

Otago University Taekwon-Do: Watch Them Grow, Watch Them Go

Dean Jenkins – 4th Dan Essay

Introduction to the University Club

I think with this type of question, we should begin by introducing ourselves as well as our club, the people we dedicate our time to. I'm Dean Jenkins, a 4th degree and the longest running instructor of the Otago University ITF Taekwon-Do Club, which I took over from Ana Rakonjac in 2013. There can be anywhere from 5 to 40 people on the floor in one class, with the club normally sitting at around 20+ members, so it's all hands on deck to help out. As a university club, we work alongside the Otago University Students Association (OUSA) to keep students active in a safe, and of course warm, environment. We have access to a training hall through OUSA in return for a non-profit service to the 20,000+ university and polytechnic students in the Dunedin area.

I'd say we are quite different to most ITF clubs in New Zealand. One aspect is that 90% of members are university student age. Another is that we have two major influxes of beginners on the floor corresponding to the Clubs Day at the start of each semester. Most beginners at other clubs are there because they decided they want to do Taekwon-Do, most beginners at our club still need to be convinced. Despite being one of the few remaining martial art clubs offered to students, we are in direct competition with 150 other university clubs, and it basically comes down to who the best salesperson in the building is. Students want the best value for their time and money, some will even try to haggle over club fees. The trick is to convince them to come to just one class, and then make it interesting enough that they want to try it a few more times.

However, the biggest con to instructing at Uni club, and I'll say it a few times, is that they all leave. Just as they reach the more senior ranks, their studies come to an end and they move on with their lives, to different cities or different countries. A lot of my discussion revolves around this aspect, as well as the other unique challenges of instructing the Otago Uni club. Though not all of these points relate directly to my own training and progression, they do show the ongoing work that I have to put into my club to keep it alive. The various pros and cons of instructing may be seen differently through different people's eyes, just as my perspective on the matter is a unique one.

The Taekwon-Do Tree

A practitioner of Taekwon-Do can exist to an extent in isolation, but an instructor cannot exist without their club and their students. Each of our doboks bears the Taekwon-Do tree, symbolic of our art and our growth as students. I believe its symbolism may also be extended to our role as instructors. We as instructors are the trunk, the support and basis of our club. Our largest branches are our assistants and our seniors, the smaller branches are our colour belts.

Branches cannot survive without a trunk to support them, an instructor to bring knowledge, experience, and structure to each class. Conversely, a tree trunk cannot survive alone without its branches and leaves. Students must return the effort their instructor puts into them through hard work, commitment, and results. It is important to develop a sense of community within your club, to grow seniors who are well-equipped, capable, and willing to give back to the club, whether it be teaching their juniors or helping with your own training when the time comes.

What It Means to Be an Instructor

Being an instructor is something a lot of students will never understand. Not everyone has what it takes to be an instructor or even an assistant. Some may never even be able to effectively teach small groups. We are the ones that keep our art alive, taught by the pioneers of this country, our seniors, and those who stood before us. We teach with the hope that some will compete for our club and our country, some will bring in fresh faces, some will start clubs of their own. We are passing the torch, we are the front line of the battle to keep our style, our art, and our organisation alive. We are the overlooked investment in the tough world where respect is decreasing and young people have less direction in a challenging future. We make sacrifices for our club and our students, and we don't always get what we want. We are the start and the finish of a student's journey.

As instructors, we must be patient, understanding, and calm, as well as healthy and injury-free. It is crucial that we are well-versed in the art, and we must take the club as a whole and every student as an individual. We must prepare classes that are not too hard and not too easy, knowing that there is a chance of a student not turning up, never coming back, or even a flood of new students arriving unexpectedly. So, we must be well-versed in surprise attacks. We never know what we are getting into until we are already in. As instructors, we are councillors and taxis, a parent to ones that aren't our own, and sometimes a place to hide. We leave a lot of our life and personality at the door, but share enough to make the club a home and a good place to grow as a group.

The Sacrifices of an Instructor

At one point in our lives, we decided to become an instructor. Maybe we decided to go it alone and start a club or take over one from someone who has done their time and wants to step back. Either way, we made a choice, a kind of sacrifice, to teach, to travel, and to give time to others so that Taekwon-Do is alive in our cities, our towns, and our communities. The job of an instructor comes with the least amount of 'us' time and a large amount of 'them' time. The rank system has knowledge, and the higher ranks teach those below them. But mistakes slip through, so we have to constantly check that our black belts are up-to-date on their training, which flows down the ranks. We cannot afford complacency.

Two of the major sacrifices an instructor makes are their fitness and their practice of higher level skills. We are too busy instructing and training students towards their camps and gradings

and tournaments, that we do not spend enough time on the floor ourselves, and this shows when we attend seminars. I have talked to many about this issue and laughed about it, how we died in that last sparring drill, or totally forgot our highest pattern. We may struggle to find time to train our high-level techniques, but we know four directional punch like we eat and breathe it.

We don't always plan or expect to do anything on the floor in a class. Sometimes we might do the warm-up and plan a class with the words 'set yourself some time to do dan patterns', which by the end of class turns into 'well at least I did yellow and blue belt patterns today'. Instructor fitness is a real thing. You show a drill, then repeat it, then do it with others, then show the next drill, all while trying to catch your breath and talk at the same time without anyone noticing.

What it really boils down to is that instructors sacrifice time on the floor. We put our gear aside, knowing that we won't be using it today. It's a patience game, we are there to build the clubs, to allow them to survive, an ongoing mission to keep the doors open. In return we have a place to go, to teach, to maybe get a pattern or two in before class starts, to hopefully get some actual floor time if one of our senior students takes the warm-up or the class.

University Students Leave – Dealing with Rapid Turnover

Right, back to the short time frame of the Uni club. In any club, a new student has a time frame, a shelf life as long as they are interested in coming back. Some might leave after a few classes, or maybe by green they are no longer keen, or by black stripe the dan grading looks too far out of reach in their eyes. Or maybe they get their black belt and decide to aim for a new challenge. But at Uni club, the minute they step into the room, I look at them and say to myself, 99% of you will be gone in four years. Most university degrees take 3 years, some can be 4 or 5 years, maybe a bit longer if they choose postgraduate studies, but that's it.

Uni club has a rapid turnover of students. Sometimes this means I am the only black belt in the club, the ones I graded recently have all moved away. Unlike other clubs, we don't have a stable basis of senior students from year to year that you know will always be there. And every year it is crucial we find new students to grow into the gaps left by those that leave. Every year is the same process: Ok you lost eight students at the end of this year, two who just dan graded, one of whom is in Switzerland now and the other moving to Australia; but a black belt from up north is coming to Otago, plus your black stripe that came from another city passed her first year and she is now your student for several more. Some students will bring along their friends or partners, and beginners will come through on Clubs Day, so you have people again.

I don't push students to grade to make money for the club, I give them until green belt to find their groove. Once they get past the first hurdle I start my plan, a system all my students who reach red belt know about. I look at my green belt's skills and when they are expecting to graduate. And I figure out how to get them through to their 1st dan grading in that time frame. It's not an exact science, because students get busy, labs are sometimes on at night, lectures clash with classes, or studies take over and they have to cut something out. Once they reach

green belt, I begin their long-term grading plan. Can they make it to 1st dan before they go, do they have the extra time to put in?

Sometimes it comes out of the blue. They make it to red belt, it's the end of their 3rd year and they tell you that their course has them moving to another city for placement next year. You try not to show your reaction, you've been here before, you knew their profession would probably require this, it's just how it is. You just put in three years, many gradings, some camps, round robins, a nationals, and you organised their induction course so they would be ready for their black belt grading. But that's that, they've packed and step into class one last time because they are unable to attend the club dinner in October. You hug, they say they'll look for a club up there, but you know that we don't have one in that area.

But the flip side is the best positive of my club. Sometimes a parent will tell you that their youngling chose to finish the final year of their degree at Otago rather than a different university (which some courses can do), or to add another year or two of postgraduate onto their degree so that they can earn their black belt with you. Sometimes a student finishes their undergraduate and then gets a job in Dunedin for a year, like one of mine did to earn her 2nd dan with me. She moved back to the USA two weeks later, having completed everything on her bucket list. It's happened like that a couple of times.

But like I said, eventually, they all leave. I've made many friends through students, but all eventually go on their way. It's part of what makes instructing at Uni club a unique challenge. Maintaining the club comes down to two main aspects: finding and retaining new members, and quickly developing them into competent seniors to step up and fill the roles of those that left.

Beginner to Colour Belt

As mentioned, Uni club has two main times when beginners come through, at the start of each semester on Clubs Day. They come looking at the many different sign-up tables, give over their details to what interests them, and we contact them. For the next month they try ours and many other clubs: cooking, computer clubs, sports, archery, dance, yoga, etc. Most are not yet convinced they want to do Taekwon-Do. We have only a few sessions to sell the club to them, and we have tried many different ideas: show them stances, fundamental movements, breaking, self-defence, sparring, or just a games day. You can never know what a new group will be like and you only have about one month to convince them to join. We also have Taekwon-Do students from around NZ arrive to study here. Getting them settled into a different environment and class structure can sometimes be harder than getting new students in, no one likes change.

So, the first beginner classes start, I am on the floor with my students in front and many new ones behind. I'll have a look, if it's a mix of boys and girls we will try some pad work, if it's a lot of boys we might have a go at ground self-defence, if it's more girls we put gloves on and get their confidence up, then give them some self-defence that may help them on walks home late at night after parties or study. I demonstrate and walk around, mixing with all the groups, cracking a few jokes to break the ice, watching for anyone who wants to try a bit more. I never

get a sweat up in that month, but definitely give a lot of directions. You really have to know your stuff, they want a confident instructor, one who shows what the club can offer them. As an instructor in this time, you do nothing yourself except maybe demonstrate the odd sparring drill. I have 10-20 pairs of students to watch, which may not be many to other clubs, but you must remember many of these are beginners who are only just learning the ropes. There is no time to stay on a pad with one person, you just move around and watch.

The students are generally 18 – 22 years old. Most of the girls are keen to learn, a lot of the boys want to hit something, those ones have to be kept in check. I've always said, if one guy doesn't like the environment, you lose one potential student. If one girl doesn't, you lose a few. Girls generally prefer to train and have a social aspect too, meeting new people.

Bringing the new ones into the community of the club is important, and starts from the first session. University students come from many different cultures, countries, and backgrounds. One way for a floor full of fresh faces to learn something about one another is with star jumps. Starting at the senior rank, each person counts out ten star jumps for everyone to do, in any language they know. I had 30 students in one class, and 17 different languages came through. It's a way for people to say 'Hi, this is where I'm from' while jumping and puffing.

For those who stay beyond the initial beginner classes, we charge them a semester or year fee and pay for their registration out of that, so we do all the work for them. We get them into a discounted dobok and give them their handbook – they always like free stuff, even though they technically paid for it. We lend them all the other gear to use, so they don't have any more costs. Some want their own sparring gear, which we get for them. Now we have a period of time to get some good gup gradings on their hips. The new belt and the certificate to take home keep them engaged; students live for results. To them, Taekwon-Do gradings are just another exam or assignment, except with more sweat and sometimes they get to yell. At this point they may talk about black belt, asking if it is possible. For a lot of them it is, if we train them right. Students don't do anything in the University that doesn't have a payoff. That's why they are here, for the reward and the experience.

Teaching a Floor of University Students

When we teach older students, we are mindful of their physical limitations and are careful with them. If we have mini-kids, we are patient with their slow learning as their brains develop. Similarly, if we have teenagers and young adults, we realise that they are at a tough and stressful point in life, finding their way through school, university, and the beginning of adulthood. We let them explore the art, and realise that they are at the age when they pick things up very fast. If they want to spar, we help them become more skilled than most age groups. We make their patterns smooth and their kicks clean. This age group must be encouraged to feel proud, but also to understand that you won't always win. Teach them the syllabus in the hopes that they will stick with Taekwon-Do into adulthood, become stripes, maybe start a club of their own, and in the future become a knowledgeable master who remembers when they started at the back of the hall with many others just as nervous as them.

Uni students work within a weekly cycle of stress and mental energy. You try not to add to that stress if you can. On Mondays, their brains are refreshed, so you teach them their syllabus, the more complicated aspects, you can show things and they practice and suck it all in successfully. By the end of the week, their minds are tired and full of lectures and assignments, so on Fridays you hammer out the stress with fun and physical classes, no brain power needed. Then if they come to a Sunday class, you give them some control by letting them decide on aspects of the class. Help them to feel good and ready for the start of the new week.

Uni students can be involved in the planning of their individual training progression. Discuss with them their strengths and weaknesses. Do they struggle with the physical aspects of class, or maybe more the social side? Involve them beyond the dojang, do stair runs together, this helps you both. Group trainings outside of class motivate everyone. Start a group chat in Messenger, both for keeping people informed easily and for socialising. When students see others getting better and putting extra effort in, they join in. If something isn't working, find out why they are struggling, make a list. Get the shy ones involved, sometimes they are better as the captains of a group, or can get involved with their seniors by taking notes for them. Give them purpose within the club and their confidence will go up, their training improves, and they will be more at ease attending tournaments because their new friends are going too.

Being More than an Instructor

Most students are far from home when they come to Otago, and often I am one of the adults they know the best in the area. Maybe some yellow belts passed their first year, they got into their programme of choice and now they ask you for a reference to secure a flat for next year. You've known them for nine months, but here you are telling another adult that they are respectful and tidy people. They get the flat they wanted, now they ask if you know of any furniture they could use. Well yes actually, the student who taught them Dan-Gun is moving out and left a set of drawers and a bookshelf. Suddenly you have become a character reference and a furniture delivery guy. But hey, they liked that, and they return the next year with a group of their friends and say 'Oh yeah, Uni club rocks, the instructor is cool'.

During training, it is important to read the room and look out for who came in late, who looks stressed, who got lunch, who got sleep. Is that one crying because of the class or did they already come in with red eyes? I have had students crying in the hallway before class: an assignment is stressing them, an exam didn't go well, they broke up with someone, they miss home. I listen to their worries, even if I do not have the solutions. I am more than just their instructor, I am an adult they know, a point of contact in Dunedin for their troubles and concerns. On the flip side, as well as sharing in their stresses, I get to share in their successes too. Attending graduations and award ceremonies brings me great pride. And their trust and the sense of community within the club is strengthened through these interactions.

Pros and Cons of Instructing at the University Club

Con: You never stop being an instructor. The day is over, but a student messages you still wanting to know more about a technique. But hey, didn't you do the same to a Master just last night?

Pro: You love that they want to learn so much, and it does both you and the club good. The more they know, the more you can do on the floor together.

Con: You give up time beyond Taekwon-Do. Someone had a bad day and they come to you after class, because sometimes, you are the closest adult they know. It can be pretty full on, and now it's late and you still have to get home and make dinner.

Pro: They trust you and come to you for advice. Often knowing what is affecting their lives and their stresses makes me glad they talked to me.

Con: Organising gear and finding money for new equipment is a lot of effort.

Pro: You have a place to train. A place for gear, a power machine, some mats, people to kick pads with. And in our case, we don't have to pay for our hall, which helps keep the club affordable to students.

Con: Training and travelling for events cost a lot of time. I trained members from six clubs for the 2022 July and December dan gradings. 3 - 4 classes a week, plus 2 – 3 clubs attending six-hour classes on Sundays once or twice a month. Six road trips at six hours return, three at almost ten hours return. We give up weekends and travel far for students who don't all have their own cars.

Pro: Catching up with other black belts, meeting new people, road trips, social gatherings.

Con: As much as a medal around the neck at a tournament is a pro, watching them lose is much worse. It never gets better as an instructor, and we feel for them.

Con: The student's training comes first. It has to be that way, it's how we survive.

Pro: The success of a student reflects on the instructor and the club.

Con: Not all students will return the effort you put into their training. Some just fade out of classes until you don't see their faces in the ranks anymore. They may return their gear, but the work you put in never comes back.

Pro: Many that goes do remember you. Not just on your birthday, but they will say when they are back in town, and stop by after years to see how the club is going. Furthermore, you have Taekwon-Do students and friends all over the country, and all around the world. They learned your style of the art, and a part of Uni club always stays with them.

Pro: All Uni students have other activities, which a lot share with you. When they get their degree, I often get to join them on the walk-through from the University to the town hall for their graduation. I've walked that path a lot, and taken many photos with proud students and parents. Taekwon-Do features in the Blues and Golds awards often, and I get to accompany students to those. Other things they did well in, you get invited to, it makes you proud.

Con: They always leave. You have to watch your friends move away. You help them pack and see them off by car or plane. They go all over New Zealand, to Spain, to Switzerland, to

America, to Japan, to Australia. Often you see them again, winning gold or dan grading with another club. It's tough.

Con: Being only one of two stripes in the Otago area and being a long distance from other senior belts are the main struggles for higher level training. Travels to get to any teachings are expensive in both time and money. Video calls or video sending doesn't match floor time with Masters or other stripes. The difficulties of not being around the large amount of seniors in the North Island is noticeable when I travelled 5 or 6 times to the North Island to train in the lead up to my 5th Dan grading. Extra little parts of patterns I didn't know were sometimes frustrating, as a lot of my patterns, step-sparring, and syllabus training were self-taught and most of the time just hoping I was on the right track. Nothing in the Otago/South Island is as easy as I see in the North. Most seminars and trainings aren't just a short trip across town, more a costly flight or sometimes 9-10 hours round trip in the car or van with overnight motels or early morning (4am) drive there and late night back.

Pro: Well that was a rant, but not at all a big 'stamping of feet in a bad mood'. The trips make us appreciate the other side of it. The Grandmasters and Masters travelling to us for these seminars and their time away from home have us all very thankful for the extra help. Standing with most of the Otago or nearly all the South Island groups at these seminars shows that we know how important these times are.

Camps: Mosgiel, Alexandra, and Otago Uni are like peas in a pod, we do a lot together. This includes being invited to the Mosgiel club annual camps, where Mr Bennett has been beyond lucky to have guest instructors at for the last 5 years: Grandmaster McPhail, Master Rimmer, Master Pellow, Master and Mrs Patterson, as well as Master Tran when she was visiting NZ. We also had the opportunity to train with Grandmaster Weiler at a seminar, all good work by Mr Bennett. These experiences are very much valued by us all.

My supervisor: Master Patterson visits Otago for the annual mid-year grading, when we also opportunistically organise a same-day gup seminar. These once-a-year gifts have seen nearly 80-90% of all gups on the floor alongside most if not all black belts in the region. That's not a number you can easily imagine as a turn out sometimes.

My teaching: With us being far away from all of NZ, I've had to step up. With great support from other clubs, I have taken it on myself to run monthly and sometimes fortnightly workshops this year to get everyone ready for their dan gradings. So I asked myself "If we had more access to senior experience, would I have done what I have to work with my fellow instructors in the area?", who have also stepped up in their effort to self-teach and work together to solve a lot of TKD questions.

Advice from Uni Club Trainings

When taking class, you can make the lesson about everyone, or about one student in particular. Teach a class designed to help or showcase one student specifically, and switch up which student each time. Have you heard a student say 'wow that was fun' or 'I felt like I got

heaps out of that class'? Try to do that for someone each time, it's a good way to give them turns feeling like it's their time to shine, or to get something right.

Here is a good way to sneak in a drill that no one likes and to get rid of a bad habit at the same time. Polite students will always be polite, but there comes a point where saying 'sorry' to every slightly misjudged hit or accidental contact is counterproductive to our training in a contact sport. Whenever a student says sorry for anything less than a bleeding nose, call the whole class to do the pre-set drill (for us its push-ups) right then and there, instructor included. It is a great way to bring in a lot of reps of a specific drill throughout the class, as well as break the habit of apologising needlessly.

Whenever you take the club to a seminar or a camp, have each attendee write down everything they learned from the event as homework. This helps fix teachings in students' minds, and notes can be compared afterwards so that everyone can read and share the information that they may have forgotten parts of.

Progressing Your Training: Get Students Involved

While there is not much chance to get on the floor and train during regular classes, I run extra classes for seniors every week, where I can sometimes have a bit more time on the floor. Every few Sundays we have a long six-hour class to prepare them for their dan grading. Do I get to train at these too? Well yes, to an extent. The higher the students' rank, the more you can be on the floor training with them. However, it takes conscious effort to design lessons in which you can be involved while still teaching, it doesn't just happen automatically as you get more seniors and black belts.

As students progress up the ranks there will come a few who will help out, who will offer their time to help a student below them get better with a stance, pattern, or kick. Keep these ones, and encourage their growth as assistants and leaders. You can't force all students to help out. Some do not have the skill, or will not put in the effort, and the lower ranks won't learn or will lose interest. Not all can teach, just like not all can break, jump high, or sing well. Some may not teach well but are helpful in partner training. The ones that help and show promise go into the assistant pile, the ones you teach to teach. Now they are there for two things: to train and to teach others. They still pay fees and give up time to be there, so it is important to strike a good balance between their two roles, so they enjoy themselves and continue wanting to give back. If you can, have an assistant or senior run the warm-up, or part of a class so that you get some time on the floor and they get supervised practice at leading the class.

Make use of the keen ones, even if they aren't very experienced yet. Running classes while you're on the floor isn't the only way a student can help with your training. In the past year, when I ran my six-hour session for red belts and above, or there was a black belt seminar in town, I offered a spot in the session to a student not senior enough to be on the floor. Their role was to sit and take notes on everything that was said by the instructor of the course, and to compile the notes for the people who had been on the floor that day. The attendees got a detailed summary of everything they might have forgotten through the course of the day, including

personal training notes directed at each of them. And the attending student got access to information and insight otherwise reserved for higher grades, an attendance credit towards their dan grading for each event they took notes for, and I believe a high-level of respect from their seniors.

Final Words

Overall, I believe being an instructor helps your own training mentally. You are expected to know all the answers, and the constant waves of questions from students about their new techniques keep your knowledge of Taekwon-Do sharp even when you aren't on the floor yourself. On the flip side, instructing hinders your training physically. Most of your time in Taekwon-Do is spent at the front of a class, teaching, watching, and helping your students. You lack time on the floor to develop muscle memory of your higher patterns and maintain your fitness.

Being the instructor of the University club comes with its unique benefits and challenges, which all contribute to and affect my own training. But overall, I believe we instructors all face the same major challenges. In all of this, it comes down to the main sacrifice of any instructor being time. Time on the floor as well as their personal time. Most of us can't easily train unless we attend another club. Look how busy we already are because we want the best for our students. So we build a power machine at home, we train with our senior students one-on-one and hope we get a chance to do our patterns too. We run, hike, do stairs, and ride in our spare time to maintain the fitness we don't get to work on in class. All things we try to fit around work, family, club, club, and club.

A great benefit of the six-month dan test leading up to senior dan gradings is that when we do ask for help, a lot of those we train at our club and others will put up their hands to help us. These aren't just students helping you, they are a group of deputised instructors you taught in the hopes that when the time comes, maybe they haven't left yet, and will share your grading journey with you, just as you were with them for theirs. Because even after we start our own club, we will always be a student to someone else.