

Black Belt Grading Preparation Guide

Introduction: Within the next year, if your training continues, you will be facing a panel of Black Belts who will put you through a test that is as much a rite of passage as it is a test of your skills and endurance. In order to prepare for this test, you must take steps to ensure you will not only survive the test, but enjoy it as well. The following is a recommended training regime based on how the past candidates fared in their tests.

Endurance: This has been stressed but maybe not enough to alter your training intensity. One must be prepared to face two tests of endurance – mental and physical.

- The end of one's mental endurance is where the mind tells you that you are unable to continue. This will occur due to the actual physical stress and boredom. Additionally the mind will want to give out long before the physical reserves are depleted; a sort of self-preservation limit. This may occur a number of times in the grading.
- The limit of one's physical endurance will take lot longer than the time we have for the grading. You will have adequate physical reserves no matter how out of shape you are.

Two important methods to use in your training are cardio and stances. The cardio can be any activity that keeps your heart rate at the training rate for a minimum of 15 minutes three times a week. (longer is okay, but don't over-train). The best stance training is holding the horse stance for a minimum of 20 minutes. You should be able to achieve this by the time of the grading.

Techniques: You will be required to perform the entire curriculum that you have learned while at the dojo. Some of the techniques will have to be repeated a number of times. Here are some training tips:

- *Breathing.* Concentrate on breathing with each technique. Some combinations will require a long exhalation, while the inhalation will be quick. Usually the movements inward (retracting a hand or foot) will be the time to inhale. Outward movements (kicks and strikes and break-falls) are done during exhalation. Properly done, breathing will keep you in the game longer.
- *Use your whole body.* Particularly the hips and waist. Throw punches from the back leg rather than the shoulder. Similarly the kicks. Using the whole body will prevent premature tiring of shoulders and legs.
- *Foot placement.* Be sure that the feet are placed properly during the katas and kicks. Pivot the feet before or during the maneuver rather than after.
- *Posture:* Imagine the head being held erect by a string. This will cause the eyes to be level with the horizon. This will help with the balance and will look impressive. Keep the spine erect during most of the techniques.
- *Focus:* Use your eyes to focus your intent. This will usually be expressed at the end of your fist or foot in punches and kicks. Don't allow yourself to look around. Use the peripheral vision to see to the sides if required, but generally look where you are going or straight ahead in ready stance.

Practice different combinations of techniques – roundhouse to spinning hook to back fist; etc. Try to use all of the techniques in different combinations. Using combinations is a large part of the grading and is sometimes used to test your endurance.

Katas: Practice all of your katas one a week. Have the katas analyzed by other karateka or senseis. Study one kata intently each week if possible. Know each movement and possible applications. Here are some of the points that will be observed:

- *Stances* – when moving through a kata the tendency is to focus on the pattern at the expense of the technique. Back leg not being locked during Zenkutsu or improper Kake Dachi stances are some of the common mistakes.
- *No focus.* Use the eyes to lead the movement. Look before you move.
- *Sloppy techniques – rushing.* While some kata require quick movements, this should not be at the expense of the technique. Its better to be accurate and slower than being the fastest one through the kata and having to repeat it again because of technique.

Self-defense The usual method of testing self-defense is to have a pair of students prepare a scenario to demonstrate. This will be done on the spot with a partner you will not have trained with (possibly). Takedowns are part of the requirement, so break-falls are a must in training. Both finishing and control techniques will be required so practice locks as well as know where to hit to provide a knockout. The techniques will be performed slowly and fast.

Sparring The usual method would have the Black Belts spar with the candidates continuously for up to 15 minutes. (Fresh Black Belts are rotated in as required). This is also a test of endurance and survival. Points are not awarded as in matches since the sparring is non-stop (except during rotation). Sparring equipment is mandatory (gloves, shoes, mouth-guard, head gear, shin- guards). Training should include non-stop sparring matches – 2 minute rounds minimum.

What to bring to the grading A towel, water or sports drinks, fruit (banana is recommended), sports bar. If you are asthmatic, then use your inhaler 20 to 30 minutes before beginning the grading.

Conclusion: Of course our private lives dictate how much time we can provide for training. But this is a once in life-time opportunity that will afford you many years of memories not to mention benefits. Having the mental focus to train intensely for a period of time could pay off in the long run in your private life. ***So give yourself a chance to do this test better than you have done anything else in your whole life.***