

THOUGHTS ON TESTING
Reflection Paper for Phoenix Instructors Program
by
DAN S. SOLLER

I wanted to share with you a few thoughts of mine relative to testing for promotions. While we have done an excellent job in our promotions over the years, we have also experienced growth at almost all age levels and now is the time to pause and reflect on our procedures.

First, I want to point out that when I wrote *The Phoenix Way*, it was designed chiefly for those who I was teaching at the time. The aspiring Kohai then was somewhere in their late teens/early twenties, robust, for the most part in good physical fitness, usually with at least some athletic ability. Today we are teaching all ages and generations. And really for the first time we will have numerous testing Shodan candidates in their late forties and early fifties. It is this latter group that I wish to direct some of my attention to as I write this reflection to you.

Our "older generation" is a very promising group for Phoenix. Sempai Sergiy (now instructing in his Afghanistan Phoenix dojo), for example, has shown us a true example what motivated karateka can do and be in their forties and fifties. They can bring a mature presence to the dojo floor along with their training spirit. "We don't get old until we get old" is still very true! Let us all hope that we never do get old and health allows us to continue training. For those senior Yudansha who have been training with me over these many years, I do want to point out that it is much easier for us to train than it is for aspiring kohai of the same age group. Some of us have been doing this a very long time and it is almost a second nature. We know what works for our bodies and what does not; the novice does not have that luxury and the training is much more of a physical struggle. Their bodies are not yet programmed and many of the waza that might have been achievable in their earlier years may no longer be possible. The mind may be willing but the reality is the body may not be as generous to the endeavor.

I always dreaded my tests. They were hard, I was nervous, and I really never thought I did well on test day. But looking back, I did always learn. Something new, something different... someone always took the time during the test to ensure that waza was corrected and made better.

I want to be sure that our tests are not just kumite sessions and a time of free kumite. I want to be sure that learning is still taking place, that skills are progressive, and that we use tests to encourage the candidate and others to improve their karate. Candidates are not going to be perfect and we shouldn't expect that they will be; the rank system is progressive and we are a seven advancement kyu system. The goal for the Association, as I have often said, is for standards to most completely come together in the brown belt stage. The brown obi should be viewed in that way where the different dojo and countries bring candidates to that standard despite their previous kyu progressions, which may be based on the candidates' progressions and/or individual instructors' ranking decisions. It should always be our goal that candidates hold brown for approximately one year so that they may interview with the Association Yudansha as they prepare to join their ranks. This is our minimum expectation. Brown belts must complete the ranking system and earn their three stripes. Only ikkyu may be promoted to Shodan.

Related to my comments on the older generation, their age must be a consideration in both time in Ring of Oyama and in jissen, with a particular emphasis on safety in the ring. Focus should be on ring time realizing that time standards are goals and not absolute. Instructors must use common sense while maintaining quality standards during testing procedures, realizing always that our tests are based on the individual, meeting skill and belt standards, and importantly displaying the tenants of discipline and OSU. It is not realistic to expect older karateka to perform at the same levels as younger karateka and jissen must be closely monitored by our senior Yudansha.

A word on training. I expect that everyone active in the Phoenix Karate-do Association to train. Yudansha should be role models in training and make it part of their everyday lives. Kohai should be striving to move forward and surpassing their instructors. There are always regrets when one stops training. Unless health demands it... never stop! Even for experienced Yudansha, skills can be lost without constant attention.

Two final thoughts:

1. Lets remember Oyama Sosai's caution of "never forget what it is like to be a beginner"
2. Train!