

## **A look at the other side - WTF Black Belt Gradings**

As a practitioner of both International Taekwon-Do and World Taekwondo, I often get asked (from both styles) “What is the Black Belt grading like for (other style)?” The answer is actually the same as my answer to the question “what is the other style like?” which is always “similar, but different”.

WTF grading requirements do not have the credit system we use in ITF although in my observation candidates will have usually completed a similar number of these contributions throughout their everyday training, competition or assistance as is required under the ITF grading system. The timespans for gradings are identical, with the candidate required to spend as many years training at that Dan as the Dan itself before being eligible to grade again.

The most obvious difference is our ITF gradings are conducted over 2 days. They are held at a regional level and there will usually be 10 – 20 candidates. WTF gradings are not as big (usually only 1 – 3 candidates grading at a time) and covers a similar amount of time to the open session on the second day of an ITF grading. This does serve to make it fairly demanding physically as you can probably imagine what it would be like to do all of your black belt grading syllabus but in a Gup grading format where you are on the floor the whole time.

As a side note, this provides a rather ironic perception of both gradings when practitioners attend the “open” part of the other styles’ grading – ITF students see the WTF grading as only lasting about 3 hours and consider it to be short, while WTF students attending the “open” part of an ITF grading see it as lasting about the same amount of time, but because candidates are not on the floor the whole time (rotating in and out for patterns and sparring etc), they also consider that to be short by comparison.

Patterns make up the most points of any single aspect in a WTF grading accounting for 54.2% of all the points available for promotion to 3<sup>rd</sup> Dan. This does make sense as patterns demonstrate the application of all the fundamental movements that the student has learnt, providing the foundation for all the other aspects of testing. It is very apparent when a student has poor knowledge of their patterns, as this tends to flow on to other areas of the grading. One potential problem with the high weighting is that a candidate who excels in Patterns (say getting 4 out of 5 for all of them) could score 2 out of 5 (below standard) for all the other areas of the grading and still pass with a total score of 74/120. I have not seen this to be the case as examiners will usually make it known to the candidates that they don’t make the grade across the board, but with no minimum requirement set for the different areas examined, it could possibly happen. Candidates are examined on all patterns for their rank and below (including 3 sets of fundamental exercises). As there is only one pattern for each of the Dan grades this totals 13 patterns for promotion to 3<sup>rd</sup> Dan (3 fundamental exercises, Taegeuks 1 – 8, Koryo (1<sup>st</sup> Dan), Keumgang (2<sup>nd</sup> Dan)). Of course, it is important to remember that for grading to 3<sup>rd</sup> Dan in ITF, while only 7 patterns make up the grading assessment, the candidate is examined on (and required to know) all patterns and fundamental exercises up to their rank.

A full knowledge of the different types of step sparring is required for WTF gradings (3 step 1 / 2 way, 2 step and 1 step) even though they may not be examined (as is the case in ITF). For gradings at black belt levels the type of step sparring performed is entirely up to the candidate. This area of the grading in particular appears to be not very challenging to a trained observer as candidates tend to stick to very basic step sparring routines (often just the same ones they have been doing since the

junior grades) unless an effort is made to introduce new routines or encourage experimenting with different techniques by the instructor. There is no pre-arranged sparring as part of the WTF grading syllabus at any level (but higher Dan grades do have Model sparring examined as part of their syllabus). Free sparring makes up the second largest component of the grading with just over 20% of total marks. This is made up of 5 scored rounds of sparring, though the number of actual rounds sparred is usually a lot higher (often 6 to 8 rounds). Sparring is performed in full protective gear (body protector, forearm and shin guards, head protector and mouth guard) and is generally 1 – 1.5 minute rounds of 1 on 1 and 2 on 1. Although protective gear is used, the contact level is what we would be familiar with in an ITF grading, not non-contact but not with the aim of knocking someone out either. The examiner will often add penalties for both fighters such as 10 press ups per point scored to be completed at the end of each round. The final round of sparring is usually of a team format where the fighter sparring the candidate is switched out every 30 seconds for a fresh fighter (really with a focus of looking at the candidate's fitness and spirit as opposed to throwing in fresh fighters to "beat them up"). This approach to sparring (and the weighting it receives in the grading as a whole) does reflect the sporting side of WTF Taekwondo; however, it tends to mean candidates place less emphasis (training and understanding) on the other aspects of the grading since they account for so little of the final result. It also means a complete change in technique from properly executed kicks displayed in patterns and step-sparring to abbreviated sparring-style kicks which offer more speed. Candidates also tend to waste a lot of energy with the "trend" of ki-haping while sparring, although this serves little purpose in sparring now and even less in a grading.

Destructions are very different (mostly due to the absence of power breaking as part of WTF competition). Candidates are required to perform 6 breaks of their choice with 3 of them being hand techniques, 2 being flying foot techniques and 1 being a grounded foot technique. The number of boards is up to the candidate, though in 23 years I have yet to see an attempt at a multiple board break! There are possibly a number of reasons for this - it could be that people don't know how to do multiple board breaks, they don't feel the need to, or they do not have the right equipment to practice with. It is likely a combination of all these. Because few WTF clubs have re-breakable boards or board holders, there is little practice when it comes to breaking (really more of a "hope it works on the day"). This flows on to students not realising that the same perfected technique can be used to break one or multiple boards at once, they decide that it is safer to just break one board than attempt multiple and potentially not make the break. It is also rare to find students to hold boards that have had experience with proper holding technique that would be required for single, let alone multiple boards.

Self defence is one of the few areas where the weighting is almost exactly the same. It is examined similarly between styles as well with the focus for 3<sup>rd</sup> Dan being weapons defence and sound knowledge of the lower grades releases and restraining techniques. Examiners want to see simple, practiced techniques that work as opposed to overly complicated techniques that are hit and miss. Break falling is tested at all levels for WTF gradings and includes the familiar forward and backward break falls and diving rolls over an obstacle (usually 2 or 3 people).

The WTF grading includes fitness aspects but not in a separate scored way like we are used to in the ITF fitness test. Instead it comprises of the aforementioned penalties in sparring and at other stages in the grading (for example the examiner may ask one candidate to perform a pattern while the other is doing situps for the duration, or 1 minute of speed kicks on a focus pad followed by 20 press

ups and repeat this a number of times). One similarity does appear in what is called the “Power Test” which is performed with focus pads or an air shield (much like the bag work in our fitness test). There are about 30 specified techniques (hand, foot, combination kicks and flying kicks) to be performed “at 100%” with the aim being to get some insight into both the candidates’ fitness, developed power and spirit.

There are no other formal forms of assessment in the WTF grading (theory exam, interview or essays) although the examiner may often ask theory questions to candidates on the floor during the grading (these tend to be of a technical nature such as stance dimensions or technique applications etc) however they are not considered to be marked aspects in themselves. There is an aspect that is marked called “Performance” (analogous to the attitude assessment) which takes into account the candidate’s attitude at grading and the application of the 5 tenets (which are also used in WTF).

The cutoffs for pass levels are very similar between both styles and WTF also has a “Provisional Pass” (much like a Pass Incomplete) for those candidates that score just under the pass mark and are able to re-test on some aspects and have them re-scored. Results are announced at the grading after a period of deliberation between the examiners and a comparison of their scoring. This is only possible due to the small number of candidates testing at one time (this would be a nightmare with the 15+ candidates we are used to at Dan gradings). Finally there are no minimum requirements that must be met in any of the categories (such as achieving at least 50% in every aspect - which while it does take into account that not everyone is always strong in every aspect of the grading, it can mean that you end up with black belts who continue to be very weak in specific areas as they continue to grade through the dan ranks).

The WTF grading is tough. It is physically demanding and mentally draining to be on the floor being examined for usually about 3 hours, if you are completely stuffed afterwards you haven’t been working hard enough. Some parts I think are not easy, but people choose to take the easy option when it comes to them (such as breaking and step sparring) because they don’t realise they can do better. A student who really tries to extend themselves when it comes to gradings instead of just doing enough to get by will always excel (in either style!).

By comparison, the ITF Dan grading FEELS harder because you spend all that time being examined on the first day. But you get a lot out of it by spending that time training WITH the masters/examiners which helps to sharpen your performance for the open session of the grading. I believe the current ITF grading helps to produce well rounded black belts at the lower Dan grades and ensures that this trend continues into the higher ranks. The WTF grading itself is merely administrated by the WTF and member organisations are free to set their own syllabus. In this respect, it important to remember that the Taekwondo Union of NZ (TUNZ) has had less time to fine tune their WTF grading process (18 years compared to iTKD with over 40 years of black belt gradings in NZ). It will be of interest to see what it might be like in another 20 years?

Gradings in this essay refer specifically to those conducted by iTKD (International Taekwon-Do Foundation of New Zealand) and TUNZ (Taekwondo Union of New Zealand) for their respective governing bodies (ITF and WTF).

### Grading scoring testing for 3<sup>rd</sup> Dan

Aspect	ITF	%	WTF	%
Patterns	7x10	32.26	13x5	54.2
1 Step Sparring	20	9.22	5	4.16
Pre-Arranged Free Sparring	15	6.91	-	-
Free Sparring	15	6.91	5x5	20.8
Destructions	4x4	7.37	5	4.16
Self Defence	10	4.61	5	4.16
Break Falling	-	-	5	4.16
Power Test	-	-	5	4.16
Fitness	16	7.37	-	-
Written Exam	25	11.52	-	-
Oral Interview	5	2.30	-	-
General Assessment/Attitude	15	6.91	5	4.16
Essay	10	4.61	-	-
<b>Maximum Possible Points</b>	<b>217</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>120</b>	<b>100</b>

### Results

Unsuccessful	<141	<65%	<72	<60%
Pass	141	65%	72	60%
A Pass	162.8	75%	84	70%
Pass with Distinction	173.6	80%+	96	80%+

I have included a breakdown of the grading scoring for promotion to 3<sup>rd</sup> Dan for both styles and have added the percentage that each aspect of the grading accounts for out of the total possible points available.