

Preparation for a Black Belt Grading

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Introduction

For many, undertaking an ITFNZ black belt grading will be the most physically and mentally challenging event that they will ever complete in their life time. The ITFNZ grading syllabus is designed to be challenging, but should not be considered difficult with proper preparation. Anyone has the potential to excel - no athletic genetic predisposition is required (granted, it will help though!). For the majority, the aim will be to survive and pass the grading which all well and good, but there is no reason why one can't aim for an A-pass or even a pass with distinction – with proper preparation this goal will be more realistic and definitely achievable!

This essay focuses on preparation that is required shortly prior to and during the grading. It provides practical advice and suggestions in lay-persons terms, with the goal being to help you to peak your performance on the day and maintain your performance throughout the grading.

The words of Muhammad Ali are particularly relevant:

The fight is won or lost far away from witnesses; it is won behind the scenes, in the gym, and out there on the road, long before I dance under those lights.

Part 1: Build up: the final weeks

Administration

Various forms need to be completed in order to apply for the grading. This maybe stating the obvious, but don't leave these until the last minute – they actually take longer than expected to complete. If you do leave this until the last minute it shows lack of preparation to the examiners. Ideally try to complete these at least a couple of weeks before the close-off date, which is 4 weeks prior to the grading date.

The forms to be completed are:

- ITFNZ Black Belt Grading Application
- ITF Application for Degree Certificate
- Contribution Credits list - try to keep a list of everything you do in your Taekwon-Do career. Any certificates that you obtain, place them in a scrapbook or keep them in a safe place. You will need to demonstrate contribution and participation (depending on the degree sought).
- Black Belt Training Checklist - this is an optional form to complete, but assuming that you will be doing extra training at other clubs for your black belt grading, it is probably not onerous to complete and demonstrates to the examiners how much preparation and extra work you have put into preparing for your grading
- Instructor's Report - your instructor will write a report and send this independently to the examiners. Give your instructor plenty of time to complete this – instructors are generally very busy people
- Three passport size photos in your dobok are required

- 2nd dans and above need to prepare an essay. Again, don't leave this to the last minute! If you are struggling for a topic to write on, check out the ITFNZ website, many suggestions for essays are on the website. Talk to your instructor and seniors, they may have some suggestions.

Fitness

Fitness is probably one of the easiest ways to improve your overall performance at your grading and make the whole experience a lot more enjoyable. Yet in saying this it is probably one of the most difficult to achieve as it requires dedication and commitment, and you won't see instant improvements. A specific fitness programme is required which will take time before you notice any improvements. Remember the words of Rachel Hunter "It won't happen over night, but it will happen"!

A good base fitness will help get you through the first day of the grading, achieve high marks in the fitness test and improve your recovery rate so that you are able to perform on the second day of the grading.

Fitness and training regimes can be found on the internet. The ITFNZ website also has some useful references such as Paul McPhail's 8 month black belt training schedule. Alternatively if you have the money, personal trainers have their merits, especially if you are the sort of person that will lose interest in your programme and require motivation. Another alternative would be to find a training buddy who will do your fitness training with you. Going for a run with someone in the pouring rain is certainly a lot easier if someone else is sharing the pain!

Mock gradings

Gather a group together, maybe comprising other people in your club or region who are intending to grade and run a mock grading over the course a day. Invite seniors to attend and each take a session so that it isn't an onerous task for one person (eg. your instructor). Finish the day with the fitness test. The main purpose of this exercise is to see how your fitness is stacking up and to give you a reality check. If things fall apart on the day, then you will know the areas that you need to work on.

Probably the best time to do a practice run would be at least 6 or more weeks out from your grading. This way if you find your fitness is letting you down, or you have technical problems there will be enough time to remedy them. If you leave it too late, then time won't be on your side.

Tapering of training

Tapering involves decreasing specific variables of training (eg. volume) to reduce fatigue, and "freshen up" to ensure peak performance and fitness for the grading. There are a variety of ways to go about tapering and it is a careful seesaw between reducing fatigue without compromising fitness to improve performance. Generally it will be sufficient to taper by reducing volume and intensity in the final week before your grading. This would mean going for one or two light runs and attending normal club training and not much more. Try to allow at least two days complete rest before the grading.

Concentrate on the technical aspects of your grading as very little can be done for endurance or strength building during the week prior the grading.

Logistics

Accommodation and transportation

If your grading is out of town, arrange accommodation in advance. Make sure it is close to the grading venue or is within reasonable driving distance. Allow yourself plenty of time to get to the venue and set aside time to warm-up and relax prior to commencement of the grading.

Part II: At the grading

So you've made it to your grading day, you have your step-sparring, patterns etc perfected, but it's not just a matter of throwing on your dobok and showing your stuff. Further preparation is required if you want to achieve your goal of "peak performance".

Nutrition/hydration

Carbohydrates are ultimately the energy source for the body and are stored in the muscles as glycogen. Your liver also stores glycogen, but to keep things simple, alternative sources of energy won't be discussed in this essay. During activity, your muscles use glycogen to produce energy. Once this energy source is depleted it is likely that you will feel that your muscles are heavy and tired and suffer poor performance and possibly complete fatigue.

By carbo-loading (increasing the carbohydrate content of your diet), you can store more glycogen and will "charge up" your muscles. There is debate amongst the scientific community about whether carbo-loading and is beneficial or not. However with out debating the pro's and con's in this essay, I would suggest not radically changing your diet prior to the grading, but just make sure in the 3 days prior to your grading that you consume a healthy amount of carbohydrates with out going overboard eg. rice, pasta and potatoes. Also make sure you have plenty of fruit and vegetables

On the day of the grading make sure you have a hearty breakfast which high in complex carbohydrates, low in fat, low in protein and low in fibre (i.e. not too bulky and filling). Complex carbohydrates release energy slowly where as simple carbohydrates release energy quickly but trigger the release of insulin which may make you feel tired. Suitable types of food include: breakfast cereals (eg. muesli, weet-bix, and not cocoa pops!), porridge, bread, rolls, toast, fruit juice, fruit, plain crackers, boiled rice, potatoes and pasta.

You will probably feel nervous on the day of the grading and do not want to eat. However, it is not a good idea to avoid having breakfast. Your liver glycogen stores will be low and could adversely affect your performance as the liver can only store enough glycogen to last 12 hours, so if you eat nothing after the previous day's evening meal your liver glycogen stores will be considerably depleted.

During the grading at breaks try to nibble at some food (eg. banana's or muesli bars) or have sports bars/carbohydrate gels (refer to hydration section below). At lunchtime eat 'normal lunch' eg. sandwiches, some muesli bars and fruit. Bananas are a superb sports food!

Practice all intended food & fluid ideas during training, not on the day of the grading!

Hydration

Hydration is probably one of the most crucial factors during the first day of the grading. It is important before, during and after your grading. If you are not sufficiently hydrating during the grading you will become dehydrated. Dehydration will have a significantly detrimental effect on your performance. Dehydration:

- Decreases concentration levels, leading to increased clumsiness and mistakes
- Decreases endurance capacity
- Decreases performance levels through increased fatigue and headaches
- Delays recovery.

During the grading you should be replacing every kilogram lost in sweat with 1.5 litres of fluid along with a carbohydrate supplement. Thirst is not a good indicator of hydration. As a rule of thumb, pale or lemon coloured urine is a good indicator.

The ACC gives a good model for hydration:

500-600ml	Two hours before exercise.
500ml	15 minutes before exercise.
150-350ml per 15-20 minutes	During exercise as tolerated. Use breaks in play as opportunities to take extra fluid. It is especially important to drink enough fluid in endurance and high-intensity exercise.
1-1.5litres per kg of body weight lost	After exercise drink fluids to rehydrate and produce clear or pale urine. Drink more than thirst dictates. Sports drinks are suitable.

Caffeine, energy drinks (e.g. Red Bull, V) and carbonated drinks should be avoided during and after the grading. Caffeine is a diuretic which increases kidney function and increase fluid losses which accelerates dehydration.

Generally if exercise lasts longer than 90 minutes not only do you need to replace fluid losses from sweat but you also need a source of energy in the form of carbohydrate. Plain water is appropriate for exercise lasting less than one hour.

Drinks containing 4-8% carbohydrate and 0.5-0.7g/litre sodium are recommended. Sports drinks (e.g. Replace, Leppin) should contain 4-8% carbohydrate (ie. 40-80g/L or 4-8g/100ml) and 0.5-0.7g/litre sodium. The right mix of carbohydrate is also important, combination of sucrose, glucose, glucose polymers and some fructose is advisable. There are many brands available, so check the labels if you are unsure.

For optimal rehydration and to prepare your body for the next exercise session you will need to replace sodium. Replacing sodium losses will ensure maximum fluid retention. A sports drink will provide you with optimal rehydration, as the sodium content rebalances body fluid, and helps your body retain the fluid consumed.

Sports waters (e.g. Mizone, loaded water) contain little or no carbohydrate (less than 4%) and no sodium; only fluid to rehydrate, flavouring and sometimes added vitamins. It is probably advisable to avoid these drinks.

The following table compares gives the composition obtained from the labels of a number of sports drinks available in New Zealand:

Name	Carbohydrate Type	Carbohydrate g/litre	(%)	Sodium (mg/litre)	Potassium (mg/litre)
Replace	Glucose, Glucose Polymers, Fructose	75	(7.5)	460	190
Vitasport	Glucose Polymer, Glucose, Sucrose	78	(7.8)	440	100
Gatorade	Sucrose, Glucose, Fructose	64	(6.4)	410	117
Isosport	Sucrose, Glucose, Fructose, Glucose Polymers	70	(7.0)	410	117
Exceed FER	Glucose Polymers, Fructose	68	(6.8)	200	180
Powerade	Sucrose, Glucose Polymers	80	(8.0)	250	140
Leppin Enduro	Malto-dextrins	76	(7.6)	100	192
XLR8	Glucose, Fructose Glucose Polymer	62	(6.2)	200	237

(source: Horleys Research Foundation)

Sports bars, power gels, carboshotz, leppin squeezies are concentrated forms of carbohydrate which are taken with water (rather than pre-mixing). They can be purchased from bike shops, health shops or supermarkets. They have been specifically designed for use during intense physical activity. Again, check the labels to ensure that they have an adequate of carbohydrate and minerals such as sodium and potassium.

Practice taking drinks or supplements prior to your grading. Some products may cause stomach cramps, so it's best to try them out. If you take concentrated carbohydrates be sure to follow instructions and take with the recommended quantity of water. This will reduce the likelihood of any laxative effect! If you do find you start to feel ill try to take some solid food to get something else in your stomach, and increase your intake of plain water.

Cramp

Some people are particularly prone to muscular cramps, which can be particularly incapacitating if you succumb to them during the course of the grading. Although there are many causes of muscular cramps, most are due to large losses of electrolytes and fluid (in your sweat) can be key factors that predispose cramps. Sodium is an important mineral for initiating signals from nerves and actions that lead to movement in the muscles, so a deficit of this element and fluid may make muscles "irritable." Under such conditions, a slight stress, such as a subsequent movement may cause the muscle to contract and twitch uncontrollably.

If you know you are particularly prone to cramps ie. have had them before during sporting events try taking a combined magnesium and calcium supplement in large doses prior to and during the grading. Make sure the fluid that you are drinking has a good electrolyte component containing magnesium, potassium, calcium, and sodium. Ask for advice at a health shop/pharmacy if you are unsure.

If you do suffer cramp during the grading, take immediate action with the following:

1. Stretch
2. Massage the area. Rubbing the cramped muscle may help alleviate pain as well as help stimulate blood flow and fluid movement into the area.
3. Rehydrate with fluids containing electrolytes, particularly sodium

Theory

The sooner you start learning your theory, the easier it is to remember. Studying a little bit every day is the best, rather than waiting until the last minute and “cramming”. If you have trouble learning the Korean, try writing cue cards with the technique in English on one side and Korean on the other. Keep these in your bag, any time you have a spare minute eg. On the bus home, you can pull them out. Another option might be to record the theory onto a cassette so that you can play it whilst in your car or walkman.

Oral

The oral exam will generally last for 10-15 minutes. You will be asked a mix of technical/theory questions, but also personal questions, such as why you started Taekwon-Do.

During the oral exam, make sure you stay formal at all times and address the examiners as “Sir, Madam”.

Written

Generally there will be ample time to complete the written exam, so don't rush through it. Usually during the written exam, the oral will be conducted so grading candidates will be called out of the written exam one by one to do the oral exam.

Don't worry that you can't spell Korean, as long as it is phonetically recognisable. Always try to answer the question – there are no marks off for wrong answers!

What to expect

What happens on the day

The first day will typically begin with a quick introduction by the examiners who will introduce themselves, then you will introduce yourself. Then it will be straight into it. A warm-up will usually be taken by a black belt (so be prepared to take a warm-up if you are testing for 2nd degree and up). Once the examiners take over you will be at their mercy! You could do line work, patterns, partner work or something totally different! Holding W-shape blocks whilst their application is discussed is a favourite!

When you form up (1st kups), if you have a person who you have been training and want to do your partner work (eg. step-sparring, self defence) with then try to stand next to them. If you don't have someone, then try to stand next to someone who you think you might be comfortable

doing partner work with (eg. someone the same size as you). You most likely won't get to choose a partner after you have formed up. Of course, those grading to 2nd dan and above will have pre-arranged partners

Generally, if there are a large number of students grading, then the examiners will try to complete a small amount of the formal grading in the afternoon session eg. You may be required to do one pattern and your self-defence, and maybe one of your destructions.

Things will start to wind down at about 4pm with the fitness test! First up is the press-ups followed by sit-ups, then pad work. Once completed you need to go get changed into your running gear. Don't dawdle doing this – be as quick as possible to assemble for the run.

Day two usually begins with the written and oral exams. Those grading for 3rd dan and above will be required to give a précis of their essay. Examiners will also usually give a talk on a subject and encourage discussion on the topic.

The formal part of the grading will begin after lunch. Usually this starts with patterns, step sparring, pre-arranged sparring, self-defence (if not tested on the first day), free sparring and last but not least destructions.

Visualisation

Now that you have a (very) brief insight into what happens at a grading, you will be able to think or visualise the grading and how you will perform. Visualisation is a mental training technique that involves using all your senses including thoughts, feelings, emotions, and sensations such as sight, sound, feel, and adrenaline to create or recreate an experience in your own mind. An important part of visualisation is "feeling" yourself performing the way you want (confident, focused, in command and in control).

Through imagery, you can learn how to program your mind and muscles prior to the grading; picture the outcome you desire, and regulate arousal/adrenaline effectively, overcoming adversity; controlling emotions; and achieving the performance that you have trained for.

Equipment & supplies

Everybody will have different needs, but generally the following items would be advantageous to include in your bag:

- Strapping tape
- Mouth guard/shin guards
- Band aids/plasters
- Spare doboks (& belt)
- Any braces/supports for previous injuries that may re-occur
- Towel
- Medication eg. asthma inhalers, pain relief
- Running shoes
- Socks
- Shorts
- T-shirt
- Pen(s)
- Plenty of fluid & food (see nutrition & hydration section above)

Recovery

Cold shower/bath

After day one probably the first thing you will want to do once you get back home or to your accommodation is to have a hot shower and go straight to bed. Try not to do either of these! Having a hot shower is probably the worst thing for the body as it will bring out any swelling. Try to take a cold shower or go jump in a cold swimming pool. Ice any injuries.

If you are taking carbohydrate gels, keep taking these until you get some food. These will help replenish energy stores that you have depleted during the days activities. Definitely don't skip dinner and drink plenty of water.

Massage

At the end of the first day (or the next morning) you may have sore and tight muscles. The "burn" is due to the build up of lactic acid which is a by-product of muscle activity. Massage (and stretching) can help flush this away by increasing circulation in the area. Muscle soreness the day after is caused by micro-trauma in the muscle. Exercising a muscle creates microscopic tears in the muscle and surrounding tissue. The muscle may also be tight, constricting blood flow through the muscle. Massage will help increase circulation and relax the muscle thus speeding the healing process and decreasing the recovery time.

Stretching

As soon as the run has finished do a complete stretch, holding the stretches for at least 15 - 30 seconds and repeating each side at least twice.

Conclusion

There is more to a black belt grading than most people imagine. It is more than just learning the syllabus, the other aspects also require a great deal of preparation. Without this preparation, candidates can be mentally and physically un-prepared. This un-preparedness can be the difference between pass and fail or even an A-pass or pass with distinction. Full preparation will ensure that your performance on the day will be the best that you are capable of, and no other extraneous factors have hampered you.

Hopefully this essay has given a simple insight into what happens at a grading and some information on how to get through the grading, which will enable proper preparation and allow you to achieve your goal.

Remember the 5 P's:

Proper preparation prevents poor performance!!