in integrity of character, and attitude in fighting.

The attitude or state of mind of the Karate-ka extends also to persistence. To give up Karate because the kicks don't go quite as high is laughable. As we age, life puts on certain limits to what we can do physically. This is not the time to throw in the towel and "damn the consequences". The older Karate-ka constantly tests his limitations. Given the variety contained in Karate practice, an inquisitive mind develops new strategies to overcome the hurdles life sets up for us.

The key I believe is in tenacity in training. Human energy often ebbs and flows. We have "down" periods as well as times of high energy. The Karate-ka who keeps training can sip at Karate like a fine wine during lethargic times. He can also soar with the eagles during times of high energy. The important thing is that he keeps on training Karate. Remember: it is much easier to stay in shape, than it is to get back into shape.

I'll leave you with a passage from Tennyson's "Ulysses". Please take this excerpt with a grain of salt, but take it nonetheless!

"Tho' much is taken, much abides; and tho' we are not now that strength which in old days moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are - One equal temper of heroic

hearts, made weak by time and fate, but strong in will to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield."