

My Black Belt Test

January 19-20-21, 2007

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Although I had been preparing for it for 5 years, I was still extremely nervous when I arrived at the dojo at 6:45 a.m. on January 19, 2007. On the desk was a series of envelopes and a message beside them - to open up each envelope at the exact time written on the label and to read it standing there beside the desk. I had arrived a little early, so I went ahead and put my things into the weight closet in the back of the dojo, making sure each item was put in neatly. I had already been instructed on the things I was allowed to bring: a prescribed number of black gis, sweatshirts, t-shirts, etc., along with a cooler to hold nourishing food and drink to last three days. All of my outerwear was to be black or white only – no gray allowed. My food choices were limited, as I didn't think my ice in the cooler would last very long: I carried a few turkey sandwiches, cheese crackers, energy bars, bagels, peanut butter, bananas, apples, and lots of Gatorade and water. I even had a couple of energy drinks, just in case! I hung up my gis in the closet, put away my bags, and came back to the front desk to open my first envelope at 7 a.m.

The message inside was "Happy Anniversary". It had been 5 years to the day that I attended my first karate class with Sensei. I smiled to myself, thinking already that this was going to be a very special weekend. My next envelope wasn't to be opened until 7:30, so I figured I would take advantage of the time that I had to start cleaning the dojo. I knew that one of my tasks was going to be to clean the dojo, every nook and cranny, from top to bottom, so I wanted to get started right away. I had brought cleaning supplies but I am not a very good housekeeper. It takes me forever to clean house, so I knew that to clean the dojo would take me some time and effort. I began by cleaning the closet that would be my "home" for the next three days. I pulled out everything, including all the weights and the weight racks, and began to sweep out the corners of the ceiling and the carpets. I then wiped off all of the weights and paired them together. I wiped off the weight racks, vacuumed the carpet, wiped down the baseboards, and started to put everything back. I was actually enjoying myself by taking care of the details! I was excited about the days to come – I wanted to do my best at everything, including my cleaning duties.

Before I finished putting everything back, it was 7:30 and time to open my next envelope. At this point, I was wondering if Sensei was hidden somewhere, making sure that I opened the letters at the front desk: was he videotaping me doing this? Was he hidden in the back office? Was that his truck parked across the street? I guess I was starting to get a little paranoid. Anyway, I opened the next envelope as I was told. The message inside was that Sensei had decided to test me on the red side of the mats, and that I needed to turn over all the mats in the dojo so that the red side was on top, making sure that it was cleaned, neat, and professional looking. I also had to finish this task by 10 a.m.! Oh my gosh – when was I going to have time to clean? There was nothing I could do about that now – I had to go ahead and think how I was going to dismantle the floor and fit those awful puzzle mats together. The experience of fitting together puzzle mats is an exercise in patience. It is so hard sometimes to get them to fit! I was not looking forward to that struggle. What if Sensei came in and didn't like the way it looked? Would he make me flip them back over to the black side? Before I took them up, I decided to go ahead and vacuum off the black side – that way, there would be less dust when I flipped them over. As I was doing that, I had a thought: if the mats were fitting together right now (wall to wall), then if I could just somehow flip the entire floor over, they should fit together that way as well. So, after I had vacuumed, I flipped the mats row-by-row, and sure

enough: they fit together! I was feeling so proud of myself! I got to the middle and was pretty disgusted: there was mold growing on the underside of the mats. I cleaned them all to the best of my ability, but some mats were just too stained. As I was flipping the rows, I would come across reminders of the past when our dojo didn't have mats on the floor – I found the white tape outline of our fighting ring, and remembered when I used to do cat stances and kukusu stances all around the ring. I came across the gray taped line running through the ring and remembered practicing Naihanchin over and over on that gray line. Feeling nostalgic, I stopped my flipping and cleaning and practiced Naihanchin and stances for a while.

I was still cleaning the mats when Sensei showed up at 11 a.m. He took a few pictures and left me alone again. He did ask if I was OK, left some old papers and letters for me to look through (a trip down memory lane) and told me not to answer the door and only to answer the phone if his number appeared on the caller ID. I decided to go ahead and eat my lunch, because my next envelope was due to be opened at noon and I didn't know what would be in store for me.

My lunch consisted of a bottle of Gatorade, a turkey sandwich, and some cheese crackers. I ate sitting in the closet, looking out the curtains and through the window, watching the cars go by and still wondering if the truck parked across the street was Sensei. I thought a lot in that closet – thought about the years that it took for me to get there, thought about what a privilege it was to have this alone time to think and focus on the journey I had made. I thought about how no one else would have this chance, since we were going to be moving to a new location. I really felt like I was “one” with the dojo, like I had always been there and would always be a part of it.

I opened up my next envelope at noon. I found that Sensei had “changed his mind” and wanted to test me on the black side of the mats! I had to laugh, since I had been thinking earlier that he would have me flip them back over. Since I had a system, I wasn't too worried, but I still had to clean the dojo. I flipped the mats back over in rows again, but this time they weren't fitting together as easily. It took me a little longer than I expected, but I still finished before my deadline of 4 p.m. I spent the remainder of my afternoon cleaning until my next envelope at 6 p.m. I was determined to have the dojo spotless for my test! I found interesting things in the corners: a roach corpse, a penny, thumb tacks, etc. I even dusted off the plants in the front rooms and almost knocked over the large one. I scrubbed the bathroom until you could eat off of the floor, and I cleaned the windows until it looked like they weren't there. Sensei came in during that time and set up a DVD player and monitor. He told me that my next assignment would involve them. Then, he told me he didn't know when he would be coming by again, but to be smart and safe and to try and get some sleep that night.

At 6 p.m., I opened my envelope. I was to watch the DVD's “The Karate Kid” and “The Karate Kid Part 2” and be ready for questions on them! I watched the first one with no problem, ate my supper of a banana and bagel with peanut butter, and settled in to watch the second one. It was dark by this time, and I had seen some blue lights from police cars in the parking lot a couple of times. I had my flashlight nearby and was trying to stay warm in my single blanket I had been allowed to bring. It was very hard to stay awake for the second one – I was tired and sore from flipping mats and cleaning. I eventually finished it, turned on my alarm, and went to sleep.

I awoke a couple of times during the night – not from noises or anything, but because I was so uncomfortable and nervous! I wanted to be ready for anything the next day. I only had one dream during the night: I dreamt that I went through the test, passed it, but that Sensei had tied a white belt around my waist. The significance of the dream was easy to figure out – I have always felt like a true martial artist is a “white belt for life”, someone who realizes that they need to keep learning in order to grow.

My alarm was set for 4:45 a.m., since my next envelope was to be opened at 5 a.m. Sensei said that he would be by at 5:15 a.m. to set up for my test, and that I needed to be in the front room during this time. I decided it would be in my best interest to rest as much as I possibly could, so I took my blanket and pillow into the front room. I also prepared a plate of breakfast: a banana and a bagel with peanut butter, and took it into the front room as well. I reset my alarm for 6 a.m., and tried to go back to sleep. I floated in and out of sleep until Sensei arrived. He turned on the stereo to the “Last of the Mohicans” soundtrack pretty loudly, so I just tried to rest. My alarm went off, and I sat up to eat my breakfast. Sensei was leaving about this time – he told me something, but I can’t remember what it was. I was already extremely nervous!

I had to be seated *anza* in the middle of the mats by 7:30 a.m. The spectators came in behind me – I’m not sure at what time that happened, but I do remember feeling the cold air coming through the doorway onto my back. I really was starting to feel sick to my stomach at this point. There were three tables set up in front of me: a large one in the center and two smaller ones on each side. At 7:45, Sensei and two others came out of the back office: Mr. Ricky Taylor and Mr. Charles Burris. I knew both of them from tournaments, and knew that they were both fair in their judging, so I was happy to see them.

After their introductions, Sensei said a few words about the importance of the test. In fact, he talked about it as being one of the most important days in his life – a statement that made me feel so humbled and undeserving; I really thought I might get sick. I had always approached the test with the attitude of not wanting to disappoint myself, but at that point I also really didn’t want to disappoint my Sensei. As I sat there and started to answer some memory work questions, my throat started to tighten up and my mouth started to get dry. I wasn’t shaking like I had in previous tests, but I was truly having trouble speaking!

My physical test began with kata. Sensei and I had talked at length about pacing myself throughout the test, so I started off my kata a little easy. Sensei had told me he wanted slow kata, so I was glad to have the chance to warm up a bit before doing my katas at a “10”. I must have been going too easy, though, because Mr. Taylor was not pleased with my kias, and told me to give them more. I went through each of my katas from white to black belt requirements. Then, Sensei had me do them in random order at a “10”. I was really trying to walk that fine line between pacing myself and giving it my all. As I did more of my katas, I was worried because some of them have prescribed places where we kiai and some of them have absolutely no kiai at all! I was hoping that the judges would understand this, and I did my katas as I had been taught and tried to give more power to the prescribed kiai points. Mr. Taylor was still unhappy, and told me that I needed to show them more or he was going to vote NO on my test. I just didn’t get it! What did he want?

The weapons portion was next. It started out with strikes with my bo and with my Sensei’s heavy bo made of coca-bola wood. Then, I did Bo 1 slow. Mr. Taylor was not happy. I decided that I would just kiai whenever I felt like it! I know that this is not what I had been trained to do, but perhaps this was part of the test – could I add in my own personality and not screw up the kata? There was only one way to find out. I did my next kata with more kias than I ever had before, and both Mr. Taylor and Mr. Burris seemed happy. Finally, I think I was getting it right! Sensei had me do all of the Bo katas a couple of times, the tonfa kata and the sai kata as well. What was the worst for me? Definitely the tonfa! Even though it’s engrained in my head that the tonfa will take practice and patience, I wish that I were better at manipulating it. I felt that the tonfa kata was the weakest kata I did. The sai, however, was another story! For some reason, I felt very comfortable with the sai that day, and as I was performing the kata, I kept imagining an opponent with every block and strike. Sometimes that is very hard to do, but this time it just felt right! Of all the katas I did, the sai kata was my favorite.

After weapons, there was a lunch break. My back was starting to really ache, probably a result of sleeping on the mats. I had been lucky that morning – Sensei had not turned the heat way up in the dojo (even though I know his feet were probably cold). He told me before they left for lunch that it was going to get hotter, so get ready. Everyone left for lunch and I went to my closet to try and eat. It was hard to get down food – I had no idea how I was doing on the test. I felt like I was on autopilot, and I was still extremely nervous. I wondered what the spectators were thinking, I wondered what Sensei was thinking, and I wondered what the judges were thinking. I started to get a little upset, because I had spent five years of my life preparing for this day and I wasn't sure I was handling it well. I resolved to up my energy level for the afternoon sessions, and make that line I was walking between "pacing myself" and "giving it my all" a little bit thinner. I mean, after all, this was my one shot! How would I feel if I didn't pass and I knew that I had been "pacing myself"? I should be completely exhausted and worn out at the end of the day. I should have nothing left to give by the time it was over.

Everyone returned and I began the basics portion. I started out with basics in masubi dachi and had to kiai on 10 and 20 – this time, I decided to yell like never before: "KIAI!" Well, that was what they were looking for! Mr. Taylor said, "Well it's about time!" and I knew that I was on the right track. I performed all of my basics in order, and gave it everything I had. I was starting to get sweaty – but I was starting to feel my power come alive! To hell with pacing myself – it was my time to shine!!! I had such a good time – for once in my life, my kicks felt right and powerful. I know that the judges must have been sleepy and bored (I mean, they had just had lunch and were now in a warm room – who wouldn't be sluggish!) but I was really enjoying this part of my test. The only thing that bothered me was that they were not offering as much feedback as before. Was I doing OK? Giving enough?

The next portion of the test was self-defense. I had been practicing with my uki, Zeema, for months to prepare for this portion. We weren't sure how exactly the self-defense would be organized, but we were ready for anything. Sensei had me first doing my forms in the air, but later he called Zeema over. To my surprise, he wanted to see how I could "take it". I had to be the attacker! Zeema gave me some pretty hard kicks, but I felt OK. Then, Mr. Taylor demonstrated how to exhale when getting punched: he came up to me and hit me hard in the stomach. He hit me again and told me to exhale forcefully, and asked me which one hurt less. It was the second one! He talked with me about losing your breath while fighting, saying "Don't let the boogeyman get your breath!" Then, Sensei had me perform self-defense forms on him, defending myself. I felt pretty good about most of them, but I never was able to take him down on the Side Knife Attack. I was trying my hardest, but I couldn't get my sweep in the right place. I tried over and over, and my leg started to get a huge goose egg on the ankle. I started to get a little upset at this point, because I felt like a weenie! I was NOT going to give up, though. The emotions were starting to wear down on me, and my body was tired, but I wasn't going to give out just yet. Sensei then had me ½ round kick his stomach as hard as I could – I gave it my all, which was enough to make him grunt just a bit, but not enough to bend him over. It was my turn after that – to be hit in the stomach: not with a kick, but a backhand. I braced and got ready to breathe out forcefully. ONE hit – ouch! TWO – more pain, but still tolerable. The third hit was the one that did it – I felt my insides move, and I thought I was going to pass out. I tried to catch my breath and started to hyperventilate. Sensei took me to the front of the dojo where it was cooler and let me catch my breath.

I was so angry with myself! I felt the tears start to come, and I tried to stifle them. Sensei talked with me at length in the front room, but I don't remember much of what he said - I was really starting to wear down, and I knew it was only a matter of time before I would collapse. I needed to find it inside of me to pull this out – I still had fighting to go, and I didn't want to fail. I kept thinking to

myself: Mentality over technique! Mentality over technique! I could die another day – *this* day was mine, and I would make my body do what I wanted.

Sensei allowed me to rest before the fighting. In fact, he gave me enough time to get some food into my system. I had an energy bar and an energy drink, and tried to calm myself. While I was resting, Mr. Burris came out to the floor and said: “You’re doing great. Keep it up – it’s almost over.” I don’t know if he realized how much that meant to me at the time – I was feeling so weak, I wasn’t sure if it was showing or not.

Finally, the time for fighting came! The fighters came out: Mr. Taylor, Ronda Parker and Phillip Parker. I knew already that they came from a hard fighting school, but I was ready for that. I wasn’t going to let them make me give up!

My first fights were all continuous sparring, and the first was with Ronda. Obviously, I was tired and my reflexes were not as quick – she got me in the eye the first round! I guess their school goes for the face a lot more than ours, because both Ronda and Mr. Taylor had on face shields. Sensei stopped the fight, but I wasn’t sure why – I mean, I knew I’d been hit, but I was ready to keep going! He made me stop and took me to the front. I guess it was worse than I thought. All of a sudden, I felt the swelling begin, but it didn’t hurt (I guess adrenaline was really pumping through me at this point.) Sensei allowed me to finish the fight, and I gave it my all, with Mr. Taylor saying the background “Don’t let the boogeyman get your breath!” My next fight was Phillip – he was not as hard on me, and I was able to catch my breath a bit. My third fight was with Mr. Taylor. He came at me immediately and knocked me to the ground! Rather than being stunned, my first reaction was “Oh hell no!” I actually surprised myself – and I remembered what Sensei had taught me a few months ago: if you are ever taken down to the ground, don’t be on the bottom. I got out from the bottom as quickly as I could, and he kept coming after me. I think I remember Sensei stopping the fight once, but I’m not sure. I *do* remember Mr. Taylor sweeping me so that I fell to the ground once, and I grabbed his leg until he also fell! I just kept punching and kicking, doing my best to keep him off of me and to get in a few hits of my own.

I had to fight Ronda once more after that, and I think I held my own pretty well. I was so glad that Sensei allowed the spectators to cheer for me! It really made a big difference – while I couldn’t focus on what they were saying, I knew they were pulling for me. I know I didn’t have the greatest form and I probably didn’t have much power since I was so exhausted, but I felt good about my fighting. In fact, I felt like I could keep going until I collapsed! I really wanted my special day to end on an awesome note.

After fighting, I was ready for my challenge. Sensei said that everyone was dismissed, but I asked if I could say something: I thanked the judges and everyone for coming, and had Zeema read something for Sensei that I had prepared earlier. Sensei came and stood behind me while Mr. Taylor said a few words and then Zeema read my message:

“For 5 years, I have laughed, cried, sweated, screamed, and smiled – all because of you. You told me from the beginning that my journey was all about me, and you were right. My journey in karate has been my own, and I have appreciated every moment. However, you were there the whole time to guide me – sometimes you were gentle and held my hand, and other times you pushed me into the deep end. But you were always there and I always knew you cared.

No matter the outcome of this test, I want everyone here to know that I am honored to be your student. I didn’t think it was possible for me to grow into the person I’ve become – and I’ve never been so happy and fulfilled in all my life. I owe much of that to

you, sir. You showed me the way, but you let me go down the path myself. You've put so much faith and time into my development, more than I ever expected. And I am proud to call you my Sensei."

Sensei left halfway through. I didn't know if I had messed up, or if he was touched by the words. It had been an emotionally charged day! We waited until he came back into the room.

When he returned, he said "Meg, come over here." I stood in front of him as he said: "You are my first black belt" and tied his own black belt around my waist! I then committed one of the sins of the dojo: I cried. I couldn't speak - I was so overwhelmed and in shock at what had just occurred. Sensei immediately took some pictures, and told me that he was allowing me to wear his belt for a while. Even as I write this paper, I am still humbled and honored by that gesture – to be able to wear the black belt of my Sensei– to know that he trusts me – to know that he considers me worthy to represent him.

I was allowed to thank everyone in attendance with a bow, handshake, or hug before they all left. I was so worn out, yet on cloud nine. I wish there were some words to describe the emotions I had, but they don't exist. I had been preparing for this day for five years, and it was done. I couldn't believe it. My challenge was yet to come, however, and I still had another day of testing. I was the property of Sensei Brian Pena for another 25 hours.

To my surprise, Sensei asked me if I would like to go get something to eat. Of course I said yes! He asked where, and I chose Red Lobster. I remember once when a group of us students and Sensei had all met to eat there, and we had a great time cracking open crab legs. So, we headed out for supper – with me in my black gi pants, a black Karate Dojo sweatshirt, and an ice pack on my eye. It seemed like everyone was looking at me – I guess my eye was pretty ugly. I got the crab legs for dinner, and ate like I hadn't eaten in a week. It was so good and warm! I was so glad I didn't have to eat the turkey sandwich that was back in the cooler.

We got back to the dojo after a short side trip to Lowe's. Sensei then gave me a wonderful gift: he asked if I wanted to sleep on his couch for the night. Of course I said yes! I grabbed my bag, pillow, and hopped in the truck – I felt like I was being spoiled! Not only was I going to be able to sleep in a heated home on a soft couch, I was going to see my Sensei's home! I slept so well that night – hard and heavy. Apparently, the baby even cried during the night, but I never stirred.

I awoke before everyone else so I could shower and be ready for any task that might come my way. I wasn't sure what Sensei had planned for me, but I knew I was going to be helping out in the new dojo for sure. As I moved around, my body started to remind me of what I had endured the day before. It hurt in places that had never hurt before: I was bruised from bo strikes, my neck was sore from being slammed on the mat, my shoulders and upper arms were so sore I could hardly lift them, my obliques and abs were in pain, my legs were so tired and tight it hurt to walk, I had a huge painful bruise on my lower leg, and even my forearms were sore. I dressed in my prescribed "uniform" for the day, and waited on Sensei.

We stopped for breakfast on the way to the new dojo (more food – yay!) and we talked about what needed to be done. I unloaded the supplies in the truck and brought them in. Sensei told me that I was allowed to talk to others if it related to the work we were doing, but I was not to talk about the test or other things. I also had to, at some point, complete 50 push-ups in a row.

As I started working, I decided it would probably be best if I completed the push-ups sooner rather than later. We went to the back room and I got them over with! After that, I began to remove old wallpaper border and wash walls. It was so hard to keep going – my arms felt like they were going to fall off and it hurt going up and down the ladder. On the other hand, I was also very glad that I had

this opportunity to help out in the construction of our new home. I wanted to leave my creative “mark” on the new dojo, just as I had in the old.

I worked the entire day, stopping only to eat a quick lunch provided by Sensei. I helped organize a team of wall-washers, cleaned off wallpaper, cleaned off air vents, and other various jobs. By 6 o'clock, I was beat. Sensei was also tired. When he dropped me back off at the dojo, he gave me one more task: take down the judge tables, and you are dismissed. He drove away, and I went into the dojo.

I stood there, looking at the place where I had trained for so long, and I started to get choked up. I decided to vacuum the place for Sensei before leaving, and as I moved around to different parts of the dojo, I kept seeing things that brought back memories: pictures, weapons, even marks in the wall all told a story. I had been there from the beginning – before the very first class had ever been held, and now I had been the first, and possibly the only person to test there for black belt. This dojo was my karate home, and all of sudden I didn't want to leave. My test was over; I had passed, but I didn't want it to end. As I stood there, I suddenly remembered my dream: it *had* come true – the belt my sensei had tied around my waist was so worn by years of practice that the threads appeared white. A true black belt: a white belt for life. My journey is just beginning, and it will never end.