

EARNING A BLACK BELT

By Paul Delson

I have been waiting for almost six years for this command: “POSITION ATTENTION.” I snapped to attention, back straight, feet together, hands pressed against my hips. This was it. The test. First Degree Black Belt. One red stripe on an all-black belt. Even though I was proud of achieving the rank of student Black Belt, there were too many occasions when people mistook my black and white stripe belt for a white belt. But now was time to show professor what I knew. I was confident, yet I prayed silently that I would not embarrass myself. I knew that I had practiced all the forms, but some times I confused them. Especially, when I was nervous, like now. Ok, Paul. Take it step by step. Just get through the next few hours.

“Horse-Move”, Professor ordered. I stepped out with my right foot, squatted and pounded my right fist into my left palm. As I stood waiting for professor’s next command, I stared straight ahead at the mirror.

I saw two things that made me nervous. First, sitting against the wall directly behind me, I saw eight adults, all white or yellow belts, who were testing with me. Not only did I feel nervous because I knew I was performing my Black Belt requirements would take a whole lot more time than it would for all of them to perform their lower belt requirements, I also felt nervous because I was an adult Black Belt. When I was a lower belt, I rarely saw Black Belts in the beginner class, let alone adult Black Belts (other than Professor and Simu). Even the young Black Belts, I never really knew how much they knew or what it took for them to become Black Belts. Today, whether or not the eight adult students watching me cared, I was going to show them what they had to look forward to. And, I wanted to show them properly.

The second thing that I noticed was that, in having to perform my test near the front of the Dojo (as opposed to my preferred position of anonymity near the back of the Dojo), a crowd of parents had filled the Dojo entry way. My heart beat faster. Not only was I going to have to perform my test in front of a large crowd, but also the crowd was only five feet away. It wasn’t stage fright. I’ve competed in numerous tournaments and had generally overcome the fear of performing in public. But I wasn’t used to so many people standing so close. I knew that I would have to concentrate. And I only hoped that I could. As I squatted in my Horse Stance, my knees trembled and my arms were getting heavy. Beads of sweat formed above my eyebrows. Could I make it through the test? I felt confident that I was in good shape and that I had the endurance. And I knew that I had to perform quickly, smoothly and powerfully. But I also knew that I had to pace myself — it was going to be a long test and I would have little time to rest. Would I remember all my Katas? Could I block out all the distractions — the children testing in the back of the Dojo, the parents standing right in front of where I would be kicking and punching, and Professor, who was seated three feet away?

Professor cleared his throat. “Paul, please perform the first part of the test. Sets one through fifteen. One to sixty punching. One to ten blocking. One to eighteen blocking. Sets A through D. One to sixty punching. Advance Striking.” Everything ran through my head at hyper-speed. Ok, don’t forget the pokes on the first part of set ten. On set eleven, remember to step back with left foot and upward block with the right hand. On sets A through D, remember to keep my punching arm extended while I turn. On number three of

advanced striking, remember to focus on the Solar Plexus... “Begin”. As I cross-blocked, I stepped back with my right foot into a Kenpo Stance and then double elbow-struck. That was step one of twenty steps in set number one. Only eighteen more sets and three punching and two blocking exercises to go before I could sit down for a few moments rest. As I moved from one set to another, and as my breathing got deeper and the sweat worked its way down my back, the room started to blur. I began to focus on what was “not there” - my imaginary attacker, and began to ignore what was “there” - the parents, the other students and Professor.

It took me sixteen hard minutes to finish the first part of the test. It took me three more hours to perform the additional four kicking sets, fourteen short Katas, six intermediate length Katas, one long form Kata, two weapons Katas and fourteen attacks (offered by a very eager and aggressive Mr. Katz) by the time I finished (and I was finished physically and mentally), there were no parents and only three other students and my girlfriend left in the Dojo to cheer me on. I felt like the last marathoner to cross the finish line.

It’s been two months since I was promoted, and I now have the opportunity to assess what having tested for and my First Degree Black Belt has meant to me. Needless to say, I am proud of my achievement. It has been a long time, many hours of class and home practice and, driving from northern San Francisco to the Dojo, many miles on the road. But there are also some unsettling things about becoming a Black Belt. For one thing, because some schools give away Black Belts like candy at Halloween, the importance and value of a Black Belt has been discounted at tournaments, I see Black Belts from other Schools that can barely perform a Kata who have no control when they spar or behave without any Personal Integrity. These people are Black Belts without skill, knowledge or personal qualities that I always thought a Black Belt should possess. When I see these people, I have to reassure myself that Professor and Simu don’t promote people unless they deserve it.

The other unsettling thing about being a Black Belt comes from my friends and family who are strangers to the world of Martial Arts. These people think that my Black Belt makes me Bruce Lee — which I can beat up ten people at once and do flying kicks. Hey, I’m almost forty two. I’ve never had to fight ten people (and I don’t want to have to) and I couldn’t do flying kicks when I was eighteen.

Let’s face it; there aren’t too many Bruce Lees out there. The reality is that, inside a Karate School, a Black Belt is a symbol of achievement that merits respect. But outside of the Dojo, a Black Belt is nothing more than a length of black-colored cotton that holds up your pants. I’ve learned that there are lots of people out there who know more about self-defense and fighting than I do. My holding the rank of First Degree Black Belt means nothing to the knife-wielding mugger unless I can use the blocks, kicks and punches that I have learned in the Dojo. And, that I continue to learn and practice. In closing, I would like to congratulate the parents of the younger students in our School for signing your kids up for Karate — especially at our School.