

The Black Belt Story!

**BY Professor Angelo L. Albergo and The Late Professor Theodore R. West
In the year of 1977...**

“Black Belt” – The very phrase titillates the imagination. The public has seldom before been so hoodwinked by so much window dressing. Movies, television, and even the lowly commercial that accompanies us on our forays to the refrigerator, feed us an endless stream of misconceptions. We Americans have led to believe that the mere attainment of rank at the Black Belt level is the ultimate achievement; yet in truth, it is just the beginning. To many high ranking practitioners of the Japanese Martial Arts, a person may not even be considered to be a student until after he or she has earned the rank of Shodan (the first level of Black Belt grading). Even at the Shodan level, he or she may be deemed a good, an indifferent or an unworthy student. In most of the Arts, there are ten grades of the Black Belt level, beginning at first degree and progressing to the tenth degree. All too often, unfortunately, countless students who have achieved the lowest, or first degree, immediately set up shop as “Sensei” (Teacher). They may argue that, for any number of reasons, this is necessary, but a serious problem now naturally follows. How is the quality of this person’s instruction to be monitored and how does our newly ranked Black Belt get additional instruction?

How does this person grow in the art? If the instructor ceases to thirst after and gain additional knowledge, the doors of the mind close, and that person begins to vegetate. He or she is deprived of the additional knowledge and training that would increase depth or knowledge and further perfect technique. This instructor then is hardly the type of person to whom one would entrust well-being, or life itself. How is the public, and the good name and reputation of the fighting arts and their practitioners, to be protected from possibly well-meaning instructor who brings limited skill and knowledge to instructional setting? Who set up shop in little nooks and crannies and dispenses limited knowledge and stilted technique until the victims are either hurt, or become aware of the person’s limitations and escape. Eventually, this person will exhaust that little bag of tricks and move on to greener pasture, there to do even more damage and the scenario is repeated. These problems do exist country-wide, to further compound these, there are no standardized federal or state laws regulating or defining the qualifications of the various schools and instructors. One cannot become a competent and qualified teacher of the martial art through passive reading, audience participation, watching movies, TV, or tapes played by the VCR. Teaching a martial art is a physical endeavor entailing a lot of the interaction between the instructor and student. The lives and physical well-being of beginning students must not be entrusted to the questionable abilities of those not fully trained themselves.

Kendo, Aikido, Judo, Jiu-Jitsu, Karate, Arnis, and so many more related fighting forms are referred to as the “martial arts”. In an attempt to establish so semblance of quality control, the various arts have established their own self-regulating organizations. One such organization was founded by a dedicated group of high ranking Black Belt in 1968. The organization of many practitioners of varying styles in the Martial Arts brought to fruition a dream of many Black Belt holders. This need was to establish strict rules of moral and ethical conduct for members, to establish strict grading requirements, to provide for open testing applicants aspiring to the Black Belt grade, and to provide for grading boards comprised to impartial judges. When grading requirements are formalized and strictly enforced, the rank manipulator can no longer flourish. This type of person is all too common in all areas of our country. Ask any bona fide Sensei, or any officer of an honest organization and they will describe this character. He is “Mr. Beautiful” – constantly amazed at his own prowess. This person will flit like a butterfly from organization to organization seeking to con, cheat, lie, and flatter or even buy the next promotion, the main stock in

trade of the specie is a fast glib tongue. That tongue will be used lavishly to convince you, the world, and himself just how great and deserving he really is. His constant lament is that “they” are jealous and are withholding higher rank for that reason. If you meet this charmer, do not walk, just run away. How do you evaluate Black Belt practitioners? It’s what’s up front that counts! How do they conduct themselves? How do they conduct a class? Never mind how good a lesson the person talks, don’t become mesmerized by words. Watch the students, asses the students on their individual abilities at the various lower ranks. The instructor’s worth and ability are mirrored in the students- in their ability, knowledge, skills and demeanor on the mat. What really goes into the attainment of the rank of Black Belt? In our organization students applying for the Shodan test (First degree Black Belt rank) have documented years of study. They are vouched for as being of high moral character. Each of their instructors must attest as to their emotional stability, their training background, and their attitude towards their art, their fellow students and their instructors. They are ready and eager to present themselves before the grading board where their knowledge of all aspects of their art will be subjected to test, scrutiny and evaluation.

As each student goes before the board, that person’s instructor also faces a test before a jury of his or her peers. If the student has not properly assimilated the physical, emotional, and philosophical aspects of the art, the instructor publicly loses face. How do you evaluate and select a good school? First, and most importantly, contact your better business bureau. Ask at the school and determine if the school and its instructors are associated with, and recognized by, a recognized Martial Arts organization. Do not be timid in asking to see grading certificates, or who did not have one, too much of an instructor’s life and sweat goes into obtaining that slip of paper. We suggest you sit and watch a few sessions before making up your mind. Do not allow yourself to be hurried. If the school is real, it will still be there when you have taken the time to consider all the information available to you. Do not accept statements that sessions are highly secret, and only for a select few to view, or that only enrolled students can watch a session. A student effort and performance, at any grade level, should be a source of pride to a competent instructor.



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