

Call the Marshal

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I have decided to write about some of my thoughts and ideas I have had over the past years as an International Taekwon-Do Foundation New Zealand instructor, on the topic of marshalling at gup grading's.

I hope anyone who reads this thesis may appreciate any constructive criticisms as simply that, and above all gain an idea or learn some tips on being a marshal or help someone intending to marshal at a grading.

First of all, I take my hat is off to all those who show up at a grading, you give up your time to help and support your club and its members as they go through a tough part of the Taekwon-Do journey.

Marshal, what does it mean?

Here are some key points taken from the Collins English dictionary.

Because Taekwon-Do stems from the military based teachings of un-armed combat,

Meaning one could be related as:

- 'An officer of the highest rank ' (black belt marshals being the highest ranked members on the floor at a grading)
- 'An officer who organises or conducts '
- 'To assemble and organise troops ' (in our case grading members)
- 'One in charge of protocol '
- 'To guide or lead '

There are many more meanings according to the dictionary, though these key points can easily be related to this particular Taekwon-Do situation.

Being a marshal at a grading is a big responsibility. In some cases new black belts are made to show up and marshal by their Instructors, as it is a requirement, nonetheless the responsibility is a lot more than just showing up because they were made to. In most cases the majority of marshals show up out of their own sense of willingness, either way the marshals are taking a group of people of who are already nervous and full of emotion. The marshal then sets the scene for them, in which they need to perform at their absolute best in order to impress and show the examiner that they have trained hard enough to go to the next level.

Too often I have seen grading students thrown right off their performance because of a result of poor marshalling. Common situations are things like, students unable to hear because the marshal speaks too softly, students being asked to perform techniques that are beyond their level of skill and being asked to perform techniques from a higher syllabus etc.

Let us look at a possible grading scenario.

Let's say a group of four young green belts have been called up by the examiner,

“Sir” they shout as their name is called out (hopefully). Then they race up to their spot on the floor. A waiting marshal says face the examiner, charyot,kyon-ye”. Examiner says “some basics please”. The marshal now says in a rather quiet voice “um step back into fore arm guarding block in a right L stance”. The boy furthest away from the marshal didn’t quite hear a word of the command, and as a consequence looks at the girl next to him to see what it is he has been requested to perform. He looks up to see the examiner looking straight at him as he just copied the girl next to him. That already nervous young boy is now thinking, oh no the examiner probably thinks I don’t know my techniques because I had to copy her. Over the next three commands given by the marshal, the boy still struggles to hear and is now worried that he can no longer hold any focus on his grading expectations.

There are a dozen different scenarios similar to this one where a grading student is thrown of their game by poor marshalling.

As instructors we get a front row seat at a grading and we get to see the look on our students faces as they go through their grading and because we get to know our students on such a personal level, we can tell the anguish and frustration on their faces that can be taking place while they are grading. Well anyway, I know I can and to be honest it does upset me when I know that an incorrect call from a marshal has made one of my students look up at me with a look that says “what was that, that move isn’t in my syllabus”. In addition, it disappoints me when a parent comes up to me at the end of the grading and says “I could not understand a word that black belt said and I could see my child could not either”.

I hope I have painted a bit of a picture now, so maybe it can be understood where I am coming from. At this point I would like to mention that this is not always the case, as there are many fantastic marshals out there who do a brilliant job of setting students up for a great grading. Although it may seem a pretty negative outlook on the topic, I do feel it could be addressed and hopefully improved for students, marshals, parents and instructors alike.

I have conducted a quick survey to put some of my theories to the test, and check that my opinions could relate to other members. I asked five questions to a group of members from different clubs in my region, the members where of all different age groups and different coloured belt levels from yellow belt up to black stripe.

Question 1

Have you ever had trouble hearing or understanding a marshal at a grading?

To which 90% answered yes

Question 2

Have you ever had marshal call techniques in Korean?

Again 90% answered yes

The first two questions can easily be related together.

Question 3

Have you ever had a marshal ask you to perform a technique you didn’t know?

75% answered yes

Question 4

Have you ever been grading where the marshal (marshals) have appeared nervous and not sure what they were doing?

75% answered yes

Question 5

Have you ever felt put off performing at your best at a grading as a result of poor marshalling?

To which only 25% answered yes.

The result of the last question was very pleasing to hear, it would have been quite scary to hear that the vast majority said they were put off by the result of poor marshalling!

So looking at the result over all I think to conclude that there is a problem with marshalling at grading's. It would appear the main issue is the basic communication between marshal and grading students.

Here is a list of ideas that I feel could help our new, less experienced black belts about to go into the realm of being marshals.

1. Preparation: This is the key to performing any task well. Don't show up to marshal if you are a bumbling bag of nerves and unprepared, people read body language and if you are not confident in what you are doing, how can you portray a message of confidence to the students grading. It is a proven fact that people fear public speaking over anything else and many eyes are going to be upon you as a marshal, you will be under pressure and expected to perform your duty well. A gup grading should not co-exist with a marshalling lesson. Prepare by doing such things as; Instructing at club, ask to take the warm up, explain and show some TKD techniques in front of family and friends and the obvious one, marshal at club pre-grading's. Get used to being under the spot light and making calls under pressure, but above all know that you have the confidence to do it and do it well, speak in a confident assertive voice that the grading students can all hear.
2. Know your stuff: To me, nothing looks worse than a marshal standing there reading from a card or out of a blue hand book for a list of techniques to give grading students to perform. Imagine how unprofessional that looks in the public eyes of parents and supporters, we boast a very high standard in the ITFNZ, so surely our black belts being marshals should know enough about coloured belt syllabus to not need to read it as they go. Just know your patterns and the different techniques in the patterns. That one is not too hard, don't ask a group of green stripes to perform circular blocks, as that is from Won-Hyo the green belt syllabus. Seems obvious I know, but believe me I have seen this happen, one that springs to mind was a very confident young black belt asked a group of green belts to perform flying reverse turning kicks!, needless to say the examiner quickly put a stop to that unfortunate display and reminded the marshal to stick to the syllabus. I wonder if they even knew the syllabus. Another one was a black belt who asked some students to perform a knife hand guarding block on a walking stance! After they attempted to demonstrate the technique for the graders they quickly realised their mistake and stopped. I put that one down to the fact that they were nervous and

became flustered. We can also find that in the syllabus, there are techniques that don't appear in the patterns, so a bit more study of the different syllabus is required to remember and know these techniques.

3. Perform technique: Personally I feel that techniques requested by marshals should also be performed by the marshals. I like it when a marshal says "ie," walking ready stance, junbi, front rising kick" and then demonstrates it a couple of times. It could be the saving grace for a student who didn't hear the command clearly, and was able to see the technique performed. Performing the technique for the student can also be a quick little blast of inspiration, especially for a child, they see a well performed turning kick by a black belt, then of course they will try and imitate that awesome kick they just saw, therefore it can actually help them lift their performance. As an instructor I can say that if I ask my students to perform front snap kicks at training and I just stand there doing nothing, they will not perform the kick as well as if I am doing it with them. I guess it is human nature, we see something performed well, and we want to perform it well too. One might say a grading is about how well the student can perform under pressure and I would agree, but I would also say are we not allowed to help that student to do well?, I think instructors would agree that if there is one time a student could fail to perform to their highest standard, it could be under the pressure of a grading, especially if by no fault of their own they have been confused by a bad call from a marshal. It will also ensure marshals can perform, I have seen instances where a marshal has performed the technique and performed it badly or even completely wrong, remember the saying, practice what you preach, you should not ask someone to do something you cannot do yourself. This once again comes down to standards, if you have come to marshal at a grading and you are going to stand there and ask some red stripes to perform some flying back piercing kicks then low and behold you should be able to perform them too.
4. Be aware of conditions: This is a relatively easy one, most often gradings take place at night and a couple of them will be when it is cold in winter, so think of your job as getting students who would have been sitting down the back of the do-jang for half an hour warmed up. Start with hand techniques and work up to easier kicks and then the more difficult kicks. Again, sounds obvious I know, but I have seen a marshal ask a group of blue belts who have been sitting a long time to get straight into some hard out flying kicks. Not a good idea, we don't want to be risking injury upon our fellow TKD members.
5. Language: Marshals are not there to test the students on their knowledge of the Korean language. Use good clear English, we with our western tongue can often speak Korean terminology quite differently. Do not think you are going to impress anyone by rattling off a four technique combo in Korean; once again the grading students don't need the added frustration of trying to decipher a long Korean command in order to perform a technique especially if you have said it poorly. Leave the terminology test to the examiner.

6. Plan: When you arrive at the grading, look around, watch as the grading students come in, see how many and what ranks are there, it could be that there are no blue belts, if it is a smaller inter club grading or something like that. So be prepared for what rank and syllabus you might need to work with. Find the highest ranked, or the most experienced marshal that you will be required to work with. Look for the highest ranked black belt there and let them know if you are new to marshalling and maybe feeling a bit nervous about it, ask to marshal for the white belts or yellow stripes perhaps. If you have planned to take the white belts for example, and you want to have a quick look at the syllabus in the hand book to freshen your memory, then do it before the grading starts. Not during your time at marshalling.

7. Know your A, B, C, D, s. (and E-F,s) Knowing the line C-D and the line A-B is important and should be used by the marshals, for example, if the grading students have stepped back into a right L stance guarding block, and asked to perform side piercing kicks with the rear leg, and have not been asked which direction to kick to, some could kick straight ahead to D like in a pattern and some could kick to A, so although neither student is incorrect, it does look messy and once again opens up the door for confusion amongst the grading members. Personally I like to see the technique performed on the line A-B, it is a good angle for the examiner to see the kick performed and sets up for kicking off the front leg in the same direction (to the sides) whilst moving backward on the L stance. It plays an important part within all techniques performed at a grading and should be known by all students on the floor!. In my Do-jang we have big A, B, C, and D, posters that we put up on their appropriate wall to help students learn where they are, as pattern diagrams are part of the syllabus and seem to be easily overlooked when learning theory.

My personal preference: This chapter just covers some of my personal ideas that wouldn't be considered strict grading protocol, but maybe, could help the grading students, along with the marshals, and examiners alike. Firstly, I feel that marshals should have the freedom to be able to move around the floor a bit more, instead of standing in the one spot in the corner. Now it would be highly rude and disrespectful for a marshal to stand in the centre of the floor with their back to the examiner and should never happen, however, could a marshal move to a more centred position on the floor and stand at an angle to the examiner?, or even move completely over to the other side of the floor? I think so. Marshals seem to stand up from their seated position in the corner and stay there. A more centred marshal would be heard easier, seen better and when giving commands to be performed, with a quick turn to A or B could demonstrate the technique for the graders, to see clearly from a side view. Also the marshal could move quickly around the floor to help with getting graders to the spots etc. Remember that you are running the grading, it is your job to keep it moving and flowing well, if a student is standing there not sure where to go, don't stand in the corner waving your arms around! Race over to him/her and get them to their spot.

Don't ask graders to turn their back on the examiner. When getting graders to perform line work, keep them facing forward, for example; move forward performing a straight fingertip thrust on a walking stance, hana dool set net dassot, then repeat the same technique moving backward, hana dool set net dassot.. And so on. I would ask the graders to demonstrate spot

and step turning as a separate display of technique with a single hand technique in between, for example; fore fist punch on a walking stance, hana, spot turn, spot turn (back to the front) fore fist punch, dool, spot turn, spot turn,(back to the front) and so on five times. Continue with other techniques. By keeping the graders facing the examiner it's a good chance for them to show their ability moving forward and backward in the different stances. Remember it is not just walking stances and L-stances, if there are a group of blue belts up, you should have them demonstrating fixed stances, rear foot stances, and low stances.

So in conclusion of all this, I ask, is there a problem in the area of marshalling? I feel yes there is. Is it a big problem? No it isn't. It just comes down to black belts young or old, junior or senior, taking the time to look at the grading situation a bit more in depth, take time to think and understand the real importance of the role you are taking on. Don't show up just for the sake of showing up, show up fully prepared, ready to set a high example, to display your confidence and your knowledge of Taekwon-Do, to play an important part of some ones journey to the next level and even for your own satisfaction and development. Leave the grading knowing you have done a good job. Be someone that coloured belts will admire and look up to. Be a great Taekwon-Do black belt!!

I thank anyone who takes the time to read this and I hope above all that it may be of some help to anyone who may find some benefit from it.