

The T.K.D. Flash

A Publication of the Association of Academies of Martial Arts

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On November 15 Mr. VH was in Cadillac, Michigan teaching a series of seminars to practitioners. The first seminar, which could be described as a "beginning look" at Ho Sin Sool, was slated to last two hours but ran badly overtime due Mr. VH's usual poor organization. The second seminar, which dealt with stepsparring, ran badly overtime due to our collective lack of organization, but, in stressing the few fundamental flaws which underlie poor stepsparring and the ways to cure them, hopefully paved the way for more organization in the future. The final session, on Black Belt forms, went smoothly and quickly owing to the superior organization and quality of performance of the students. Mr. VH also addressed the question, because it had been raised, as to what the entropy of the I.T.F. augurs for us and why he and his schools adhere loyally to the U.S.T.F. and Grand Master Sereff. Disorganized though he be, Mr. VH greatly appreciated the courtesies extended to him by people about whose success in TaeKwon-Do he cares and to the Osborn family who graciously extended him the warmth of their home.

On November 1 a gup-level test was held at the Sheboygan Academy. Mssrs. Marc Mikkelson, Jarvis Klassy, and VH presided and Mrs. Jacqueline Karpinsky cornered for a test of nine students. Congratulations to Ed Girdaukas and Alex Kornetzke on their Decided grades.

On Sunday November 2 a gup level testing took place at American Martial Arts Center in Middleton. Mr. VH presided, Mr. Kevin McDaniel cornered, and Mr. Mike Love assisted. Three students displayed solid technique.

At a Black Belt Workout in Grafton, Saturday November 8, Black Belts focused on Model Sparring and Prearranged Free Sparring. Mr. VH passed out sheets dealing with these topics. This was the last workout in this series.

The Academy of Martial Arts, Grafton, hosted the Ozaukee children's Tour Club on November 3 and 4.

47 students from the Academies competed in Hartford CT on November 15. Of 557 International competitors, we took 10 gold medals, 11 silvers, and 21 bronzes. "Going Gold" were Jeremiah Woolwine, Mahlon Ellis, Justina Hauss, Kristen Hosey, Jalonde Willis, Emir Dostovic, Jillian Osborne, Scott Vaughn, Josh Lewis, and Amber Cole.

On November 15 the Martial Arts Tournament Association hosted its final tournament of the year during the day, and State Finals in the evening, in Manitowoc. Congratulations to the winners and to the MATA folks for a fine first year of competition.

Students from North Carolina Schools participated in a Thanksgiving Day Parade in uniform, grateful, I am sure, for having tied their belts correctly.

On December 1 the University of North Carolina club will move to a brand new facility. The new location is marked by plenty of floor space, a clean and orderly appearance, generous parking, and, best of all, no landlord or cotenants. Congratulations to Jeremy and Lisa Kempka for making it happen.

A test will be held at the new UNCC location on Dec. 6.

On December 6 at 10:00 a.m. Mr. VH will teach a seminar in Step Sparring at the Academy of Martial Arts in Sheboygan.

On January 25 the Association will head a regional Black Belt test at Grafton Wisconsin. To be held at John Long Middle School's new gymnasium, the U.S.T.F. sanctioned test will be presided over by Master Earl Weiss. Testees are expected from at least 3 states. A banquet will be held in the evening. For information contact Mr. VH 414-963-8990.

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Why is It So Hard for a Child to Get a Black Belt in Your School?

by F.M. Van Hecke

Every year I take a ring as Center Referee in a local tournament. I like the continuous free-sparring format, I like the Instructor, and I like to help out people like him who I think are helping young people develop the right way in our martial art.

And every year at this same tournament, some students, from one or another of my schools, attend and see small children with Black Belts, twelve-year-olds with "Second Degrees," and fourteen-year-olds with "Thirds." My students, and more commonly their parents, observe these preening kids and make comparisons with their own rank and proficiency. It's not uncommon for a Blue Belt to feel that even the more advanced of these Black Belts would not survive a fairly conducted match with him.

What's going on? And why?

There are several things at work here.

The first is obvious: kids start study in the martial arts earlier. The author wrestled in high school and played Judo in college, but his serious study of our art began during graduate studies and his Black Belt achieved in his mid-twenties, better than three decades ago. Even though

most physical education experts would agree that most children are developmentally unable to take advantage of a striking art until age six, many schools are happy to admit children as young as four. One consideration for these instructors is the financial advantage, but, in fairness, there is a market out there. I've received a call from the mother of a three-year-old seeking classes and assuring me her child had a superior attention span. Parents want more activities for their children and are willing to sacrifice more (monetarily) to get them.

A consequence of this market is the availability of more products and programs for these children. Century's "Little Dragon" program and Melody Shuman's "Little Ninjas" are examples. There are many books for children on martial arts themes, and even specialized equipment. While in class, students play games specifically designed to cater to their shorter attention spans and get exercise, never a bad thing. It costs money to keep a school's doors open and the lights on, and instructors have found a new profit center.

A second thing that's going on is the influence of a "self-fulfillment" culture on the martial arts. (It is not without irony that Anthony Robbins is on the cover of a recent martial arts trade journal.) Parents rarely care that a child may have won a trophy by taking on weak

competition. The important thing is that the child's got the prize and can feel good about himself. Every teacher knows that affirming a child's self-worth is an important exercise, and good teachers do affirm self esteem in children. Parents want their child to be a Black Belt because they know children admire Black Belts (some days, a young Black Belt teacher may spend more time in a direct and unencumbered interface with the child than the parent). To give a child a Black Belt, then, is not just of value for the work and resultant proficiency that usually goes into it, it is of value for its apparent statement of the wearer's personal worth.

A third thing that's going on here is the need for closure and end to the flux of tension. Children need to feel they're "moving on," from grade to grade in school, level to level in competition, and will ultimately achieve the "ultimate." Their needs for gratification, quickly, and the feeling of getting to a final position of achievement, "champion," or "honor student," is a relief. We put children under tremendous pressure to achieve, and the resultant tension can be destructive. Boys, in particular, seem to suffer far more anxiety about being achievers than the author recalls from times past. Martial arts teachers feel bad about failure of their charges and there is a constant tug on the heart-strings to promote a

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child, even when it may be wrong to do so.

In addition to these general changes in the landscape, many parents do derive much personal satisfaction from children's achievement as though it were their own, and can be bitterly disappointed if a child does not achieve. This is hardly new. Parents seek personal reassurance, and many teachers are, in effect, selling that reassurance along with the Black Belt.

The martial arts trade associations are highly resistant to criticism of a program emphasizing child Black Belts, because they know the financial consequences of children dropping out and the comparatively greater profits derived from Black Belt testing and programs. They also know that much resistance to these programs comes from the very people -- "old school" instructors -- who are otherwise those most resistant to their profit-enhancing message, services, equipment and programs. (The trade associations do emphasize many positives, such as dojang decor, program expansion, and service tips that can be very valuable to those of us "old schoolers" who open our minds.)

Looking back in history, even in a traditional context it is not impossible for a child to achieve Black Belt, just rare. The child who does

so in that type of school is usually strongly motivated by himself, not just by parents, turns in adult-type hours and discipline in training, and stays with his instructor for years. Often this type of child will arise from a somewhat anachronistic context such as home schooling. Rarely will he or she be oriented toward the passive recreation of television; this student's parents might actively forbid certain forms of passive recreation or control them tightly. Quite often these personal characteristics will lead to excellence in other endeavors as well, although not always exactly where their parents might prefer. And often the kid achieving his or her Black Belt in a traditional context is fairly tough and has exhibited the capacity to overcome some sort of personal tragedy or loss.

So, what's better, to have the occasional very rare achievement of a Black Belt by a child or to have this achievement available to every child who stays with the program long enough?

I believe there are good arguments on both sides, but here is what I've come to think.

Every child should be able to achieve a Black Belt. But only a few will, even in an ideal context, because the context alone cannot make them Black Belts. The student must take advantage of the context. This means a Black Belt cannot just be given, conferred. It must be taken,

seized.

One can argue that the context should motivate, and that lack of success of some students means you have to improve the context, but the fact is that even if you provided the best of example, caring, and opportunity, many will not seize it.

There is a lesson here for proponents of both sides of the argument.

No "old schooler" (and this seems to include a lot of young independent school owners) is being fair if he simply blames society or "modern parents" or "lack of toughness" or "today's kids" for a lack of success in motivating his students. If he really wishes to promulgate his art and its benefits, he must open his mind to better methods, motivational tools, quality instruction and surroundings. The day a teacher thinks he knows it all and his only need is to pass his knowledge down the chain, he begins to die as a teacher.

A teacher must be a student, must keep learning and improving, should not fear improving himself and his product. If he believes he should not have to go out of his way to move on, he will only fool himself when he self-promotes. The "old schooler" should be motivated to continually improve his school environment to permit students a greater chance at seizing the opportunity. Every drop out should cause reflection.

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But no purpose is achieved in simply conferring Black Belts as a courtesy (“Your mom and dad have been paying a long time, so you deserve it.”) and lowering standards either. Older students in particular know when an award is meaningless, and then it is held in the same sort of contempt in which we hold ourselves for accepting it.

In this sense, the trade association junkies do a serious disservice even as they preach (and rightly so) that more traditional martial artists need to improve their educational service. In cheapening the significance of a Black Belt, they lessen the motivation of the aspirant and lower the quality of their respective arts for future generations.

It is an intriguing argument, both sides partaking of being dead right and deadly wrong.

So, in the end, the intelligent consumer will ask a few questions and weigh choices carefully. Is there a “Black Belt Course Option” with an implied promise of achieving the rank? How long does it take to get a Black Belt (beware the “three year wonders”)? Does the school seem to be overwhelmingly young in its student body, with very few mature students? Is there enough gray hair on the faculty to imply that there is a serious connection to traditional thinking and enough

mental acuity under that gray hair to imply that there is a continuing effort to improve (or does the school show neglect)? Does the school have an organized curriculum (as opposed to game-playing), particularly commencing with children aged six and above? Does the school have enough association with other schools that its students occasionally have the opportunity to test their skills in competition? Does the instructional staff appear to have the respect of other martial arts schools and instructors, at least to the extent of being seriously credentialled? Are credentials real (sorry, in the real world there are rarely decent fourteen year old instructors, thirty-two year old Fourth Dans) or phony? Am I being pressured to “sign now” with “specials” and so on which would cause me to end my search? Where can I learn more about the school? How long has the school been around, and what does the community say about it? Finally, are these Black Belt teachers the sorts of Black Belts who respect both the persons of their students and their own Black Belts?

It is clear that anybody purchasing a course of instruction who hasn't had the opportunity to speak with graduates who are themselves in a position to judge comparatively is at a disadvantage in making these judgments. But since that sort of opportunity may be rare,

consider the question as broader than, “Can my child achieve a Black Belt?” and follow through by asking whether the Black Belt achieved is worth it.

From the Editor--

As we come to the end of another year of publication, and the Association another year of operation, it is important to remember that all of this, the Art that we practice, the friends who join with us in it, the growth we experience in its exercise, is a great gift. Gifts, especially those unexpected and, dare we say it, undeserved, are little analogies of our very lives. Whether we attribute life to chance, to God, or are content to evade the question, the fact is that in its absence we are nothing and of no worth. When we seek and travel a path with tenacity, we are doing the business of life in a Way. Choi, Hong Hi, son of a nation subjugated and torn, has shown us a path to follow. His own life was mixed with positives and negatives, but the path to which he points, even where he does not follow, is a monument to his indomitable spirit. That he is no longer with us is really not true, for he lives on in his Art and in our practice. So thanks are due, to him for our Way, and that is a gift to reflect upon.

The Flash and the Association wish you all and your families the best wishes of the season.