

The Youngest Black Belt

How old does a person have to be to earn a black belt? Actually, since each art, style or school determines its own standards, there is no set age. There are two schools of thought: one says that anyone performing the specific requirements adequately should be able to wear a black belt; the other says a certain amount of maturity (not just physical skill) is needed to qualify for a black belt rank. This is why we have 9-year-olds being awarded black belts along with their 71-year-old grandmothers. The first has the skills memorized, has practiced with youthful vigor, and imitates the appearance of maturity. The second has the maturity and can approximate the skills. Of course, there is no absolute. I have met truly mature 9-year-olds and truly athletic grandmothers. Because of this lack of absolute, to award a black belt on only predetermined requirements to anyone, regardless of age, seems rather unavoidable.

I think, however, that the argument begs the true question: what are the predetermined requirements, **what are the standards of judgment?** Since each art or style chooses its own standards, one cannot compare a black belt in Shotokan Karate with a black belt in Ueshiba Aikido. One cannot even compare two similar systems, let's say Matsubayashi Shorin and Kobayashi Shorin Karate, or even two associations of one art: ITF and ATF Tae Kwon Do, for instance.

Since martial arts in the modern world -- martial arts that can be self-defense and self-development, or sport and aesthetics, or cultural study and exercise -- is supposed to be for everyone, it seems unfair to criticize schools that have offered a mark of achievement to a few students, yet somehow, seeing really young kids get a black belt feels uncomfortable to many. It is not just sour grapes; rather, it is the emotional realization that the standards of some schools are annoyingly dissimilar from other schools. **The symbolic meaning of the black belt to the general public seeks the lowest common denominator**, so a mature adult (who labors 5 years to earn his/her black belt in a martial system that is as hard to graduate from as Harvard is to get into) feels cheated when the 9-year-old puts on a black belt it took him 18 months to "earn."

It is not about who would win in a fight or who has better athletic skills or who has the judgment to use his skills appropriately -- these are only part of the problem -- rather, it is about having high standards. Are you convinced that a BA from Podunk College took the same amount of intelligence and effort to earn as a BA from Harvard? It is not that we should have all colleges adopt Harvard's standards, but that we should *not* have colleges adopt Podunk's. Further, those colleges using Podunk's standards should not be lauded as if they produced a genius because they gave a BA degree to a 9-year-old.

What should the age standard be? Many traditional schools use a point of compromise: they suggest that a child can earn a junior black belt, but it will be converted to a senior black belt only when the child is old enough, usually at 16 or 18. At BUSHIDO-KAI, we support this method. There is no way we want to insult or disappoint our kids' class students who work to their capacities on earning higher rank, but we require them to

first earn their way into the adult class before that higher rank can be honored, then we consider them for junior black belts only when maturity, understanding, self-control and physical ability is displayed in several ways. **The senior black belt will come later, if they stay with their martial arts because they love the learning and the personal development they achieve -- not because they love the rank.**

Next time, we'll continue on a similar vein with Apples and Oranges.