

# Think you're ready for your black belt?

## Your rank exam begins today

By Pete St. Pierre

A blackbelt examination is not just a one to two hour experience in our martial arts training. As students, the sensei and sempai around us are always watching, observing, and making mental notes. These observations result in a constant stream of feedback that helps us to improve ourselves and our art over the course of months and years. The arts presented during an exam are the culmination of years of work, not the result of a series of last minute exercises.

Likewise, preparing for the administrative part of blackbelt examinations should not be treated as a last minute exercise. The process the American Judo & Jujitsu Federation (AJJF) follows for examinations is well documented in the school handbook and on the AJJF website (<http://www.ajjf.org/handbook/hbtoc.html#BB>).

Each region also has exam coordinators to help students and their sensei through the process. On exam days, these regional coordinators are responsible for verifying the paperwork, though it is the student and the sensei who are responsible for ensuring that the proper documentation is provided. All paperwork must be in order before the mat examination.

The easiest part of preparing your exam paperwork should be your notebook. Most sensei's encourage their students to keep a notebook from very early in their training. The minimal requirement for examination is to maintain a list of all techniques required through the rank being examined. This list should contain at least a short description of how each art is performed. Your notebook should serve as a tool for recording anything you learn, though only the AJJF kata arts are required for examination. If you have not begun keeping a notebook, now is an excellent time. Your blackbelt exam begins today.

In general, you should begin preparing your exam paperwork at least two months before your exam date. All ranks are required to submit photo copies of current

cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) and First Aid certifications. The two most common certification courses are offered by the American Heart Association and the American Red Cross. Length of certification varies from one to three years and should be checked in time to allow for a re-certification course if necessary. Please remember, these organization usually require 3 - 4 weeks to deliver certification cards. Plan accordingly. Your blackbelt exam begins today.

All ranks also have a requirement for tracking event participation. Specific requirements are spelled out in the rank

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requirements section of the handbook. The AJJF is working on ways to automate this process as part of event registration, but these projects take time.

Students are responsible for maintaining an event/activity list, complete with a signature from the event director. Many students are now submitting a photocopy of their AJJF Budo pass, which serves as a great long term record of clinics attended. Whatever method you choose, have your activities record signed by the event director. You do not want to be chasing signatures the week before your exam. Your blackbelt exam begins today.

The most common last minute crisis for exam candidates is the time-in-grade letter. These letters must be requested from the AJJF central office. The guidelines suggest giving Central Office eight weeks to process the request, though it often take less time than this. In reality, many students test well after they have met the time in grade requirements. If your time in grade has passed it is OK to ask for documentation even if you do not plan to examine yet. Time-in-grade letters do not expire. Your blackbelt exam begins today.

Taping examinations and anatomy examinations for Sandan candidates are part of the black belt requirements. Failing these examinations on the day of your mat exam precludes taking the mat skills test. Candidates are welcome to take care of this requirement in advance exam day. Taping exams are administered to attendees of AJJF taping courses, or may be taken along with course attendees by prior arrangement with the taping instructor.

Likewise, the anatomy examination is offered as part of the Okazaki Restorative Massage (ORM) Module I class, and with special arrangements may be taken by individuals not enrolled in the massage course. In Addition, the anatomy exam may be taken at a regional exam date that includes sandan examinations, if arranged through the regional exam coordinator.

Students have a number of opportunities through the year to take care of this in advance; a passing score is good for one year. Your blackbelt exam begins today.

The pre-examination requirements for each blackbelt rank are not intended as obstacles to examination. First Aid and CPR are valuable skills for instructors running a mat. Your notebook is a tool which, if maintained, provides an excellent record of both AJJF kata techniques as well as unique gems learned at clinics and conventions. An events list is just a small indication of a candidates level of activity on the mat. Given that most monthly blackbelt workouts across the country are sanctioned and on the National Calendar, 3 events in each 12 months of time in grade required is often trivial number when preparing for examination, if you've kept records.

Most of these requirements are easily met along the natural path of training. All that is required is the commitment to be organized and keep records - yet another valuable skill. The bottom line is, blackbelt examinations are about being prepared, both on and off the mat. If you're considering examination for a blackbelt rank in the next few months, remember - your blackbelt exam began yesterday.