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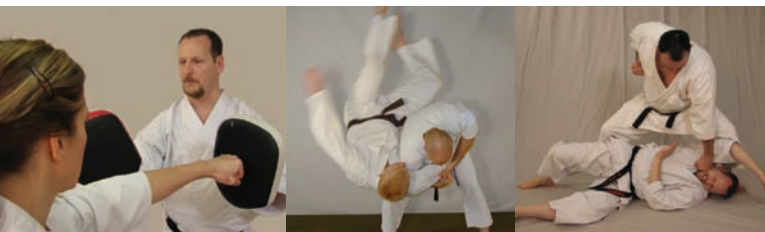


THE WAY TO BLACK BELT

A Comprehensive
Guide to Rapid,
Rock-Solid
Results

LAWRENCE A. KANE
AND KRIS WILDER

Foreword by Dan Anderson,
8th Degree



THE WAY TO
BLACK
BELT

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AND KRIS
WILDER

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Introduction

“You become responsible, forever, for what you have tamed.”

– Antoine de Saint-Exupéry ²

Introduction

So you want to earn a black belt. Obviously; that is why you have purchased this book. Before we delve into how you can best achieve that goal, however, let us spend a few moments talking about what a black belt really represents and how it is commonly measured. After all, if all you wanted was the belt you could simply go to your local martial arts supply store or hop online and buy one. But that is not what this is all about, is it? It is really about developing the knowledge, skill, and ability necessary to be considered an expert martial artist.

A Brief History of Belt Systems

First, some history: The founder of judo, Professor Jigoro Kano, codified a system of wearing colored sashes or belts, which was subsequently adopted by most martial arts systems and is widely used today. This *dan/kyu* system distinguishes between advanced practitioners and different levels of beginning and intermediate students. The *dan*, or black belt, indicates advanced proficiency. Those who have earned it are called *yudansha* or *dan* recipients. The *kyu* degrees represent the varying levels of competency below *dan*, and are called *mudansha*, those not yet having received the *dan* rank.

Kano *Sensei** felt it particularly important for all students to fully realize that one’s training was in no way complete simply because they had achieved the *dan* degree. On the contrary, he emphasized that the attainment of the *dan* rank merely symbolized the real beginning of one’s training. By reaching black-belt level, one had, in fact, completed only the necessary requirements to embark upon a relentless expedition, a journey without distance that would ultimately result in self-mastery.

After establishing the *Kodokan Dojo*, Kano *Sensei* distributed black sashes, which were worn around the standard *dogi* (training uniform) of that era, to all the *yudansha*. Around 1907, this black sash was replaced with the *kuroi-obi* (black belt), which became the standard that is still used today. Of this standard, there was the white belt and the black belt. Later addition of green and brown belts rounded out the traditional ranking system.

By following a structure of merit, such as the belt system, instructors have a way of monitoring the development and skill progression of their students and can teach them according to set standards. While the majority of martial styles use a belt sys-

* *Sensei* means teacher, literally “one who has come before.” Like all Japanese words, *sensei* is written the same for both singular and plural. There is no “s” at the end to denote more than one.

Something to think about:

Unlike most tests in the traditional education system, you simply cannot cram for your black-belt exam. You can expedite the process, of course, but you cannot master the prerequisites overnight. A black belt is earned through steady, consistent training over a long period of time, typically four to eight years depending on what system you study, how naturally talented you are, the quality of instruction you receive, and how effectively you practice.

tem, it is by no means universal—some use badges or patches while others use no formal ranking method at all. A common approach incorporates five *kyu* belts: white, yellow, green, blue, and brown; and three *dan* belts: black, *akashi* (red/white), and red.

The tips of the belt are decorated on occasion as well. *Dan*-level belts are frequently embroidered with the name of the practitioner at one end and the name of his or her style at the other. This embroidery is typically done in the native language appropriate for the art (e.g., Japanese for karate, Korean for *taekwondo*).

Colored stripes on both ends of a *kyu* belt can delineate gradations between *mudansha* ranks. Some schools use additional colored belts, such as orange or purple, rather than colored stripes to show these gradations. These stripes, when used, take the color of the next level of advancement such that white belts have yellow stripes, yellow belts have green stripes, green belts have blue stripes, blue belts have brown stripes, and brown belts have black stripes. In Okinawa, one or more gold stripes at the ends of a black belt indicate *shogo* (teaching/degree) rank. For children under age 16, stripes are frequently white no matter what color of belt to which they are attached.

Evaluation and Testing

A “belt test” is a critical evaluation of your martial arts knowledge, skills, and abilities, an opportunity to prove that you are ready to move on to the next higher level. You may not pass every test the first time, yet you should know that few instructors will ask you to test for any promotion for which you are not ready or nearly so. So what might the test be like? Wilder, who has earned seven black belts in three different styles, relates some of his experiences:

My old *taekwondo* instructor was some eighty miles away from where I lived and the new teacher that I found was not even teaching at the time I sought him out. I had experience as a teen in *taekwondo* and had also taken some karate in college. I wanted to continue training, so I found out where my soon-to-be new instructor lived and gave him a call.

He lived in the adjacent town and he told me he was flattered by my interest but he was working pretty hard at the time and did not really have much time to run a school. He said that he was not really all that interested. Sensing a “maybe” in his voice, I called back a couple of days later and talked him into agreeing to meet me.

Soon I had an appointment once a week in his basement where he did his personal training. He looked at my basics and awarded me a mid-level rank, a blue belt, if I recall correctly. I spent the time outside of class working on my skills and quickly progressed through the ranks over the next year and a half. Once the black-belt test date was set, I had about two months’ notice to polish my skills. I spent hours upon hours working on my kicks, blocks, and forms, drilling the basics on my own.

One Saturday afternoon we began the test. Present at the test were my instructor, a video camera, and me. We started at the first thing I was taught and began to move through the rank requirements, covering every item I was supposed to know. Each form, strike, and block was scrutinized. We then moved on to sparring. He was a good six-feet-two-inches tall, long, lean, and fast. At five-eight with far less skill, I was really put to the test.

After that, the examination moved on to “What else do you know?” I demonstrated anything and everything I had gathered throughout all my training, showing other forms and applications. Some three hours later when it was over, I was awarded my black belt. The certificate followed about a month later. I had made it and was proud!

Over the course of time life changed and I had moved yet again. Living in Seattle (Washington), I had continued my martial training, this time taking up karate. Eventually it came time, once again, for my black-belt test. This time around, three other students would be testing at the same time along with me.

When we arrived at the hotel on the day of the test, we found that a conference room had been reserved for our use. It was centrally located for all the attendees and spectators. The various witnesses included friends, spouses, and other instructors. Some brown belts from the organization were also present to assist when we were short of fresh people.

The number two instructor in the organization had traveled to be present for the test that he was going to supervise. The room was carpeted and well laid out. Our organizational logo with its swirling dragons had been drawn, very well I might add, on the jumbo white board at the head of the room where seats had been placed for the examination board. This was a very formal and intimidating situation.

To add to the stress of the day, I had cracked a few of my left ribs a week earlier while practicing with one of the black belts. Nevertheless, I was as prepared as I could be for the test. It was a new style but the approach was much the same. Once again, we began with the basics and moved through the entire syllabus of the system. About three hours and lots of water and aspirin later, we were done with the physical portion of the test.

There was one further requirement, too. Each time a practitioner tested for a black-belt grade, he or she had to write a research paper and hand it in to the head instructor. The boundaries were wide open: "If you need ten thousand words to get your point across, do it; if you can express what you need to in a single dot in the center of the page, do that," we were told. I sweated over that paper just as much as I sweated on the *dojo* floor, going through a good ten drafts before I felt it was ready, and then sheepishly handed it in, feeling in my heart it was not good enough. Nevertheless, it was accepted and I became a new black belt in the organization!

Judo was a different affair altogether. You had to compete and win to receive points. When you reached the magic number, as I recall it was sixteen points, then you became eligible for your *shodan* (first-degree black belt). Consequently, keeping a record of your wins and losses was essential. The tournaments, the dates, who you fought, a win or a loss, how you won or lost, the length of the match, the technique used to win or how you were beat, your rank and your opponent's rank were all meticulously recorded. If you beat another brown belt, it was worth half a point; a *shodan* was one point, a *nidan* (second-degree black belt) two points, and so on. As you might guess, defeating a higher rank was quite a challenge and not very common, as the upper ranks knew you were in the hunt for points and they were not too inclined to lose to a lower rank.

You also had to show proficiency in the *kata* (forms) of the system. The form *Nage No Kata* required two people to perform and involved six throws done by each participant. Precision and body mechanics were of the highest concern when performing the *kata* with your partner. This required much time, both in and out of class.

We chose to demonstrate the *kata* to some other judo *sensei* to pick up tips and perfect our technique. Whenever a visiting instructor came from out of state to visit the *dojo*, we would be sure to show off our form and ask for advice. Once *kata* competency was demonstrated at an acceptable level, it came down to presenting the book of wins and losses.

This record went to a regional board. Membership was checked, the book was reviewed, and a testament of witnessing the *kata* was given both by my *sensei* and by another instructor who had watched us complete the form properly. Once all the paperwork was completed, we waited.

One day, a couple of weeks after the paperwork submission and the regional meeting, my *sensei* called me and another student forward after class with the pronouncement, “We are going to change the colors now.” We stepped forward, bowed, took off our brown belts, and put on our new black ones. About a month later, the certificates arrived from Japan and were given to us in a similar, yet even more casual, manner.

These examples come from three different art forms. Kane’s experiences have been somewhat similar. He remembers:

My *shodan* (first-degree black belt) was a bit of a surprise. I knew about a year ahead of time that I would be testing for my black belt. During that time, I had written my research paper, studied my *kata* (forms), rehearsed my *bunkai* (applications), practiced my *kihon* (fundamentals such as stances, blocks, and strikes), and worked out very hard. I felt anxious yet reasonably confident. In my heart, I knew that I was ready, but did not know exactly when the test would occur or how it would be handled. Because I had a pretty good idea of what others had gone through, I had been preparing for an arduous, formal test. Then one day my *sensei* called me up in front of the class, asked me to take off my old belt, and handed me a new one. It was as simple as that. He had clearly been watching my preparation, had seen me perform all the requirements adequately, and decided that I was ready.

My *nidan* (second-degree black belt) test, on the other hand, was both arduous and formal. In addition, I was recovering from a serious injury when I attempted it. One hot, humid Saturday morning I tested with three other students. When we arrived at the *dojo*, all the windows were covered with dark paper. An advancement board soberly awaited us, conversing quietly together while we warmed up and prepared ourselves for testing. There were still a few

twinges of nervousness even though I knew that I was fully prepared. A bit of meditation and a vigorous warm-up calmed my nerves and I felt ready to go.

We presented our research papers and then went through the entire syllabus, covering *kihon*, *kata*, *bunkai*, *kaisai no genri* (the theory of deciphering fighting applications from *kata*), *kumite* (sparring), *dojo* etiquette, history, and traditions of the art, and a whole lot more. As the day progressed, the room became a sweltering, humid mess. The mirrors quickly fogged over and the floor became slick with sweat. Even though we took a couple of thirty-second water breaks, one candidate nearly succumbed to heat exhaustion before we were finished.

When we got to *shime* (testing of technique and power), the instructors checked our concentration, body alignment, movement, breathing, and the mechanics of our techniques by giving pressure and striking various parts of our bodies while we performed *sanchin kata*.^{*} They not only used their hands and feet but also a *shinai* (bamboo sword) as well. It was quite challenging but I managed to maintain my concentration under those stinging blows. I had some interesting bruises to show for it the next few days.

After four and a half grueling hours, the test was finally complete and the testing board retired into a back room to discuss the results. Exhausted and dripping with sweat, we drank water, stretched, and attempted to joke with each other while we anxiously awaited the results.

After several minutes, the board filed back in and called us up to the front of the room one-by-one. Everybody passed! Those who tested for *shodan* were asked to remove their brown belts and tie on black ones in their place. In the same manner as my *kuroi-obi*, their new belts were custom embroidered with the *kanji* (Japanese characters) of their names as well as the name of our style, *Goju Ryu* karate, in red thread. We were all handed certificates and congratulated on our promotions.

Will your tests be like these examples? Yes, they will, and no, they will not. Each test you take will carry with it a certain level of pensiveness, a shallow feeling in the pit of your stomach that you are not ready or will not do your best. There will be surprises, challenges, and even disappointments. Each organization, club, or system, has its own way of going about testing and they will be different in the techniques, and, perhaps, the ritual, but the human experience will be the same.

Know that your instructor is testing you because you appear to be ready. Your time in training and knowledge base are at a level that they see as warranting a test and an acknowledgment of all your hard work. Pass or fail, it is important to remember that rank is always earned, never given. With enough dedication, discipline, and

^{*} *Sanchin*, which means “three battles,” is a moving meditation designed to unify the mind, body, and spirit. *Sanchin kata* is the foundation of many martial systems to this day. While its techniques appear fairly simple and straightforward, it is actually one of the most difficult *kata* for martial artists to truly master. Techniques are performed in slow motion so that practitioners can emphasize precise muscle control, breath control, internal power, and body alignment.

Something to think about:

A Japanese journalist witnessed a demonstration of *sanchin kata* performed by some of Master Kanryo Higashionna's students. Higashionna *Sensei* founded *Naha-Te* karate. The reporter was deeply impressed by what he saw, particularly the way in which the *karateka* (karate practitioners) moved their hips, contracted their muscles, and controlled their breathing. Inspired by this experience, he wrote the following *haiku*.³

*A roll of thunder
Seizing the first bolt of lightning
With empty hands*

Is your own performance anywhere near as impressive today? By the time you are ready to test for your black belt, perhaps it will be.

diligent training, you will ultimately become worthy of wearing a black belt.

In most systems, there are ten *kyu* levels to pass through before receiving a black belt. So how do you go about earning that rank as swiftly and efficiently as possible while simultaneously making the most out of the experience? Well, that is the subject of the rest of the book.

How to Use this Book

Here is a brief overview of the material to follow:

Chapter 1 – Do Not Limit Yourself

This chapter debunks common excuses that would-be practitioners often have and motivates you to begin your journey into the world of martial arts. It helps you set goals, monitor your progress, and overcome plateaus in your training once you have gotten started. Knowing what you are looking for, clearly articulating your goals, and realizing that they may legitimately evolve or change over time is enormously important to setting yourself up for success.

Chapter 2 – Find a Good Instructor

This chapter helps you choose an art, find an exemplary instructor, and locate a place to begin your training. It also helps you understand how much you might reasonably expect to pay for classes, defines appropriate student/teacher relationships, and steers you away from dangerous martial cults and other adverse situations. Even if you have already found a place to train this information will prove useful.

Chapter 3 – Know How You Learn

This chapter helps you understand your own learning style and personality type in a manner that can expedite the knowledge transfer process. It explains how people internalize new physical skills, teaches you how to ensure a positive learning outcome, imparts powerful visualization techniques, and sets you up to make the most of almost any educational situation in the *dojo* and beyond.

Chapter 4 – Understand Strength versus Skill

This chapter helps you understand the value and recognize the relationship between strength and skill in martial arts training, identifies focus areas appropriate for your age and gender, and demonstrates the fundamental importance of *kihon* (basics) for your success in earning a black belt.

Chapter 5 – Practice a Little Each Day

This chapter demonstrates that advancement is a continuous process and offers strategies to avoid becoming overwhelmed with all you will need to know to earn your black belt. It is packed with creative ways to make the most of your training time and take advantage of every opportunity to learn.

Chapter 6 – Understand the Strategy to Master the Tactics

This chapter demonstrates that a deep understanding of strategy and tactics is a necessary prerequisite to making the most of any martial art. There are simply too many techniques to apply without knowing the context in which they work most effectively. You will learn about Boyd's Law and Hick's Law, understand the linkage between strategy and training, and delve a bit into the relationship between *jutsu* (fighting techniques) and *do* (martial ways).

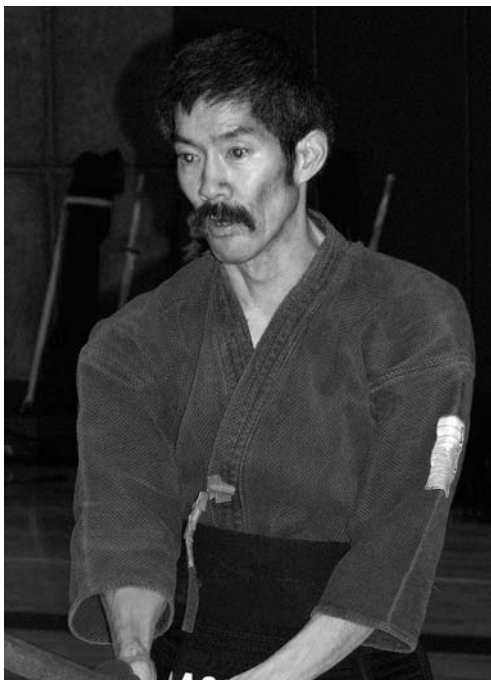
Chapter 7 – Know How to Work Through Injuries

By their very definition, martial arts are warlike and dangerous. This chapter demonstrates that while injuries are commonplace, getting hurt does not have to interrupt your training substantially. You will understand what happens when you become injured: learn a little basic first aid, develop a good understanding of when you might need to see a medical professional and when you can treat things yourself, discover proactive ways to prevent getting hurt in the first place, and find creative ways to continue practicing while injured.

Chapter 8 – Use Technology

This chapter covers a wide variety of ways to take advantage of modern technology and the vast resources available today to learn more about your martial art, expedite the learning process, and prevent or minimize injuries. Training journals, nutritional recommendations, and exercise routines are covered as well.

Each of the aforementioned chapters begins with an introduction by an experienced black belt and ends with a treatise from a senior student (many of whom are already black belts themselves; learning is a continuous process). In the middle of each chapter, you will find an essay written by a veteran black belt as well. At the end of each chapter, we provide an action plan, suggested reading, and recommended Web sites so that you can put your new knowledge to use right away. Appendices at the end of the book cover common martial arts terminology, review briefly the various martial styles you might wish to study, and, just for fun, give you a list of our favorite martial arts movies that you might enjoy.



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WORKING WITH ADVANCED RANKS IS A SURE WAY OF GETTING BETTER FASTER.



A LITTLE TRAINING OUTSIDE OF FORMAL CLASS GOES A LONG WAY.

CHAPTER 1

Do Not Limit Yourself

*“The only way to discover the limits of the possible
is to go beyond them into the impossible.”*

– Sir Arthur C. Clarke ⁴

Introduction (by Iain Abernethy)

*Of all the barriers to progress we can face, by far the most potent are the ones we create for ourselves. Negative thoughts and self-imposed limits are poison for your potential! “**I cannot**” always becomes “**I never did**” if left unchecked. To become what we are truly capable of becoming, we must ruthlessly free ourselves from the “brain chains” of mediocre thought and compromised aspirations.*

*The martial arts teach us to be bold and courageous. Timid and self-sabotaging thoughts, therefore, have no place in the mind of a martial artist. We need to confidently think “**I will!**” so that we can then triumphantly yell, “**I have!**” Know with all certainty that when you think positively and liberate your potential, you have the potential to achieve anything. If you want to make strong, positive progress in the martial arts, be sure to think strong, positive thoughts.*

The power of your thoughts should never be taken lightly. The human mind is the most complex thing in the known universe: its power is vast. Almost everything you see around you once started as a thought inside someone’s head. I know it may sound a tad “mystical” but the fact that our lives are shaped by our thoughts is “profoundly” down to earth. Our lives are shaped by our actions and our actions are the result of our thoughts. What we think about will manifest itself in our lives through the simple process of cause and effect. You are what you think.

If you think that you cannot master that technique, beat that opponent or achieve that grade, those negative thoughts will ensure that you are right! So long as you continue to think negative thoughts, they will create an impassable barrier. The good news is that it also works the other way around! When you truly believe that you can master that technique, beat that opponent, or achieve that grade, you set off a chain of events that will

inevitably lead to your success. Your positive thoughts will lead to positive actions. You do the right things and you achieve the right results. Simple!

When we think positively, it is sometimes said that we are being unrealistic, we are daydreaming, or that we are setting ourselves up for a fall or becoming arrogant. However, if we think in a negative way then we may be applauded for having our feet on the ground, for being realistic, practical, and down to earth. All this may lead us to wonder why the majority consider thinking negatively to be realistic whilst thinking positively is considered unrealistic.

The reason negative thinking is deemed more realistic is simply that the majority of people think negatively. These negative thoughts become barriers to progress and therefore the negative thoughts become a reality. Therefore, thinking negatively is realistic... for all those who think negatively! However, for those who think positively, positive thoughts are also realistic. Your positive thoughts free your potential and ensure you will make strong progress.

As warriors, we must never accept an inferior position to anything! We do not accept the limitations of circumstance and we should certainly never limit ourselves. This warrior spirit and refusal to accept any limitations should not only be central to your martial arts, it should be central to all aspects of your life. Be bold, courageous, and positive in everything you do.

– Iain Abernethy ⁵

Break the Limits of Possibility

Learning martial arts can be very challenging. It is a lifelong process that encompasses not only internalizing an abundance of fighting techniques, but also learning proper body alignment, breathing, and movement. It is both a physical and mental process. Diligent practice builds the physical strength, endurance, and flexibility necessary to become a black belt. Physical training is arduous yet certainly doable when you dedicate yourself to it. For many practitioners, mental conditioning is an even more challenging endeavor. Tough as mental conditioning may be, however, almost anyone is capable of achieving it if he or she approaches training from the right perspective.

Most people never know the limits of what they can do until or unless they are faced with a seemingly impossible challenge and decide to step up and meet it. Even significant challenges, like earning a black belt, are relatively mild when put in the proper perspective. Which is harder, learning to punch, kick, throw, and grapple effectively or learning to adjust to life as a paraplegic or quadriplegic after a sudden catastrophic accident? Clearly, the latter, yet many individuals in that condition lead long, productive lives. It is all a matter of attitude. Strong, positive thoughts facilitate your ability to overcome most any obstacle while negativity and doubt can impede your progress. Here are a few famous examples:

- Due to a rare birth defect, Kyle Maynard was born a congenital amputee, missing his limbs below the elbows and knees. Despite having neither hands nor feet, he refused to let his condition interfere with his goals in life. He learned how to eat, write, and even type (50 words per minute) all without relying on the hands he did not have. By the age of nineteen he played middle school football as a defensive lineman, became a state high school wrestling champion, and established a new world weightlifting record. Mr. Maynard exemplifies the indomitable spirit of someone who refuses to be limited by his disabilities.
- Cycling legend Lance Armstrong discovered he had advanced testicular cancer that had spread to his lungs and brain in 1996. Like many cancer survivors, he refused to let his struggles through surgery, chemotherapy, and rehabilitation place limits on his competitive spirit. Unlike anyone else in the world, however, he not only came back to win the *Tour de France* in 1999, but eventually won that illustrious bicycle race a historic seven times. The field of racers he competed against included world-class athletes who pedaled far enough in training each year to encircle the globe. The daily metabolic rate of a *Tour de France* cyclist exceeds that of most Mount Everest climbers, closely matching the highest rates found in any other animal species, yet he demonstrated the mental discipline and physical prowess necessary to out-distance all competitors and win.
- Passengers and crew on United Airlines Flight 93 found themselves in an unexpected and horrific challenge when terrorists hijacked the airplane, stormed the cockpit, and began killing people. Todd Beamer, Mark Bingham, Sandra Bradshaw, Tom Burnett, Andrew Garcia, Jeremy Glick, Richard Guadagno, Cee Cee Lyles, along with other passengers and crew, armed themselves with a variety of makeshift weapons and stormed the flight deck. While they managed to overcome many of the terrorists, they were tragically unable to regain control of the aircraft before it crashed. Regardless, their heroics thwarted the terrorists' aims, saved countless lives on the ground, and proved that ordinary people are capable of extraordinary valor even in the face of certain death.

“It is a paradoxical but profoundly true and important principle of life that the most likely way to reach a goal is to be aiming not at that goal itself but at some more ambitious goal beyond it.”

– Arnold J. Toynbee ⁶

Something to think about:

Most people never know the limits of what they can or cannot do until they are faced with an impossible challenge yet step up to meet it. If congenital amputee Kyle Maynard, missing both his hands and feet, could play middle school football, become a state high school wrestling champion, and establish a world weightlifting record, you can earn a black belt. Nearly anyone can achieve the rank through dedication, discipline, and diligent training.

- Susan Butcher was one of Alaska's most famous athletes. Competing in a traditionally male-dominated sport, she won the world's longest sled dog race, the Iditarod, a historic four times. Braving grueling conditions such as subzero temperatures, blinding snowstorms, treacherous ice, dangerous wildlife, and sleep deprivation to mush 1,152 miles from Anchorage to Nome, Alaska, she made this trek 17 times during her racing career. In 1985 she was forced to defend herself and her dog team from an attacking bull moose, an approximately 1,200 pound beast, using only her ice ax and parka. The crazed moose stomped two of her dogs to death and injured 13 more before another musher came along and shot it. Butcher, who withdrew after the loss of her dog team, was leading the race at the time. Had that incident not occurred she very well may have won five Iditarod races over her illustrious career, tying an all-time record. While she ultimately lost her struggle with leukemia in 2006, she demonstrated the same bravery and grit in battling her illness as she did when struggling against both nature and the other dog teams during the Iditarod races.
- During a routine hike in 2003, Aaron Ralston suddenly found himself in dire straits when an 800-pound boulder shifted unexpectedly and pinned his wrist to a canyon wall in a remote area of Canyonlands National Park in Utah. After six days of captivity, he realized that desperate measures were needed for survival. Using a cheap, dull pocketknife, he managed to amputate his own arm, rappel one-handed down a hill, and then hike six miles through the wilderness before someone found and rescued him. This extraordinary tale of survival shows what a sufficiently motivated person is capable of doing.

Earning a black belt pales in comparison to these aforementioned challenges. It is by no means an easy task, however. To succeed you need a positive attitude, one in which you can visualize success. You need to clearly articulate why you are embarking on your martial journey, set specific long- and short-term goals for getting there, and follow through to ensure progress. It also helps (a lot) to hang around supportive people who can help energize you along the way.

It is a good idea to begin by making a list of the significant achievements you have already made, athletic or academic endeavors, personal or professional accomplishments, anything that helps you see that you can set and attain goals. It is easier to visualize yourself succeeding in martial arts when you know that you have excelled and/or persevered in other areas of your life as well. Knowing that you have met and overcome other challenges makes martial arts seem a bit less intimidating.

It is also important to realize that while earning a black belt is a truly monumental milestone along the martial path, it is but one of many stopping points. Until you quit, the learning never ends. First things first, however. To begin your journey you must articulate why you want to start and where you want to go. Once you know that, you will already be one step closer to achieving your goal.

“Ninety-nine percent of all failures come from people who have the habit of making excuses.”

– George Washington Carver ⁸

Begin by Articulating Why

What draws you to the martial arts? People become interested in *budo* (martial ways) for a variety of reasons. Simply stating that you want to earn a black belt is not enough to create a compelling vision to carry you through the challenges along the way. Are you looking for character development, tournament competition, physical conditioning, mental discipline, self-defense skills, weapons forms, any or all of the above, or something completely different? Are you really looking to achieve rank and promotions or just learn some new skills? What are you seeking as you begin your martial journey?

Before you articulate what you want today, it may be useful to know that our interests in *budo* generally evolve and change over time. As children, we may be drawn to the martial arts simply because they are fun. Building strength, balance, and coordination is definitely rewarding, yet the most beneficial aspect for many youths is the enhancement of self-esteem that comes from surmounting challenges and receiving promotions throughout the training. Parents likely appreciate the discipline and conditioning aspects more than their children do. Many of our students' parents have remarked that their child pays better attention in school as a result of his or her karate training.

As young adults, we may be more concerned with the competitive aspects of our art. Social interactions and physical conditioning become more important. The ability to defend ourselves from potential adversaries is often a draw. As we reach our late 30s or early 40s, however, many practitioners begin looking for something deeper,

Advice for New Students

by Martina Sprague⁷

Know your objective. It is difficult knowing the exact reasons for our studies when we first sign up for martial arts lessons. But after a year or two when the information you receive has had time to gel a little, providing you have made a conscious effort at self-discovery, you should have a clear idea of what you wish to achieve and why. Start by heeding the following warning: The martial arts differ from other sports or physical activities in the sense that they come with a split objective. A soccer player wants to join a team, compete, and win. A marathon runner wants to improve her time over last year's run. A gymnast wants to go to the Olympics and take the gold. What does a martial artist want?

The martial artist might want to improve his physical fitness, build self-esteem and confidence, win on the tournament circuit, do stunts for the movies, or learn to defend himself and others against assault. Alternatively, he might want to learn how to fight. In either case, the goal is ill defined. Because the martial arts carry a split objective of sports and fighting, it is difficult or nearly impossible to choose the part that interests you the most and single-handedly focus on this part. You cannot reach your full potential on the street, however, if your main interest is tournament competition. Likewise, you cannot reach your full potential on the tournament circuit if your main interest is self-defense or real fighting. Yes, you can be a jack-of-all-trades, but who finds that attractive?

If you do not know what you wish to achieve, then how can you design a program that takes you there? If you wish to accelerate your learning, then start by identifying your objective. Note that objective is singular. You only have one objective—everything else you learn is support work. If you are unable to identify your objective, then seek to educate yourself until you have the understanding it takes to know what you want. Every time you go to the training hall, keep your objective in mind. When you know your objective, the attitude with which you approach your training will assist your instructor in meeting you halfway and help you accelerate your learning.

such as *ki* (internal energy) training, character development, or even spiritual enlightenment. Knowing what you are looking for, clearly articulating your goals, and realizing that they may legitimately evolve or change over time is enormously important to setting yourself up for success in earning a black belt.

What is your objective in learning martial arts? Take some time to think deeply about your objective and then write down why you want to train. If you are unable to identify your objective, then seek to educate yourself until you have the understanding it takes to know what you want. Once you know why, you will need to take the next step and get started. Believe it or not, this is the first point where many potential black belts fail. They know what they want, yet they keep finding obstacles that keep them from getting started.

There are No Good Excuses

If you really want to become a martial artist and earn your black belt badly enough, there are no good excuses to keep you from obtaining that goal. Black belts come from every ethnic and religious background. They can be tall, short, male, female, old, young, healthy, or disabled. In short, just about anyone can earn the rank through dedication, discipline, and diligent training. That being said, many potential martial artists dwell on all the reasons they cannot begin their training, focusing on the negative rather than looking for the positive. Without that positive mindset, it is nearly impossible to earn your rank. Similarly, many practitioners who begin with a positive mental attitude drop out the first time they encounter a significant barrier along the way.

To earn your black belt you will need to overcome the plethora of excuses that keep you from starting (or finishing) your journey. Here are some common excuses that may be holding you back:

“I really want to get started but I need to get in shape first.”

“I am too old to begin such rigorous training.”

“I am too small to become a successful martial artist.”

“I am disabled; there is simply no way I can perform these techniques because of my condition.”

“I have an old injury that prevents me from participating.”

“It is just too complicated; I’m simply not smart enough to figure it all out.”

“I just do not have enough time to practice.”

“I do not have anyone to practice with.”

“It is too expensive; I cannot afford the training.”

We hear these kinds of things every day, yet for every obstacle, there is a work-around. Here are ways of overcoming the aforementioned excuses, shifting your mindset to a more positive and ultimately successful approach:

Fitness is not a prerequisite. While a high level of physical fitness is absolutely required to earn a black belt, it is by no means a prerequisite to begin training. Most martial arts classes begin with *daruma* (exercises), where students warm up, stretch, and perform basic calisthenics. This helps practitioners not only get in shape over the long run, but avoid training injuries on a daily basis as well. Some instructors include *daruma* with every class session while others expect students to learn the routines and then, once competent, begin performing them on their own to focus limited class time on martial techniques that you cannot learn by yourself. Either way, participation in these activities will dramatically increase your fitness level over time.

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About the Authors

Kris Wilder

Beginning his martial arts training in 1976 in the art of *taekwondo*, Kris Wilder has earned black belt-level ranks in three arts: *taekwondo* (2nd Degree), *Kodokan* Judo (1st Degree) and *Goju Ryu* Karate (4th Degree), which he teaches at the West Seattle Karate Academy. He has trained under Kenji Yamada, who as a Judoka won back-to-back United States grand championships (1954 – 1955); Shihan John Roseberry, founder of *Shorei-Shobukan* Karate and a direct student of Seikichi Toguchi; and Hiroo Ito, a student of *Shihan* Kori Hisataka (Kudaka in the Okinawan dialect), the founder of *Shorinji-Ryu Kenkokan* Karate.



Though now retired from Judo competition, while active in the sport Kris competed on the national and international levels. He has traveled to Japan and Okinawa to train in karate and has authored several books on the martial arts, including co-authoring *The Way of Kata*. He has written guest chapters for other martial arts authors and has had articles published in *Traditional Karate*, a magazine out of the U.K. with international readership. Kris also hosts the annual Martial University, a seminar composed of multidisciplinary martial artists. He also regularly instructs at seminars.

Kris lives in Seattle, Washington, with his son Jackson. He can be contacted via e-mail at kwilder@quidnunc.net or through the West Seattle Karate Academy Web site at www.westseattlekarate.com.

Lawrence Kane

Lawrence Kane is the author of *Martial Arts Instruction* (YMAA, 2004) and *Surviving Armed Assaults* (YMAA, 2006), as well as co-author (with Kris Wilder) of the critically acclaimed book, *The Way of Kata* (YMAA, 2005). He has also published numerous articles about teaching, martial arts, self-defense, and related topics, contributed to other author's books, and acts as a forum moderator at www.iainabernethy.com, a Web site devoted to traditional martial arts and self-protection.



Since 1970, he has participated in a broad range of martial arts, from traditional Asian sports such as judo, *arnis*, *kobudo*, and karate to recreating medieval European combat with real armor and rattan (wood) weapons.

He has taught medieval weapons forms since 1994 and Goju Ryu karate since 2002. He has also completed seminars in modern gun safety, marksmanship, handgun retention, and knife combat techniques, and he has participated in slow-fire pistol and pin shooting competitions.

Since 1985, Lawrence has supervised employees who provide security and oversee fan safety during college and professional football games at a Pac-10 stadium. This part-time job has given him a unique opportunity to appreciate violence in a myriad of forms. Along with his crew, he has witnessed, interceded in, and stopped or prevented hundreds of fights, experiencing all manner of aggressive behaviors as well as the escalation process that invariably precedes them. He has also worked closely with the campus police and state patrol officers who are assigned to the stadium and has had ample opportunities to examine their crowd control tactics and procedures.

To pay the bills, he does IT sourcing strategy and benchmarking work for an aerospace company in Seattle where he gets to play with billions of dollars of other people's money and make really important decisions. Lawrence lives in Seattle, Washington, with his wife Julie and his son Joey. He can be contacted via e-mail at lakane@ix.netcom.com.

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Kris Wilder began his martial arts training in 1976. He is the co-author of *The Way of Kata*, and the author of *The Way of Sanchin Kata*, and *Lessons from the Dojo Floor*. He has earned black belts in *Taekwondo*, *Kodokan* judo, and *Goju Ryu* karate. Wilder has trained under world-class martial artists, including Kenji Yamada (back-to-back United States judo grand champion), John Roseberry (founder of *Shorei-Shobukan* karate), and Hiroo Ito (student of Kori Hisataka, the founder of *Shorinji-Ryu Kenkokan* karate). Kris Wilder lives and teaches *Goju Ryu* karate in Seattle, Washington.



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