

TIPS FOR GRADING PREPARATION

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Preparing for your black belt grading shouldn't be taken lightly. Your preparation will reflect on your grading so it's vital you dedicate the appropriate time and effort to it in order to do well. Personally, I have found the preparation to be the biggest challenge. Knowing where to start and how to approach it can be quite daunting. For my essay, I have put together some tips for other students preparing for their black belt grading which I hope they will find beneficial.

1. Manage your other commitments

Before starting your training, think about the practicalities of putting more time into your training during the 3-4 months leading up your grading. Will the extra time you're putting into your preparation impact on anyone else i.e. partner, family, spouse, work colleagues, parents? Talk to them about how you think it may impact them so you can gain their support and understanding before you start.

2. Heal your old injuries

Before you increase your training load get any injuries, aches or niggles treated. They will only get worse with the increased stress from your extra training plus it will hold your training back. It would pay to get your condition diagnosed and treated if necessary.

3. Know what the requirements are and what will be expected of you

Talk to other black belts in your club about their experiences. Don't be afraid to ask them questions or for advice. The more information you're armed with the better you'll be able to prepare.

Make sure you understand what the requirements are for your grading before you start your training so you can prepare smartly. Understand your syllabus and the allocation of points and focus your efforts accordingly. For example, if patterns make up 31% of the total marks and the run is worth 2% don't spend a majority of your time trying to improve your run time and not enough time improving your patterns.

Develop your step sparring requirements early, practice them and if you're able to choose a partner for the grading, practice with them as much as you can.

If you've started your preparation later than four months out from your grading, try to fit at least one extra Taekwon-Do training session in a week. Ask your instructor if you can have time to focus on your grading requirements.

Condition your breaking tools before you attempt your required breaking techniques. Unconditioned tools can lead to pain or injury, plus it will only hinder your training. Take a board home and condition your tools at home while you're watching TV.

Remember to train your weaknesses – it's all too easy to keep practicing the techniques we do well and avoid the ones we don't do so well or don't like doing.

With practice, your weaker techniques will become stronger and so will your overall Taekwon-Do performance.

4. Plan your preparation

Put a plan together for when you're going to start your preparation. When will you start studying your theory? How often can you train? When will you work on your fitness? Plan to have rest days to give your body time to recover. Try not to plan your runs two days in a row. Running can be hard on your joints so give your body time to recover so you can minimise the risk of injury.

5. Eat well

Try to eat well. There is a lot of nutritional information floating around about the kinds of foods that will support your training efforts. However, everybody is different and has a different chemical make-up which means there's no one size fits all diet. Experiment with food, note what makes you feel tired and lethargic, what makes you feel energised and alert. Do you feel like a sleep after a big meal of rice or pasta or are you full of beans? Do you feel satisfied and energised after you've had a meal with meat or fish with vegetables or do you still feel hungry?

If you're always feeling tired and lethargic it may be a symptom of simply not eating the right food to fuel your body rather than actually being tired. Experiment with different types of food to find out what works for you.

Carbohydrates will play a key role in fueling your mind and body. They are the most efficient and effective source of fuel for your training. Foods that are high in carbohydrates include bread, rice, pasta, fruit, vegetables and most cereals.

Increased Taekwon-Do training can lower your iron levels. Any kind of bruising, contact, or trauma can lead to the destruction of red blood cells which lowers iron levels. Low iron levels will reduce the oxygen supply to muscles affecting your energy levels as less oxygen is available for energy production. Iron is essential for hemoglobin which is the protein that moves oxygen from the lungs to the muscles. If your iron levels are low, regardless of how fit you are, your aerobic endurance will be impaired during the course of your training and your grading. To replace the iron lost during training, eat lean red meat. Vitamin C will also help the absorption of iron so drink a glass of orange juice or eat an orange immediately after your red meat meal. On the contrary, tannic acid will inhibit the absorption of iron so avoid drinking tea or coffee either immediately before or after your meal.

6. Keep hydrated

It's important to keep your body hydrated by drinking between 2-3 litres of water a day, and that's not including the water you drink while you're exercising. If you're not used to drinking this amount of water you may find yourself visiting the bathroom every ten minutes. This can be inconvenient and may prevent you from drinking enough water. If this is the case, it may mean your body isn't absorbing the water you're putting in and vital minerals are being flushed from your body.

Water is an important source of minerals which are needed to help your body obtain energy from food. A pinch of unrefined sea salt in your water can help keep your body well hydrated as well as replace those important minerals. The amount of salt in your water is so small it doesn't change the taste of your water.

Next to oxygen, water is the other most important substance for human life. It is essential for blood circulation, removal of waste products, maintaining body temperature control and sweating and transports nutrients around the body. Insufficient water will compromise your training as it can interfere with coordination, motivation, concentration and your ability to train for extended periods. Your body tries to cool itself down by sweating when we train, water is lost through sweat and needs to be replaced. Unless you're training for more than 2 hours, water is all you need. During your grading weekend you may benefit from an electrolyte replacement drink such as Replace or Powerade. These can be diluted to make them less concentrated and easier to drink while training.

7. Set yourself mini-goals

Think about what you would like to achieve at each training session. Whether it's improving a particular technique in a particular pattern or whether it's working on your step sparring techniques – make each session count. Listen to feedback and advice from instructors. If you struggle to remember what they've said, carry a notebook with you and make notes so you can remember to practice.

8. Work on your fitness

You'll need to build up your fitness level in order to perform well at your grading over the entire weekend. Try to build up your cardiovascular fitness as well as your strength so that you have the stamina to perform to your potential.

Cardiovascular

If you're not normally active, you should start your fitness training at least 5-6 months before your grading. If you're not used to running, start out slowly with 10 minute runs building up to 30 minutes at a moderate pace. Once you're able to run 30 minutes without stopping, you're ready to improve your run speed. The following runs focus on improving your speed. Completed once a week over 4 weeks, you should see an improvement to both your speed and fitness level.

1. Pyramid

30 seconds intense: 30 seconds easy; 45 seconds intense: 45 seconds easy; 1 min intense: 1 minute easy; 90 seconds intense: 90 seconds easy; 2 minutes intense: 2 minutes easy; 90 seconds intense: 90 seconds easy; 1 min intense: 1 minute easy; 45 seconds intense: 45 seconds easy; 30 seconds intense: 30 seconds easy; finish with 10 minutes moderate.

2. Intervals

Find a hill. Run hard for 2 minutes up the hill, then recover for 3 minutes (walking or jogging), repeat this 3 times. Try to build this up to 5 times. Finish with a moderate pace for 10 minutes.

3. Continuous

Run 8 minutes out and 8 minutes back at a hard-moderate pace. Take note of where you reached the first time and then try and get a little bit further each time you do this run.

Test yourself once a month so you can watch your improvements. Map out a 2.4km run circuit that's convenient for you to run regularly. You can do this at www.mapmyrun.com. Write down your run time so you can measure it against the next time you do it.

Strength and Stamina

Practice your press ups and sit-ups. You can also test yourself once a month with these. See how many sit-ups you can do in 2 minutes. Count how many press-ups you can do without stopping. Aim to increase the number you can do each time, even if it is by just one extra repetition. Ask your instructor if you can pair off with somebody in your club to do three 2-minute rounds on a pad each time you train.

If you have the opportunity to train for extended periods it's a good idea to do so, so you know how it feels to be doing Taekwon-Do over a long period - both physically and mentally.

If resistance or weight training is part of your plan, try to choose movements that will work your full range of motion and work muscles you use with Taekwon-Do. Here are some examples of what you could do.

Squat jumps. Perform a squat and jump on the spot. Aim to get height. If you find these easy you can add powerbags or weights for resistance. This can help develop the fast twitch muscle fibers required for flying and jumping techniques as well as the strengthen your leg muscles.



With powerbag



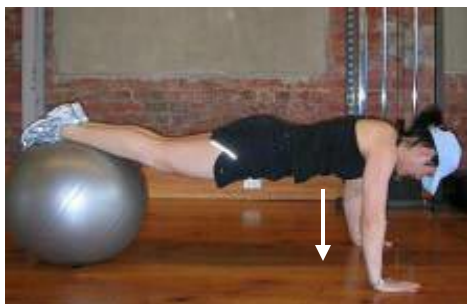
With weights

Press-ups using a swiss ball. You can either put your hands on a swiss ball or balance your shins on the swiss ball. Putting your hands on the swiss ball will work your stabilising muscles more while your shins will work your arms and chest more.



Hands on swiss ball





Shins on swiss ball

Lunges. These will help strengthen your thigh muscles which can help you perform flying and jumping techniques as well as strengthen your stances. There are a few types of lunges you can do with varying degrees of difficulty. Obviously, the stronger you are at lunges, the more difficult you should aim for.



Lunges on the spot – Keep your back straight, front knee in line with your heel and your back leg straight behind you i.e. not off on an angle. Move your body weight up and down using your quadriceps (thigh muscles). Repeat 8-12 on each side.

Dynamic lunges – The same basic lunge principles apply but instead of staying on the spot, move your right leg from the front lunge position to the back. Repeat this exercise 8-10 times on the same leg, then swap sides.



Jumping lunges – Similar to performing dynamic lunges but instead of staying on the ground, jump up and switch your legs from the front to back and the back to front. Aim for height.

Jumping lunges with medicine ball – This requires some co-ordination but adds resistance as well as develops the muscles used for twisting. Start with the ball on the outside of your knee, jump up into the opposite lunge position swinging the medicine ball up and over to the opposite side at the same time. Repeat 16-20 times.



Woodchops. This exercise can help develop the muscles we use for twisting, for example in reverse turning kick or knifehand side strike. Using a cable machine, position the cable around your shoulder height. Place your feet one and a half shoulder widths apart with feet facing outwards 45 degrees. Hold the handles with both hands, your outside hand positioned under the opposite hand. Start with the cable at the top pulling down to inside your opposite knee. Transfer your weight from one leg to the other and keep your arms straight through the whole movement. Repeat 8-10 times and swap sides.



9. Stretch regularly

Remember to keep up your stretching especially once you've stepped up your training. Every time you train your muscles, they shorten and eventually lead to injury if you continually neglect to stretch. Stretching can help minimise the risk of injury, maintain your flexibility and help your body recover more quickly.

Tense muscles have reduced circulation, resulting in a lack of needed oxygen and a build up of waste products such as lactic acid in muscles. Both of these combined can leave you feeling fatigued and sore which can impact on your ability to train to your capacity at your next training.

When your body is more flexible it is also able to cope better with the occasional overextension or sudden twisting that might happen during the course of your preparation.

10. Give yourself time to recover

Recovery time

Ensure you include time to recover in your plan. You need at least one or two days off all types of exercise each week to give your body time to heal and recover. Along with regular recovery days plan to have one week a month where the volume of training is lower than other weeks. This is especially important if your training is intense. These low volume weeks will allow your body to heal and recover while still maintaining the fitness and strength levels you've built up. After your low volume week, you should be able to step up your training.

Nutrition and hydration for recovery

Good nutrition and hydration are also contributing factors towards your recovery. Re-hydrate and replace the energy you've burned with good food as soon as you've finished your training session. Muscles are more receptive to fuel replacement immediately after exercise. Ideally this should be between 2-4 hours after exercise. Eating immediately after training will contribute towards a faster recovery and ensure you have enough energy for your next training session. This will be especially important to remember during your grading.

Hot and cold treatment

Applying hot and cold water to aching muscles can also speed recovery. Start with 1-2 minutes hot followed by 15 seconds cold and repeat this six times finishing on cold. This will increase the blood circulation in your muscles removing lactic acid and increasing the oxygen uptake. If you have access to a shower at lunchtime during the first day of your grading, this could be beneficial.

Look after injuries

Apply the RICE treatment (Rest, Ice, Compression, Elevate) to any new injuries or niggles. If your injury hasn't healed in a couple of days see a doctor or physiotherapist for expert treatment or advice to aid a quick recovery. The longer you leave an injury the longer it will take to heal. In more severe cases, other muscles can change the way they would normally function to compensate for your injury which means you risk developing aches and strains in other parts of your body.

11. Get your application form prepared early

Get your application form prepared early so you have plenty of time to get the appropriate signatures and photographs. Read the instructions carefully, ask your instructor to check your application form when he/she signs it to ensure you've followed the instructions. Don't leave this to the last minute as late applications are returned! This can take longer to put together than you think.

12. Stay focused at your grading

This weekend is where all your preparation comes together – your Taekwon-Do training, fitness, strength, theory, etiquette and, of course, your spirit.

Keep plenty of light snacks on hand to keep your body fueled and plenty of fluids to keep you hydrated. An electrolyte replacement drink may be beneficial over the weekend along with plain water.

If you've used any recovery techniques during your preparation that have worked for you, remember to apply them during the weekend.

Stay focused, listen to the examiners and give 100 per cent over the entire weekend.

13. Be prepared for the transition

Be prepared for what will be expected of you once you've achieved your black belt. Instructors and other seniors will expect you to pitch in with club duties and instructing. Everything you do both inside and outside the dojang will be noticed. So it will be even more important you practice good etiquette. Be a good example to coloured belts. Your behavior will now reflect on all other black belt holders.

ITFNZ expects black belts to:

- Support their instructor and club in all of its events
- Support ITNZ events either as a participant, official or organiser
- Attend and marshal at coloured belt and black belt gradings in your region.

Not only will more be expected of you as a black belt, but you may also find a drop in motivation to go along to training especially when your next grading is 18 months away. Take advantage of this time. Plan out what you would like to achieve before your next grading rolls around. Whether it's your instructing skills, helping your instructor at club, organising a grading or camp, or even practicing the techniques you find a bit tricky so they become easier. Having a plan for after your grading will help keep you motivated.

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