

When I began training in the arts in 1978 there were very few children in our classes and most schools would not accept anyone under the age of 10. The training was very tough and very combative because the martial arts had not been exposed to the commercialization that would come within the next 6 years. You never saw a black belt under the age of 18. It was not acceptable nor was it something that was allowed.

In the late 1980's there was an explosion of black belts in children. It seemed like everywhere you went you would see kids as young as 10 wearing a black belt. In order to accommodate the extreme influence of movies like the "Karate Kid" which made parents run to the nearest dojo to sign their child up for some Miyagi-do training, instructors everywhere came up with the term "Junior Black Belt" and would promote children to this stage. It was not considered a "real" black belt though until you were 18 and quite often you had to retest for your rank at that age.

When I was 16 years old my sensei offered me to test for my "junior" black belt status and I refused. When asked why it was because I wanted the real deal. I had trained in era when most kids quit training because it was too hard. I had fought the adults since I was 8, took the hits, bled and sweated as much as any of them so to offer me anything less to me was not right. So I waited another year until finally they said they would allow me to test for the real thing. Even at this stage it was unique because I was only 17.

To be a black belt and be under 18 was forbidden. My test was in many ways harder than most adults because they demanded more from the "kid" testing. After I earned my black belt, with 100% on the test, it was not over. For the next year I would have to prove myself worthy everywhere I went to wear the black belt. At tournaments I would not be allowed to enter the junior divisions and would have to fight the 18-34 divisions. I often won and after about 5 months they finally accepted me into the inner circle of "real" black belts. It was a tough time, but one I would not give back for anything.

At that time I was only the second person in the United States, or so I was told, that was a true recognized black belt under the age of 18. My rank was registered with the Kukikwon, the international headquarters for Tae Kwon Do and they had only given out one other real black belt to someone under the age of 17 at that time. I never did meet this person but have always wanted to since we shared a common bond. Perhaps it was to see how good they were at martial arts and compare myself to them but I do not know and never will since that day has long passed.

In 1987 I tried out for the Olympic team in Tae Kwon Do at the age of 17. They allowed me to fight the adults division but treated me like a child at the games. This enraged me so much that I knocked out the first four people in my division. I ended up getting a bronze at the games and was qualified as an alternate but as luck would have it I entered the Army after I graduated and was not able to attend to training in Denver as it was being done at the same time I was in basic training. The Army will not make exceptions for this and I tried everything I could but it never worked out.

I spent many years proving myself in the karate world since I received my rank at such a young age. This is still going on even now as I have been told that I cannot promote to my eighth degree because of my age. I received my 5th, 6th and 7th degrees many years before I should have if you go by age requirements, but I have the training time in and yet they still will not promote me. It is not that I care much for rank, but it is rather that I like to be considered for my experience, training and abilities rather than by my age. When I was in my college years, while others were out getting hammered at parties and experimenting with drugs I was hard at my studies and training in the martial arts. I lived on my own since I was 18 and have worked my but off to survive in this world. I have never stopped training in the martial arts and have done so since 1978 which was 29 years ago. It may sound like I am complaining but, well I guess I am. If there can be 8th degree black belts running around who have only 25 years in training and never made one significant contribution or sacrifice for the martial arts...then I guess I am not good enough for that rank even though I have 29 years of training, 14 years of teaching and am well known and hopefully respected in the martial arts today. I guess that even now age is a major consideration for martial arts rank, even though our founding fathers were in their 20's when they

created such great styles as Goju Ryu, Judo and even Jeet Kune Do. Oh well, time will tell and I have plenty of time on my side since I am only 36.

(9/1/07) Update – I earned my Hachidan, 8<sup>th</sup> Degree Black Belt this year at age 37.