

Unexpected item on the Dojang

As I prepare for my grading to 3rd Dan I am reminded of the yawning gap between what is required to pass and what is possible; between what is relevant to students in their teens, 20s and 30s and what is relevant for an almost 70-year-old.

Getting older (but not old!) creeps up on you – then hits you like a brick (or a well-placed kick). It begins with a bit of stiffness or soreness after training that, at some point in the aging process can keep you awake at night. On the Dojang you are puffing more than your younger colleagues or lagging in the line-work.

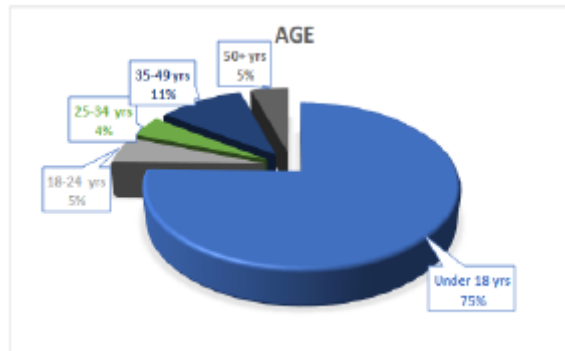
Taekwon-Do prides itself as being “...suitable for all ages...”. ITKD is transitioning into the **Harmony Program**, adopted in New Zealand in June 2018, that is designed for Taekwon-Do beginners who are 50 and older. However, the physical aspects of the program can also be adopted for older students who are already advancing through the traditional Taekwon-Do syllabus. Page 9 of the **Harmony Instructor’s Guide** states “*This program does not intend to replace the traditional – Taekwon-Do program but rather to compliment it by means of exercises, movements and specific concepts for the ages that it is meant for.*” Herein lie some interesting challenges for Taekwon-Do organisations like ITKD – specifically how to modify certain aspects of training and grading so they are ‘fit for purpose’, while maintaining the principles laid down by General Choi.

The central theme of this essay provides an outline of the vagaries of aging in the context of regular training and grading - are these programs always relevant to those 50 and older?

There are very pragmatic reasons why ITKD should expend more energy supporting the ‘vets’ capabilities and building membership:

- a. The simple expedient of bums on seats and \$.
- b. A generally expressed desire to have a martial art that is accessible to everyone; many 50+ folk who might be looking to do a martial art would look at our training and grading requirements and think “no, this is beyond me”.
- c. To create an organisation that better represents the demographics of New Zealand society.

The graph below (taken from the ITKD 2017 Annual Report) shows the membership statistics. Students 18 and younger cut a huge swath (75%) and the combined proportion younger than 34 is 84%. Only 5% are 50+ years old (up 1% from the 2014 report). Of course, there is an argument that “the future lies with our young people”, a truism that is trotted out by all manner of people, organisations and politicians.



But it belies the fact that there is a ‘present’, that those members of society who are presently old or older are still valuable members of society, as will all those younger folk who will eventually become - older.

For ITKD, and in fact for Taekwon-Do as a whole, there is an emphasis on youth. Even the definition of ‘veteran’ is skewed towards the younger end of the age spectrum (the minimum age is 35 for the Vets’ Camp). Traditionally this emphasis is grounded in youthful vigour, speed and strength. The young fight our battles; the old remember them. But the older fraternity has also learned valuable lessons such as wisdom, the art of focus, the psychology of endurance, and the consequences of our actions, especially as they relate to Taekwon-Do. It is these qualities that enable us to survive the aging process.

The remainder of the essay looks briefly at the aging process and how age is represented in Taekwon-Do by the system of Rank. This is followed by some specific problems that relate directly to training and grading, and finally some thoughts on how these problems can be dealt with.

Getting older

So, what happens after 50? The list of **physical life-changes** is not exhaustive but is pertinent to the theme of the essay.

- a. Our general **metabolism** becomes less efficient, which translates to less efficient mechanisms for energy transfer. An aging heart will beat slower during physical activity, which means blood and oxygen transfer tends to decrease (i.e. the huff and puff component). Hardening arteries also increases the risk of heart failure and stroke. We commonly find our diet requires changes, perhaps to control weight or cholesterol levels, or some other health issue. Changes in diet will have a run-on effect on the availability and expenditure of energy.
- b. **Eyesight** – at 45-50 we all develop a need for reading glasses (unless you already have them). This condition, called Presbyopia, is caused by hardening of the lenses. It is one aspect of our sensory system that may also affect physical balance.

- c. **Balance** – this is one of those sleeping giants of a problem that really does creep up on you. In a healthy person, balance is controlled by the inner ear that regulates signals to the brain (vestibular system), and the sensors of position and movement in the hands and feet (associated with eye sight). Aging reduces the efficiency of this system (people 60 and older are increasingly prone to falling). One of the significant effects on older Taekwon-Do students is dizziness when the head is turned rapidly. A good example of this is the reverse turning kick. Again, this affects everyone but if you have been training for 30-40 years, techniques that require a rapid backwards movement of the head and torso will tend to be hardwired in your brain such that the negative effects of this condition (primarily dizziness) are diminished or slowed. However, if you began Taekwon-Do at 55 there is none or far less hard-wiring and hence the problems of balance are more acute. For me, 2 or 3 reverse turning kicks and I need to change direction.
- d. **Flexibility.** This is a function that a person can maintain if they begin at a young age. But once lost it is difficult or even impossible to regain. Those who begin Taekwon-Do later in life are commonly at the lower end of the flexibility quotient.
- e. **General aches and pains.** This is related to loss of flexibility, wear and tear of joints, tendons and muscles, and a less efficient metabolism where oxygen delivery to muscles doesn't work as well. Running for example can have a pretty negative impact on hip and knee joints. Joint problems commonly stem from a lifetime of abuse – earlier sports injuries, incorrect posture (particularly when lifting heavy loads), over-use (OOS) that commonly affects wrists, fingers and elbows, or the gradual onset of arthritis. Hip and knee replacements are not uncommon for senior Taekwon-Do practitioners where a lifetime of extreme kicking comes back to haunt.
- f. **Bone structure and bone density.** The tendency here is for an increase in brittleness of bones as density decreases. Bone fractures following a fall are common for folk in their 80s and 90s – in most cases the falling is directly related to lack of balance.

The implications of General Choi's system of Rank

Progression in Taekwon-Do was codified by General Choi in a system that provides for increasing rank with increasing age; aging is an explicit consequence of the system of 24 patterns that reflect a person's life, where Chon Ji is performed by the beginning student, and Tong Il by those who have reached full maturity. The physical requirements for Dan ranking also were outlined, such that progression through the 1st to 3rd Dan tends to be the most physical and less so through the Senior Dans (4th to 6th). The ITKD grading system certainly follows this general pattern wherein the 'junior' grading takes place over two physically intense days. Senior gradings are less intense physically, but more demanding in terms of knowledge and commitment to the art and organisation. The transition to Senior Dan gradings is a deliberate reflection of student age and the changing dynamics and physicality of a student's involvement in the art as they become older.

However, this progression assumes one over-riding condition, that the student begins their Taekwon-Do journey early in life such that they can pursue the art to its apex of rank, knowledge and wisdom (i.e. maturity). Clearly, the rationale for this progression becomes less relevant for the student who begins training at 50; in this case the older student is beginning at an age when, in General Choi's world, other students would be entering or have entered those ranks that signify maturity in the art, i.e. Senior Dans and Masters. Herein lies the conundrum; *the beginning older student is faced with some aspects of our training and grading regimes that are no longer relevant to their age and physical capabilities.*

An example from regular training will illustrate this problem.

In regular training sessions, line-work serves to perfect our fundamental techniques via repetition; at a grading session the same activity serves to demonstrate one's competency with these techniques. In every session I have attended (at clubs, seminars, camps and gradings) the line-work moves at a brisk pace to the extent that in some techniques the older student is left behind. For example, the simple turning kick – is not that simple when joints, muscles and balance are not working at the same efficiency as they do for younger students. The rate determining step for this technique is the speed at which the student can pivot and turn their hip, the dynamics of which are hugely dependent on flexibility. The overall speed of the technique performed by older, less flexible students is commonly slower such that attempts to keep pace with the line may result in poorly executed kicks. Likewise, reverse turning kicks are commonly beset by problems of balance, unless the entire technique is done at a slower pace.

There is some relief for problems like these, wherein we may be told that, for example the height of our kicks is not at issue – what is important is that they be performed correctly. This is great advice, but it is also rather ad hoc in the way that it is presented. Furthermore, most instructors will not take issue with the older student who cannot keep up in line-work, but again the response and how an instructor may deal with this problem is generally ad hoc. I have broached this subject from time to time with other senior people; the common response is “do the best you can”. This advice is not very useful because it provides no real guidance on how to set a boundary for one's involvement in whatever activity is taking place. These boundaries are quite explicit for younger students.

Some ideas for change

The ideas and suggestions that follow are based to some extent on my experience with two Black Belt gradings and general training regimes. It is recognised that, at any regular club training session an instructor will commonly need to deal with different ranks, age groups and abilities, and this is no easy task. However, some aspects of these tasks may be simplified if there were better defined boundaries and limitations to training of older students that everyone is aware of – both student and instructor. This may require more

formal statements from the ITKD Technical Committee so that everyone understands, for example, how to deal with line-work, pad work, kicking heights, and so on (note I am not advocating more formal rules – just statements of intent). More thoughtful responses to problems like these, that I do get from my own club instructors, are preferable to the “please keep up Mr. R” kind of response that is more likely to make one feel that they don’t belong on the Dojang.

Many instructors already deal with these issues. What seems to be lacking however is that the student will not always be certain about how any changes to training might influence his or her grading requirements – for example the question of kicking heights – if I can kick to this position will it be acceptable at a grading? If my high turning kick is belt height, my middle kick clearly must be lower than belt height and is this acceptable? The answer is probably ‘yes’, but the important point here is that the student needs to be assured this is acceptable and not left guessing. In other words, there needs to be a consistent set of statements that both student and instructor alike can refer to for guidance, such that the student is assured that whatever kicking height they are capable of is acceptable. These kinds of boundaries exist for younger students – they need to be available in some form for older students.

- a. There need to be clear strategies for dealing with work rates during fundamental exercises. Rather than slowing everything down, which would disadvantage younger students, maintain the pace of line-work but make it clear that slower students can, for example, walk through a technique in order to catch up to the line. In other words, provide some constructive guidelines that enable the older students to deal with ‘slowness’ without also feeling inadequate.
- b. Similarly, continue to make it clear that kicking heights are of less consequence than kicking technique, but in a more formal way to ensure there is consistency both at regular training and at gradings.
- c. Destruction: does consideration need to be given to the changing bone structure with age (primarily a decrease in elasticity and density) – we do this already for juniors re. hand breaks. OOS problems with wrists and elbows can significantly reduce the efficacy of fore-fist and knifehand breaks. Should there be greater individual choice given that older folk will have some understanding of what is achievable without injury. This is the case for Senior grading.
- d. Fitness and flexibility in general; Continue to encourage those older beginners who generally have low flexibility/fitness. There is a tendency among older students to compare themselves with younger folk and even with similar aged instructors who have been doing Taekwon-Do for many years; for most, such comparisons are irrelevant and need to be discouraged.
- e. The ‘Vets Camp’ is an excellent idea. The camp (open to all) has been very successful (notwithstanding the irony of a 35 years minimum age). One or two additional camps elsewhere in NZ would provide better access for those who live farther afield.

Significant changes to fitness requirements at ITKD gradings have been made recently (refer to various announcements by the Technical Committee). The move towards a more 'fit for purpose' rationale for age and ability are a great step forward. Links to these announcements are listed below:

Harmony Program <https://members.itkd.co.nz/reference/documents/technical/harmony.php>

Black belt grading fitness test:

<https://members.itkd.co.nz/reference/documents/technical/fitness-tests.php>

60 and older - Fitness requirements

<https://members.itkd.co.nz/reference/documents/technical/technical-updates.php>

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