

Fitness & Energy over 50 – How to survive your Black Belt grading

It is a well known fact as we age our bodies start to weaken, we lose strength and flexibility along with speed. We simply cannot perform with the same ability as we did at 30 or even 40, so at 50 is this the end of the road? Most definitely not, in this essay I will run through my preparation as I approach my third BB grading and go over the things that worked for me and if you are in the above category maybe you will get some idea's that might work for you. At the time of writing this it is five weeks till grading day, I am a 53 year old male, 1.91M tall and weigh 96 KG the body mass index calculator puts me in the overweight category just outside the normal range. (My BMI is 26.61 – normal BMI is 18.5 – 24.99), to make the normal range I would need to weigh around 91KG which I guess means I won't be normal anytime soon!

Firstly a bit of background.....

Firstly let's go back to the 45 year old, 106KG out of shape golfer with a passion for cooked breakfasts and red wine (at different ends of the day of course) who turned up to watch his son try TKD. Mr Graham convinced me to get off the bleachers and had me in a Dobok about four weeks later, the "I'm too old argument" doesn't work with Mr Graham! I graded to my yellow stripe around three months later and I was on my way with a 100% certainty that I would never become a Black Belt.

Previous to this my main sport / passion was Squash which I played competitively for around 20 years. At around 35 years of age most of the Squash players started moving to Golf as a much less demanding activity as hips and knees were starting to feel the effect of such a strenuous sport. I played golf for around 10 years after that and although I thought something was missing from my life I never thought I would begin a martial art some 10 years later, I really believed my sporting days were behind me.

Starting your TKD journey in this shape is not a lot of fun but I feel there are a few people who have lived through this hell! A couple of years later grading to Blue Belt, Mr Pygott kept me on the floor for the entire grading. By the time it came for me to demonstrate techniques and patterns from my syllabus I could hardly stand, let alone speak to answer questions that I knew the answer to – not a good look! To me this was the turning point, if I was to continue in TKD I was going to have to make some lifestyle changes basically get fit or give up, there was no way I would be getting to Black Belt without some major changes. Luckily my Instructors had already instilled in me that giving up on anything is never an option if it is important to you, either find a way or find an excuse. The tenets that we follow allowed me to find a way, so the next chapter in my life was about to begin, although I was still 100% certain I would never be a Black Belt.

Two years later I graded to first Dan with an "A" pass scoring 84% in my fitness test at 49 years of age, two years after that I graded to second Dan also with an "A" pass scoring 86% in my fitness test at 51 years of age. If you had of asked that Blue Belt if these results were possible, he would have laughed so hard he would have spilt his wine! Weight on those grading days was 94KG's, 12KG's less than Blue Belt grading day. So how did I make these changes and how did I manage to score so well in the fitness section?

Firstly there are no short cuts, you must find what works for you and pursue it relentlessly whether this be TKD or anything worthwhile in your life. There is a lot of trial and error with diet and exercise and it really does become a study of one, what works for someone else might not work for you and vice versa. For me diet was the key and I truly believe that this is 90% of weight loss, most TKD people keep reasonably active so combining this with diet was the answer for me.

So let's take a look at what I did.

Diet:

I truly believe we are what we eat and we can expect our bodies to perform if we don't eat foods that give us energy. I needed to lose 10KG so I needed to make sensible food choices. Whilst not a fan of diets I did start following an intermittent fasting plan where I normally (5 - 6 days per week) only eat in a five hour window usually between 2.00PM – 7.00PM. Outside of these hours I only drink water / tea or coffee. Following this plan allows me to not limit my food intake and also eat with my family as there are no restrictions on what you can eat, just when you can eat it. Following this and making healthy choices along the way has helped immensely in weight loss and energy levels. The research I did on this eating style indicated big energy level improvements, the thinking being that the body is not continuously processing food and therefore can recover / mend itself more efficiently. I don't know if this is in fact true or not but I certainly feel much more energetic following this plan. The old saying you can't out train a bad diet is very true and for me was the logical place to start.

Not eating until 2.00PM can take a little while to build up to, but after a few months becomes relatively easy. Exercising on an empty stomach is also not for everyone but I prefer it the only thing to be aware of is some medications should not be taken on an empty stomach. I also am a firm believer that the saying that breakfast is the most important meal of the day is a slogan invented by breakfast cereal companies and not actually fact!

TKD Club Classes

You have to do the time! I made a commitment to myself that unless I was injured, sick or had an engagement I could not change I would be at class. Feeling tired or a tough day at work was not an acceptable excuse and you never feel worse after training than you did before training. Once this habit is formed it is easy to maintain and I also enjoy additional opportunities to train.

Other TKD Classes

We are so lucky in the Auckland region to have the MMC training facility and also some dedicated TKD personal trainers. I have utilised where possible weekly and monthly BB classes run by Master Bhana at the MMC, this on top of regular club trainings increases fitness and knowledge. I have also utilised one on one training on a regular basis to further my knowledge and understanding of TKD. This along with self defence courses, BB development days, IIC's and various other courses prepare you well for grading and certainly keep you active.

Other Fitness

I am a big fan of "Impact" or "Kick Fit" classes at my local Gym, these are basically high intensity classes of 45 – 60 minutes in boxing gloves kicking and punching a bag to music. Most of the time the kicks are very similar to our TKD turning kicks, front snap and sidekicks although the hand techniques are more boxing based there is a lot of similar strikes. I try to do three classes a week as I approach grading and have noticed my recovery rate due to this high intensity training has increased considerably. The other result of this type of high intensity training is my resting heart rate is now around 52 which Google tells me is in the

athletic range (Age 46 – 55 range for athletic is 50 – 57). I think because of the similarity to TKD techniques I really enjoy these classes, as there is also some body weight exercises between combinations I no longer feel the need to go the Gym, mainly because I find it boring.

Recovery

I like to do something most days, but normally have one day a week where I do not exercise at all. I think it is important to do this from both a mental and physical point of view.

Combining all of the above has helped me improve considerably from where I was. The energy levels I have from changing what I eat and when I eat has been the catalyst to train harder and more often. Being able to recover quicker from being tired has also been of great benefit and I now exercise 5 – 6 times a week and sometimes even twice a day.

Black Belt Fitness Test

So after getting my weight down and increasing my exercise regime, we now come to the Black Belt fitness test. I formed up on both days being the best version of me and that was the goal. For me these were two quite different experiences as per below.

First Dan

I was under 50 at this grading so completed the test at the end of the day with all the other candidates, this is a very tough test and no matter how much you prepare, it isn't going to be easy especially after a full day of exercise. I enjoyed the group dynamic of this test and this really helped on the run where I found I was dragged along with the group. Being in your best physical shape to score as many points as you can goes without saying.

Second Dan

If you are over 50 you have the option to complete your fitness test prior to the actual grading, I would strongly recommend this. Although missing the group dynamic it is without doubt easier to complete the test being fresh. I did find the run harder by myself and my time was 20 seconds longer than my first Dan grading – luckily you get an extra minute over 50 so still managed full points. I was unsure if I wanted to do the test prior but my thinking was I would kick myself if I was extremely tired at the end of the day (I was) and hadn't taken this option. I will definitely take this option again for my third Dan testing.

So that is my story – to say TKD has changed my life is a huge understatement, I am a better father, husband, employer and all round person. I look at that Blue Belt now and I don't know him, he was weak physically but more importantly was weak mentally and would give up. I am so glad I found a way through that Blue Belt time and pushed on to gain my Black Belt. I now pay special attention to Green / Blue Belts in our club as it is about this time that they realise the journey to Black Belt is not going to be easy and they need to decide if they want it bad enough to sacrifice other things. I tell them about my "turning point" and hopefully steer them through this difficult stage of their TKD journey. At the end of the day it is a personal choice for them but I know if I can do it starting as an older student, so can anyone if they apply themselves.

I will forever be thankful for the guidance of my Instructors, Masters and the seniors within our organisation who have helped and inspired me. They have made TKD in NZ what it is today and for me that is an amazing thing with countless benefits, for that we should all be extremely thankful.

Tae Kwon

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