

## Breaking in the Old Guys

Why is it that you always have to “break in” the new guys on the team, in the office, or in the dojo, but you never have to “break in” the old guys? The obvious answer is that, having been “broken in” when they were new, the old guys don’t need any more “breaking”.

I have a problem with the “breaking in” phrase: it sounds like the new guys are always going to be stubborn broncos that arch under the saddle and chomp at the bit they should be champing at. I also have a problem with the idea that the experienced student doesn’t need to be “broken in” as much as, perhaps more than, the new one. In fact, I would claim that the old guys are going to be stubborn broncos at least as often as the new guys—just probably not at a predictable time, or in the same way.

We can all picture a new recruit bristling with questions, doubting that this training method will bring him the results he has in mind; but what about the seasoned veteran who, jaded with the school’s methods and overly comfortable with his relationship to Sensei, feels he knows what would really be good for the school, the students, the art, etc.? If only Sensei would do more *shugyo* (austere training), then we’d get those lazy beginners in shape! If only Sa Bum Nim would do more kicking, then we’d separate the *Taes* from the *Kwons*. If only Sifu would do more sparring, then we would know who is number one around here. Of course, the beginner may be having similar thoughts, but he knows that he knows nothing so, stubborn though he may be, he will line up and shut up because it seems everyone else is okay with Sensei’s/Sa Bum’s/Sifu’s decisions. Eventually however, the beginner becomes the intermediate who asks training questions of seniors, supposedly out of curiosity but actually because she thinks she may know better. The intermediate becomes the senior and, having held her breath for years, now lets her opinion out in a sometimes less-than-respectful manner.

Maybe he or she has a point; but to be sure, he or she is seeing it from a single point of view. Sensei may have flaws or may be running a less than perfect training regimen, but he has to consider multiple points of view: he has to satisfy himself, the art, and several levels of students, as well as lead them, whether they know it or not, toward mastery.

Many years ago, a student of mine, having deferred college until later in life, decided to get a degree at the local state school. He had done a lot of reading on his own, was a bright guy, a good learner, and knew exactly what he wanted. Therein was the problem. Because he knew exactly what he wanted, he had little patience for teachers who were not giving him exactly that. To him, they were conceited lunkheads who were going about their tuition in an uninspired and inadequate way. He dropped out midway through his second semester. Okay, perhaps the professors were not the right ones for him, I thought, but the next fall he enrolled in an out-of-state college in a special program for the major he wanted. After one year, he came home complaining of professorial lunkheadedness once again. Although he was a new guy at college, he was an old guy in the art of studying. Although he needed to be broken in, as does everyone else when first matriculating, he also needed to be broken of the idea that being older always makes one wiser.

Far from a docile beginner needing to be broken in, the grumbling senior needs to be woken up to the fact that his opinion, although educated, seasoned, and considered, is likely to be self-serving. Self-service isn't the worst characteristic a person can have, but it doesn't serve when one is a teacher or a leader, or when one is leading oneself through the weeds and over the barriers of personal development. Certainly one should not abandon oneself blindly to the school's instruction as beginners must do, but to resist a wider perception can be the very item that breaks one off from the school, rather than breaks one in.