

Apples and Oranges

In the course of conversation, an acquaintance mentioned that his nephew, only 14, would be testing for his preliminary black belt this month. The expression on his face implied, “Isn’t that good? Isn’t he talented to test for a black belt at 14?”

I think he expected me to congratulate him on his nephew’s achievement, but I’m afraid I disappointed him with a neutral stare. “What?” he asked.

“Well, I’m sure the kid worked hard for the rank.”

“But?”

“But it may or may not mean a whole lot.” His wrinkled forehead begged clarification. “I have been the in the martial arts 45 years and have seen 8 and 10 year olds earn black belts in your nephew’s system. Of course, there is no telling about his specific school or his teachers, but the style they represent is noted for handing black belts to younger kids. Fourteen is not unusual.” His face was still quizzical. “Okay,” said I, “it’s like this. Ask yourself if he is especially talented to earn a black belt at 14, or if the requirements are not especially challenging. If it took him 2 years to make that rank and it took one of my guys eight, what assumptions would you make? That your nephew was a martial arts genius, or that my requirements were too difficult? I’ll bet you would not assume that his requirements were too easy. Few parents or relatives would. That would mean that they had poured their hard-earned money and their son’s sweat into something of comparatively small value.”

“I see,” he admitted. “They are so ready to be proud, they don’t see the forest for the trees.”

“Or the don’t see the apples for the oranges. It doesn’t mean there’s anything wrong what the system he studies. I am sure there are many benefits to it. I am sure they make him work to earn his rank, but all ranks are not alike. Look, I haven’t seen the kid or his school, so I don’t want to caste aspersions, but I have been teaching long enough to know that most schools would rather promote their students for sales purposes than to recognize...okay, let’s stop here. What do you think, his black belt recognizes?”

“A certain level of mastery, I suppose.”

“Okay, but mastery of what?”

“Self-defense, what else?”

“His test will consist of kicking, forms, maybe breaking, one-step engagements, and maybe some freestyle sparring. Nothing wrong with that: all of those can be consider elements of self-defense. The closest to self-defense, in my way of thinking, would be the one-step engagements. I am familiar with his system so I know that the attacker will lunge to a safe distance from him, he will lunge into the attacker’s frozen punch, effect a powerful block, step away from the posed attacker and illustrate his best jump-turn kick. The crowd will cheer. Now that’s a drill with artificial distance created for safety, to be sure, but it is primarily a way for him to

show off his athleticism, not his self-defense ability. One may contribute to the other, but one does not equal the other.”

“I get it. But why would they give him the black belt then?”

“Because a black belt, traditionally, is a sign of entering into real instruction. He would be seen as a qualified beginner. Is that how you, his parents, or his friends would see him? I doubt it. I think they would see him as a self-defense expert, and I’d be willing to bet that he would not stay with the school more than another year.”

“You mean because he got his black belt, there was nothing more to learn?”

“He would have more to learn — another break, another kick, another form, but would it be self-defense? See, I don’t mind his learning a traditional art so long as his school tells him he is learning an art. I will bet, however, that he thinks that he is learning to kick bad-guy butt. Certainly his improved self-confidence and athleticism will help in that, but it is not what you or he thinks it is — at least not in most cases. Unfortunately, each school has its own standards for each rank. If you went to Harvard and got A’s while your buddy went to Podunk State and got C’s, both of you could legitimately say you graduated college. But ’t’aint the same thing, is it?”

“Okay, but I still have to ask, why would they give him a black belt? Why not have stricter standards?”

“Because they are running a business. It is to their advantage to promote a guy when he has memorized the requirements, hiding under the guise of ‘all schools have different standards’ and ‘black belt is just a qualified beginner anyway.’ They hold a big public affair, use it to enroll more friends a relatives, keep them enthused with frequent promotions and repeat the process several times a year. Look, we live in America. Americans have given up quality for convenience. They want everything on the hurry-up. Most successful martial arts schools give them what they want. Unfortunately, where you think you are getting a ripe apple, they are really giving you a shrunken orange dressed up in smooth, red skin.”

“What about your school? Obviously, from what you say, you don’t promote frequently and have higher standards, yet you run a business.”

“Only barely. I run a school. Business is necessary to bring in the bucks, but serving what people want does not give them what they need. In fact, it usually gives them only a fraction of what they think they want; the rest of what they get is hype so they won’t notice that they didn’t get what they *really* want. If you work to earn a black belt in two years in a school that makes you feel accomplished and proud, why would you pay attention to what other schools do? You’ve developed certain skills and you have a good feeling about yourself, so why question anything? On the other hand, since you asked about schools like mine, if you give a person what they need to achieve the goal they *really* wanted (self-defense ability), they might balk at what it takes to get there. There is less fanfare and less frequent achievement on that route. That’s why Harvard has fewer admissions than Podunk State.”

“And that’s why a business-school black belt is a different sort of fruit,” concluded my acquaintance.

I bowed at his learning, but did not offer any belts.

Next time we'll discuss the challenge of managing time for martial arts study.