



Episode 61 – Martial Arts Belts & Rank | whistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com

Jeremy Lesniak:

Hey, there, everyone its episode 61 of whistlekick Martial Arts Radio, the only place to hear the best conversations about the martial arts, like today's episode all about belts and rank.

I'm the founder here at whistlekick, but I'm better known as your host, Jeremy Lesniak. whistlekick, in case you don't know, makes the world's best sparring gear and some awesome apparel and accessories for you traditional martial artists. I'd like to welcome our new listeners and thank all of you returning fans.

Hey, did you know we're not the only martial arts podcast on the internet? *gasp* I know, crazy, right? A few months ago we put together a piece at our [blog](#) showcasing some of the other [martial arts podcasts](#) we thought were worth a listen. Well, out of that we've made friends with Sensei Ando, the host of the "[Fight for a Happy Life](#)" podcast. It's a great show, and Sensei Ando is a great guy. If you haven't checked it out yet, you definitely should. We'll have links over on the show notes, or you can check it out at senseiando.com.

If you're not familiar with our products, you can learn more about them at whistlekick.com. All of our past podcast episodes, show notes and a lot more are at whistlekickmartialartsradio.com. Today's episode also has a full transcript with links on the website. If you're listening from a computer, you might want to follow along with everything we've posted.

And while you're over there, go ahead and sign up for our newsletter. We offer exclusive content to subscribers and it's the only place to find out about upcoming guests.

Martial Arts Belts - Topic Intro

Today we're going to talk about the way most martial arts schools handle the grading of their students – through testings and belts. Now, obviously this can be very different depending on not only the martial arts style but also the school. And let me start by saying there is no right way. There's also no wrong way. The things I talk about here today are based solely on my experience in the various schools I've attended and the few years I operated a school of my own.

One of the challenges in many schools is the conflict between operating as an educational institution and a business. The two are very different, but unless you have a very fortunate personal situation, you can't run a martial arts school for free. And we know that once money enters any equation, it changes things. I've been on both sides of that pressure, both as a student and as a broke 20-something instructor trying to make ends meet.

The most discussed rank is, of course, the black belt. Marketing and popular culture have convinced us that the black belt designation is centuries old and carries with it expert status. Alas, no, that isn't the case.



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The first recorded use of a black belt to denote rank is barely one hundred years old. In 1883, Jigoro Kano, the founder of Judo, devised the beginnings of the belt system that most martial arts use a form of today. Initially there were only two ranks – white and black. It wasn't until more than 20 years later that other colors were added. Prior to belts, certificates were the common way of assigning rank.

[Resource 2 - [The Judo Rank System](#)]

But what does having a black belt mean? We often think of it as having learned an exceptional amount, of having a high degree of skill. Of being a master of the material. That, too, is false.

The original intention of the black belt was to show that a martial artist had competency of the style's basic techniques and principles. In Japanese, a first degree black belt is referred to as a shodan, which literally means "first step." It doesn't imply any level of perfection but rather an ability to use the concepts and skills they've learned. A good way to equate it to modern, non-martial education would be to think of it as a bachelor's degree from a university.

Of course, the definition of competency is wildly subjective, and can be easily illustrated by comparing the black belt tests at different schools. Some schools test for days while others test for hours. Some test with an intention to break the spirit of the testing candidates, which others simply want to see if they can perform under a bit of pressure and in a formal setting. Again, there are no right or wrong methods as I see it.

If black belt is an expression of basic competency, what, then, is the role of the lower ranks – the colored belts? Again, if we compare martial arts to modern education, it was a way of showing progress – roughly equal to the way students progress through numbered grades. In 1935, Mikonosuke Kawaishi started assigning colored belt ranks at his Judo school in Paris because he felt that western students would have more success with an external symbol of their achievement.

[Resource 3 - [History](#) of Martial Arts Belts and Rank]

Gichin Funakoshi, the founder of Shotokan karate, is claimed to be the first Karate instructor to have adopted the Judo ranking system as well the gi – the uniform – that Judo used. Up until that time, karate didn't use any special uniform or rank, just as with Judo. The first Shotokan black belts were awarded in 1924. Why did Funakoshi do this? He was seeking acceptance by the Japanese.

There's a lot more to that story that we won't go into, though, because it really ends up more on the subject of associations and government than anything else. If you're interested, though, we'll post a few links in the show notes.

But this isn't karate radio, it's Martial Arts Radio – what do black belts look like in other styles? While the research I did didn't show nearly as many resources as with karate rank, it seems pretty clear that both the modern Korean and Chinese styles followed what happened in Japan and Okinawa. Traditional Kung-



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Fu doesn't have colored sashes though modern Kungfu does. The same can be said of older Korean styles, as evidence of belt rank doesn't show up until after the end of the Japanese occupation of Korea.

One point I'd like to touch on is that of charging for a rank test or promotion in martial arts. Now, please keep in mind – if the way you choose to do things is different, I'm not attacking you. I'm offering my opinion based on what I've seen at the various martial arts schools I've trained in. Your feedback is welcome – after all, conversation and healthy debate is one of the best ways for us all to improve.

I'm not a fan of belt fees or rank tests, and it comes down to a single reason – I think it's contradictory to everything we teach in the martial arts. In most schools that do implement these fees, the charge increases with rank and the student sees little tangible benefit from spending that money. In other words, as our best students grow and progress we essentially charge them a financial penalty. Show me any other sport, hobby or pursuit that does this?

If we look back to our previous comparison of modern education, yes, there are fees for matriculation – but those are proportionally small compared to a semester's tuition. One might pay more for the tuition in an advanced class, under the instruction of more advanced and knowledgeable professors, and I agree with that method. I think that's where the difference should lie in martial arts as well.

I'd like to suggest that belt fees, promotion fees, testing fees or whatever they're called be absorbed by monthly fees. Doing simple math based on my experience of testing fees, it's actually advantageous for the school owner to charge in this way. For most schools, it amounts to less than \$5 a month per student, and the school owner actually makes more money.

Now, as with everything, there are exceptions. One of the largest involves the need to source qualified instructors to oversee a promotion. If an advanced rank needs to be flown in for a testing, the advanced rank shouldn't be asked to cover that cost. One could make an argument for the school owner covering the cost, but I can see the individuals being tested asked to pay a fee for that. It seems perfectly reasonable and, if done with transparency, the students know exactly what they're paying for and will likely feel more engaged in the testing.

Yes, there are other exceptions, and if you're feeling like I've taken a jab at your school and the way you do business, I apologize as that's not my intention. I simply feel that everything around a rank testing should be positive and motivational, and asking someone to pay a fee for the privilege is contradictory. But enough on that, let's move on.

There are other ways I'd like to see martial arts testings and promotions improved.

In many schools, especially at lower ranks and younger ages, promotions are granted even if the student isn't ready. This is done often to retain the student and to motivate them. Hopefully, the logic goes, the student will step up before their next testing. Unfortunately, I've found that is rarely the case.



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Promoting a lower rank when they're not ready seems to turn into larger gaps in their education as they progress. The yellow-belt that should not have been promoted often becomes the black belt that definitely shouldn't have been promoted. Part of this is cultural within the school, but I feel it's doing the student a disservice. In martial arts we claim to hold ourselves and each other to high standards. By letting someone skate by on the standards they're held to does not prepare them for martial arts, for combat or for life in general.

Quite often these rushed promotions come from schools that do not have clearly defined standards for rank. Most schools break down rank by a list of techniques and forms that must be known. But known how well? What standard of proficiency are they held to? Is it the same for everyone? Is it based on personal progress? I'd argue that it doesn't matter so much what the standards are, but rather that they exist and are held to in a strict sense.

Having these standards, especially when some of them are objectively defined, such as, for example, fitness requirements or ability for memorization, allows students to clearly assess themselves and remove a lot of pressure from martial arts instructors. Instructors can, and thus should, evaluate students clearly outside of testings. These evaluations can encompass small portions of their expected material and be done either privately or publicly. If the student knows how they fare, they can adjust their training focus, attend additional classes and, or train on their own. Further, if the instructor finds that their students are routinely failing their spot checks, the curriculum can be addressed to be sure that the important elements are receiving focus.

I'm a fan of writing things out when it makes sense, and these spot checks are a perfect candidate. In fact, I'd love to see martial arts schools keeping records for each student that show these evaluations. The records should be accessible by the student and easily show how the student is progressing, or not.

In schools that test students based on a time schedule rather than a preparation schedule, a culture of failure acceptance needs to be encouraged. I'd even suggest considering changing the name from testing to something else, perhaps evaluation or examination. Maybe assessment. The word test carries a lot of stress for a lot of individuals, and we're often trapped in a need to pass at all costs. Failing a test can be crushing, but learning at an evaluation that you need to rectify a few issues before your next promotion... that can be a much more positive environment.

Martial Arts Belts & Rank - Conclusions

So, does it matter that some martial arts schools offer easier testing requirements than others? Yes and no. While I still maintain that there is no wrong answer here, we as martial artists need to be careful. The black belt holds a position of mystique in popular culture and cheapening it threatens that. Many martial arts school owners identify the rank of black belt as a point where they see a lot of students drop out. Whether they realize it or not, there's something inherently satisfying about earning that rank. That satisfaction comes from the knowledge that it required a significant investment, in both time and effort,



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to earn. Should either of those requirements diminish too much, and the wider world know a black belt doesn't always carry meaning, then we lose one of our greatest marketing strategies.

What are your thoughts on rank, martial arts belts, promotions, testings and the like? Please leave us your comments over on our website, whistlekickmartialartsradio.com or you can tag us on social media - we're on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [Pinterest](#) & [Instagram](#) - all with the username whistlekick.

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So, until next time, Train hard, smile and have a great day.