

A Discussion on the Retention of Taekwon-Do Black Belt Students

This essay is submitted by Pete Cossey as part of the requirements for ITF Taekwon-Do 2nd to 3rd Dan Black Belt Grading Syllabus and discusses the topic of retaining black-belt students in our Taekwon-Do clubs. Although I have selected this topic, I am not an instructor, and I do not have the responsibility of running a club, so I do not mean to imply that I have any such experience, nor do I wish to imply I have an answer to the challenge of keeping black-belts interested in club training.

Introduction

I recall early on in my training, learning that when you reach 1st Dan it is only the beginning of your Taekwon-Do journey. That is when you are recognised by the ITF international organisation that you train in Taekwon-Do, it's not the end goal but rather the start of your professional development. Over the years in our club I have noticed a trend where students progress up through the ranks to 1st-gup and then undergo an intense 6-month to a year of training before a black-belt grading, which they then pass and subsequently they disappear off the scene. I find it difficult to understand why a student, who puts in such a concerted effort to obtain a black-belt, would stop training once they reached that goal. Why is this? Why do black-belts walk away from training? What tangible steps can be taken to encourage them to continue-in their Taekwon-Do journey?

To investigate this topic, two sources of data were used. For the first, instructors were invited, via ITKD Instructor Facebook group and a subsequent email, to complete a short survey on the retention of black-belt students in their clubs. In this essay I refer to this source as the "Essay Survey" (see appendix 1). The second source of data, kindly provided by Master McPhail, was the ITKD Exit Survey which is sent out to those members when their status in the membership database is set to 'gone'. The information provided by the Exit Survey provides insight as to why members decide to leave ITKD.

I have combined the feedback from both of these sources, to discuss ideas of how black-belts might be effectively retained in clubs. To experienced instructors the essay content might seem obvious; however, I hope that some instructors and assistant instructors might find the discussion helpful.

I am interested in the following three questions: What percentage of students when they achieve their black-belt grades, decide to leave their club? Why do black-belts decide to leave their club? What efforts can be made to retain black-belt membership?

What percentage of students, when they achieve their black-belt grades, decide to leave their club?

I joined our club in 2009/2010 and grading to 1st Dan mid-2016. If I recall correctly, our club has had approximately 19 members successfully reach black-belt level of which 5 are still training (26%), 4 I believe are still local but no longer attend (21%) and 10 (52%) moved away and I suspect the majority no longer train as I do not see them at events. In total then, approximately 73% of our club

black-belts left ITKD and the majority of these (12 of the 14) left at the 1st Dan rank. Of those who moved away, half moved away to study.¹

The majority of instructors who completed the Essay Survey felt that a high percentage of their black-belt club members continued training after their grading.² This will vary from club to club and be influenced by factors such as class content, class audience, the number of other black-belts in the class and the location of the club. This result seems contrary to my observation of several clubs in our area where black-belts seem to disappear not too long after grading. This makes me ask the question, are some clubs doing something different that helps retain black-belts? If so, what can other clubs learn from them?³

Why do black-belts decide to leave their club?

A spreadsheet of the ITKD Exit Survey results, filtered to show only those of black-belt level, gave insight as to why members decide to leave ITKD. Out of the 95 survey respondents of black-belt level, 28 (29.5%) said that they either no longer enjoyed training or that they were not progressing or learning.⁴ Surprisingly 22 (23%) said they had stopped training due to an injury or health issue. One of the Exit Survey questions gives opportunity to the respondent to comment on why they left training. Some of the comments included:

- Such amazing instructors; they constantly impressed me with their skill, patience, generosity and kindness. ... *needs a black belt training night ...*
- *Need more to keep 1st dan as after black belt it becomes less exciting*
- For me there was too much of an emphasis on competition. I was never much of a competitor, but I enjoyed the technical aspects and the physical training.
- Achieved as much as I wanted to achieve in Taekwon-Do
- I felt every training was the same and there was not much variation in what we were doing each session and there was also a lack of sparring training.
- Time commitments at uni - too busy and couldn't make training times
- When you become black belt, black belts that don't compete don't do much. The fun's gone. I wasn't a fan of competing so *it got really boring* we just taught and ... *the thrill was gone*
- Cost is an issue but so is value for money. *The lack of progress was a major disappointment.* ... to make *no progress* and actually forget stuff already taught was poor.
- Focusing on spending more time with Family
- Too many changes, keeping up and requirements - *started to lose the passion* I once had.
- [Wanted] *to work more on the syllabus at all training sessions.*

¹ Is there a process in place to transfer students from one club to another or are members left to take their own initiative to join up to a club in their new location? Of course one would like to think they would make that effort and be enthusiastic to find a new club; however, it could also be, that the change in location is a convenient excuse for them to stop training should they no longer have the enthusiasm they once had.

² In the Essay Survey I asked the respondent to use 6-months as the timeframe for those who staying on after grading, and those who left within 6-months were treated as not staying. This was an arbitrary length of time; it is possible that if 12-months were taken as the cut off, then more black-belts would have dropped out.

³ This Essay Survey only had 10 respondents with useful data. Clearly there are black-belts that do stop training at some point as shown by the iTKD Exit Survey. I wonder if a greater number of clubs were surveyed, would we find that some clubs have black-belts drop out while others clubs are able to retain them.

⁴ The original spreadsheet had 105 lines however 10 of these had no data.

Half of the respondent of Essay Survey felt that loss of enthusiasm/lack of progress was a factor in the students' decision to leave their club although most of these did not appear to see it as a major reason. I would suggest however that the decision to keep training or not to, is significantly affected by the level of enthusiasm the student has for the art and this is also directly impacted by the progress the student makes. While some students may be content staying at the same level of proficiency, I think most would like to see themselves improving and developing their skills. For me, generally speaking, if I am not moving forward toward a goal then it's too easy to go backward and before long despair sets in and the risk of quitting increases. Frequently phrases listed in the Exit Survey replies include: "got really boring", "less exciting", "lack of progress", "lose the passion". While the Essay Survey had some of the respondents note that there were other reasons why students left such as moving location, another sport, and time—I wonder if these also relate to the level of enthusiasm the student has. If they continued their enthusiasm for TKD then they would more than likely join up at another club when they moved location, or they would make training a priority so allocate the time to attending class or they would still want to do TKD and not go to a different sport. So what can be done to help retain our black-belt members?

What efforts can be made to retain black-belt membership?

The aim of this section is to make specific suggestions on how an instructor might be able to retain more black-belts in their clubs. I am using the Exit Survey and the Essay Survey feedback, along with my personal thoughts on the subject. Although it is a little presumptuous on my part, particularly because I am not an instructor myself, and have never run a club - I present these suggestions with due respect and acknowledgement of the challenges and difficulties of club management and instruction. It is no easy task to instruct a group of students of varying ages, degrees of competences and competing ideas of what is "fun"!

Path of development

One of the themes that came through with the Essay Survey question on retention strategies was to have a "clear path of development" for each of student. Several instructors mentioned that they have a conversation with their black-belts about their "development needs". I think it is important for instructors to have such a conversation and to help the black-belt to plot out a journey ahead, whether that be the next grading level, a tournament event, to become an assistant instructor with the club or to even start their own club in the future. It may be that to compete in a particular division a black-belt wants to stay at 1st Dan rank for several years rather than just the minimal period of 18-months. Nonetheless it would be beneficial to still help the student to set a target of when then might like to begin a more intentional period of training for their next grading. One instructor said, "For black belts, always checking in with them about their development needs or desires - are they keen to instruct more, are they heading for next belt?" One student told me that knowing instructors really are interested in her journey helps keep her motivated.⁵ Another instructor explained that he keeps black belts at club by making them feel included and by personalising their training.

⁵ Via the Old Farts Martial Arts Facebook group.

To teach or not to teach

Part of the development discussion is to find out if the student has a preference to teach, or to be left to train. Approximately half of the Essay Survey instructors mentioned under “retention strategies” that they discuss with their black-belts whether or not they would like to teach during class. One instructor said, “I teach most of my classes so my black-belts can train. Some like to teach so I use them. Those that just want to train, just train.” Another instructor answered frankly on this subject saying:

“The big issue here is that the majority of BB end up being expected to teach and give back. This is fine, but some do this willingly, others quite reluctantly. Most people never joined to become instructors, they came because they wanted to maybe get fit, wanted to give a martial art a try, ... Whatever the reason, across the country we slap a black belt on them and then say 'teach'. This is a big turn off for many. They just want to be trained. They don't want to be responsible for a grading group or to have their own learning time chewed up.”

Fortunately some black-belts will love to teach and even those who do not want to be up the front teaching the entire class will usually be comfortable taking a couple of students to the side and helping them. Although most instructors will probably have a good sense of which students may like to teach it is still beneficial to discuss this with the student and to work out a plan how they themselves can still progress while assisting more with instructing.

Teaching focus on black-belts

In larger clubs, black-belts are fortunate to be able to train at classes dedicated for black-belt students. In other areas, when clubs are smaller and do not have enough black-belt students to make a dedicated class session feasible, some clubs set the last 30 minutes of a general class for black-belts or senior ranks. This allows black-belts to keep on top of the lower rank syllabus and also frees them up to assist with instructing, knowing that their syllabus level training will still happen later in the session. The downside with this plan of course is that the colour-belts or junior students only receive 1 hour of instruction or the instructor needs to add the black-belt ½-hour session to the end of the usual 1.5 hour general class.⁶

Another approach is to roster the black-belt members on to instruct part of the general class session so the head instructor can focus on the remaining black-belt members. One Essay Survey respondent explained, “Time is allocated each night for the Black Belts and often on some nights, a single Black Belt will take entire main class, releasing all the other Black Belts to train”. It will not always be the case but if one assumes black-belts are usually teenagers or adults, and non-black-belts are often young kids, then, even less experienced or less confident black-belts could take the class for games, ideally TKD related in some way. The rostered black-belt could take the class for a warm-up or general fitness exercise while the instructor focuses on syllabus work with the other black-belts.

One consideration is how to cope with new prospective students visiting and new white belts who have recently joined. If your instructing focuses too much on the new entrance students the rest of

⁶ At a glance of the ITKD website 37% of clubs have a special class or part of each class targeted for senior students ranks or black-belt ranks. Approximate breakdown by region is: 7 of 20 for Auckland North, 8 of 12 Counties Manukau, 2 of 6 Midlands, 4 of 13 for Central Region, 4 of 12 for Wellington, and 2 of 9 for South Island.

the class will become bored. If you have enough black-belts and red-belts to roster on and take the new students for 30 minutes then the head instructor can focus on the more senior students. If you only have a few black-belts and they are frequently assigned to go through basics with visitors or white belts then the black-belts may wonder why they bother coming to class. To minimise these sentiments the head instructor can assign time in the class to focus specially on the black-belt students then they will be more willing to use their other training time to work with beginners.

Some instructors will alternate senior syllabus patterns with junior syllabus patterns. While the seniors are performing their patterns the juniors can either repeat their last pattern, or sit at the back to watch. All the coloured belt-patterns can be covered in 20 minutes with the lower levels just repeating their set of patterns. Black-belt patterns could also be interspersed through the colour-belt patterns in a similar way. Alternatively, rather than have the black-belts perform the junior patterns get them to start with their own patterns. If necessary have the black-belts form up at the back of the class so you can focus on the coloured belts while they carry on with their black-belts patterns.

Some aspects of Taekwon-Do are easier than others to teach at all levels at the same time such e.g. line work and self-defence. Practicing techniques in line work allows the instructor to have senior students working on a more senior technique while juniors can work on a more basic technique. Perhaps new members might need to repeat basic walking-stance punches and walking-stance low-blocks for ten minutes, however, to keep black-belts attentive assign them a more complex technique or a double technique. Self-defence is well-defined and explained in the self-defence handbook. While the entire class could focus on the one level to begin with, the more senior levels will want to get to their self-defence techniques rather than spend the session on wrist grabs. Self-defence is also a good activity where students can work with other students of the same coloured belt. Having students work in groups of similar belt levels allows the black-belts to work on their self-defence. While a senior student may need to keep an eye on younger students this could free up the head instructor to cover material with the black-belts.

Semi-self-directed, belt-colour-level, group work also allows the black-belts to work together and the instructor to move from group to group directing and assisting students where needed. One respondent explained, "I also break my classes down into smaller development groups, so when they come to training they're getting what they need." This could be a useful tactic after a grading when some students need to learn a new pattern. Form belt-level groups and have the other more experienced students at that level work together to teach the new graded students. This is often a better approach than going painstakingly through a pattern with the entire class, only for the one person who just graded, to learn it.

Social events and inter-club activities

Outside club class social events and inter-club activities were considered fairly important to the overall goal of retaining black-belts. Out of 10, instructors in the Exit Survey gave social events a 6.2 rating and inter-club activities a 6.7 for their importance. Outside club activities included activity days, archery, EOY dinner for black-belts, EOY club breakup, demonstrations, BBQ's, social dinners/drinks, senior bonfires, pizza and movie nights, ten-pin bowling, beach training, start of the year dinner with black-belts (also used as an opportunity to talk about their ideas and what they wanted out of the year), swimming pool, and year planning meeting with black-belts. A couple of

instructors mentioned social training at other clubs. One instructor said that everyone “should be encouraged to attend some type of external club activity regularly. A large part of staying in an organisation is having a strong sense of belonging. If you are encouraged and supported to be involved, you create new friends, are part of a network and don't want to step away and lose those connections. They become part of who you are ... friendships are a huge part of what maintains our passion.” I think it is easy to underestimate the value of outside-club activities in building club comradeship. One forum⁷ I posted to asking about how they retain members had a reply that the reason “why we retain our older members lies by and large in the family feeling. That feeling continues after class with coffee and social interactions.”

Summary

Some Taekwon-Do clubs are able to retain their black-belt members while others struggle to keep them. This essay has asked the question: “What can be done to help retain black-belts in your club?” Reasons given by black-belts as to why they leave training include that they no longer enjoy the training, and that they felt a lack of progress.

Instructors can help retain black-belts by having a development path for each student. This might take the shape of a simple discussion at the start of each year, or a more elaborate training plan covering the skills they need to develop for their next grading level. While some black-belts will be eager to teach, others may prefer to train. It is beneficial to know the preference of each black-belt to discover who can be called upon to assist with teaching. To keep the attention of black-belts some of the teaching time in each class, or a specific class time, should be used to address their syllabus requirements.

Black-belts or senior grades could be rostered on so that one person takes the main class for part of it allowing the head instructor to focus on other senior students. Alternatively, the instructor can substitute more senior-syllabus related techniques in line work while juniors perform basic techniques. Another approach is to split the class up into smaller same-level groups to work together while the instructor moves between groups helping where needed. Lastly, outside club class social events and inter-club activities play an important part of giving students a sense of belonging and this will help black-belts to stay in the organisation.

It would be interesting to see a wider study on this topic undertaken, perhaps with interviews and focus groups of instructors in each area. I would like to thank all those who made the effort to complete the Essay Survey and those who provided feedback and suggestions on the topic. Taekwon.

⁷ The Old Farts Martial Arts Facebook group.

Appendix 1 - Survey for Instructors on Retention of Senior Students

Q1. What percentage of your students in your club, once they pass their 1st Dan black-belt grading, continue training for longer than 6-months after grading?

Q2. Of those that leave, what reasons do students typically give for leaving your Taekwon-Do club? Please try to give a percentage, guess if you need to.

- Moving town/area e.g. go to another city for university
- Involvement in another sport/non-Taekwon-Do club
- Time factors, too busy with work or study etc
- Lost their enthusiasm for Taekwon-Do, bored with class
- Not progressing
- Cost
- Injury or health issue
- Unknown

Q3. What is a typical format of your class session? If you were to average out the content of your core club training sessions over the year, approximately what percentage of time during class do you spend on each of the following areas?

- Warm-up/Cool-down
- General fitness/exercise
- Junior level (e.g. up to red-stripe) fundamentals techniques/movements/line work
- Senior level (e.g. red-belt and higher) fundamentals techniques/movements/line work
- Junior level patterns
- Senior level patterns
- Step-sparing
- Destruction
- Sparring

Q4. Please provide details on the class sessions you have each week in terms of target audience e.g. are they for particular grades, general, beginners, seniors, sparring etc

Q5. Please tell me about any strategies you have to retain black-belt students? What do you think would help keep black-belt students in your club?

Q6. How important, if any, do you think outside club-class social activities are in retaining black-belt membership? If you have any examples of social activities you have run please give them.

Q7. How important, if at all, is involvement in inter-club, regional and national levels Taekwon-Do events, camps, and competitions to black-belt membership retention?

Q8. What else would you like to say on the topic of retaining black-belt students?