

The Value of Rank

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People outside the martial arts value rank higher than those inside the martial arts. Beginners value it higher than experienced martial artists and masters, although they appreciate its purpose, value it least of all. This is not because rank is unimportant, but because rank is not what many people think it is. In short, belt rank is a convenient method for an instructor to determine, at a glance, approximately what students have learned.

Rank is not supposed to give one bragging rights. The kid who come home saying, “Mommy, I got my yellow belt!” is deservedly proud--for kids, any symbol of success is important for self-confidence, but for a 20-year-old to assume that, because he received a 2nd degree black belt after only 4 years of study, he must be better than a peer who is still in the middle of pre-black belt training is just plain ludicrous. Every school has different belt ranks (some have none) and every school has different standards by which those ranks are awarded.

Non-martial artists tend to think, incorrectly, that (1) the currency of rank is standard throughout the martial arts, and that (2) one who achieves a black belt is an expert. Both assumptions are false. To make the understanding of rank a little easier for the uninitiated, let’s take a look at a typical system from the traditional martial arts (left) and one version of a modern adaptation (right):

TRADITIONALISTIC SYSTEM	ranks	MODERN ADAPTATION
does not exist or white	10	plain white belt
does not exist or white	9	white belt w/ stripes
white	8	yellow (add 1 or 2 stripes)
white	7	orange (add 1 or 2 stripes)
white or green	6	green (add 1 or 2 stripes)
green	5	blue (add 1 or 2 stripes)
green	4	purple (add 1 or 2 stripes)
brown	3	brown (1 stripe)
brown	2	brown (2 stripes)
brown	1	brown (3 stripes)
black belt : ready to begin serious study	1st black	1 stripe on black belt : ready to open a school
assistant instructor only	2nd black	2 stripes on black belt
ready to teach as apprentice	3rd black	3 stripes on black belt
may be ready to open school	4th black	4 stripes on black belt
may be ready for “master” level	5th black	5 stripes on black belt

Note that the modern adaptation is heavy on colors and sometimes sub-ranks between colors. This allows students to keep their motivation by taking smaller steps and simultaneously allows the school to collect

more exam fees--in a way, it benefits both student and school. The colors themselves mean little because colors do not suggest how far from “graduation” one is. In the more traditional system (originally only 6 grades before black belt) name their ranks (in Japanese or Korean, etc.) to state the distance from the first black belt. For example *hachikyu* (white belt) means eighth level from first-degree black belt, *sankyu* (the first brown belt) means 3rd level from first-degree black belt.

In both systems, black belt seems to be the goal, but in the more traditional system, one’s accomplishments are downplayed, not because they are unimportant, but because modesty is one of the qualities expected of a student.

The value of rank is purely pragmatic both for the teacher and for the student--the value lies only peripherally in the student’s self-esteem. In the traditional systems, there is also the added value of facing a major, often unspoken, challenge: not letting the rank go to one’s head.