



Leaping **THE**
HURDLE

Overcoming the transition from
junior to senior in Taekwon-Do

By Anna Hall - 2nd Dan

Taekwon-Do is a discipline of both the body and the mind. From the time they tie on their first white belt, students are taught the tenets of Taekwon-Do: Courtesy, Integrity, Perseverance, Self Control and Indomitable Spirit. However, from Blue Belt/Red Tip to Black Belt, it is often perseverance that is the most challenging tenet to uphold, particularly when facing conflicting demands at home, in education and in the workplace. While the physical challenge in Taekwon-Do is progressive, many students hit a psychological barrier when attempting to move from junior to senior grades.

This essay addresses the mental and physical ‘Hurdle’ that many students face as they approach Black Belt, giving guidance for those facing this hurdle, and advice for instructors to smooth this transition, and support and retain these students.

Anecdotally, it appears many students of Taekwon-Do are lost to their clubs from Blue Belt/Red Tip (3rd Gup) onwards. This is perhaps partially due to the additional commitment and responsibilities that are expected of senior club members. Many students may feel alone and isolated when facing this hurdle, not realising that it is likely the Black Belts in their club have been through the same, or similar, experiences. When training gets tough - both physically and mentally - students need practical advice and support. This is not only important for them personally, but also for their clubs and for the future of Taekwon-Do in New Zealand.

Students may come to Taekwon-Do at any age, with many starting as children or teenagers. As any adult knows, youth face many challenges during their adolescent years. Most teenagers will, at some stage, experience competing school, work and social priorities, as well as a lack of confidence and low self-esteem. Youth may not feel comfortable discussing these difficulties with their instructors or other club members, and teenage bravado may lead to the false assumption that a lack of motivation is the only concern.

Ill health may also lead students to stop training. As a teenager I was quite prone to colds and ‘flus, and at Red Belt level came down with a bad case of Glandular Fever. As it was also a stressful time for me at school, I stopped training to recover and focus on my schoolwork. Having taken time off, my social life took over, and I found I lacked the motivation to return. This became harder to contemplate the longer I was away. After more than eight months of absence, I felt that going back would be too hard, and my mind and body had stopped wanting to return. That changed when someone I knew from Taekwon-Do asked me if I was still training. I thought about it and replied, “Yes”. At the next training session, I was back; ready to give it all I had.

Change of life transitions, whilst more obvious during the teenage years, can also occur throughout adulthood. Changes in employment, housing, relationships and family can all impact on focus and motivation.



A student who relocates to a different community for work or study may find joining a new club, with new routines, difficult. They may also find it difficult or impossible to find a new club within a convenient travelling distance. Starting a family can also have a huge impact on students' availability and commitment to training, with additional responsibilities at the club seeming too much of a burden. Female students, in particular, may find it hard to return to training following the physical (and for some psychological) impacts of pregnancy and childbirth. These factors make *The Hurdle* more difficult to overcome, but not impossible.

It is critical that instructors realise that for some students making a decision to stop training may appear permanent, but in fact only be temporary. An understanding of each student's behaviour and personality is therefore vital for instructors, and this can only come through a close association with that person. It is not enough for the instructor merely to train the student - at different times he/she must be prepared to act as a teacher, friend, disciplinarian and confidant. If clubs want to develop depth in the senior ranks, keeping in contact with former students and ensuring a "Do Jang is always open to you" policy may help ensure senior students are not permanently lost to the Art. Having a proactive and positive club environment will make it more likely that students facing *The Hurdle* will ultimately be retained, and with encouragement and support, goals become reachable, if not today, perhaps in the future.

Instructor Ian Campbell (IV Dan) agreed that prioritising became difficult during his teenage years, but said having other members of his family in Taekwon-Do helped keep up his interest and motivation. However, for him the connection to the Art was the physical. "In the early years it was the physical aspect of training kept that kept me going, and like a lot of sporting activities, Taekwon-do was a natural high. "As an individual matures, physically and mentally, so too does their understanding of Taekwon-do - the 'natural high' continues - this is one of the beauties of our martial art. "For me, a key aspect for enhancing motivation is for the instructor to give all students the same level of attention no matter what level, or capability, or rank," he said.

The 'natural high' to which Mr Campbell refers is caused by endorphins in the body. These endogenous opioid biochemical compounds are peptides produced by the pituitary gland and hypothalamus, and resemble other opiates in their abilities to produce analgesia and a sense of well-being - in other words, they work as natural pain-killers (*AllExperts, n.d.*). Performing continuous exercise over a long period of time, for example when running or training in martial arts, can lead to a gradual loss of the ability to feel pain, and often athletes experience a thrill of exhilaration and energy (*Allen, 2006*).



This is caused by the release of endorphins, which attach to receptors on the outer surfaces of brain cells, acting like chemical keys fitting into locks. If enough endorphins are inserted into the outer 'keyhole' of a nerve cell, that cell is unlikely to convey pain messages to the conscious part of the brain and will instead produce an overall feeling of euphoria (*Peak Performance, n.d.*).

While some students enjoy hard training, for others it is the physical aspects of Taekwon-Do that become increasingly more challenging when progressing from junior to senior grades. Like sports such as rugby and netball, Taekwon-Do involves skill, strength and fitness development, and improvements will be seen with regular training, albeit at different rates for different students. However, it should also be remembered that Taekwon-Do is more than just a sport. It is also an Art that requires mental as well as physical development. Each grade requires students to learn the names of techniques in Korean, a language quite unlike English in pronunciation and spelling. Students must also complete increasingly more complex theory examinations, including philosophy and history components.

In this way learning Taekwon-Do is more like learning a musical instrument - the theory and the practice are equally important and must be simultaneously developed. However, these requirements can prove a particular challenge for those with literacy limitations. One student, who did not wish to be named, said it was the strong use of theory that made him consider quitting. Having struggled with formal learning, he found this component very demanding. Taking up the offer of extra tuition at his club, as well as the support of his family, helped him with his study, which ultimately enabled him to overcome these difficulties and succeed.

While the instructor and the club environment are important, the most critical factor in overcoming *The Hurdle* and staying with Taekwon-Do is the individual student's attitude. In his book *Going for Black Belt*, Tony Gummerson (1990, p.95) says that: "The martial artist who wishes to achieve the highest level of performance must have well developed self-motivation. Top performers are able to pull themselves out of the depth of despair when things are not going well, giving support to the saying 'when the going gets tough - the tough get going' ... this capacity to persevere through adversity separates the great martial artists from the amateurs and also-rans."

Gummerson suggests that motivation has two components - internal motivation, which comes from the student's personal will to succeed, and external motivation, which arises from the encouragement and support of others, such as instructors, family and friends. The mind-body connection is a very powerful one. For everything you think in your mind, your body has a reaction, regardless of whether it is real or imagined. Those who think they can't cope, or who believe they aren't good enough, are much more likely to make mistakes and struggle than are those who feel confident and competent whilst training.



While internal motivation cannot be taught, instructors can assist with external motivation. This is particularly important for those students whose partners or families are not providing support and encouragement, which may make these students more vulnerable to the hurdle. Whatever the nature of the challenges you face, overcoming *The Hurdle* is about taking control of your life and making the decision to commit to Taekwon-Do. This mental application requires relaxation, confidence, and focus.

Relaxation: When you are relaxed, your mind is calm and your body is ready to go. Being relaxed will allow you to move with great strength and ease.

Confidence: Everyone has an ‘off day’ sometimes, and unfortunately sometimes this may happen at a competition or grading. Not letting a lapse in performance undermine your belief in your overall ability is at the core of this characteristic. When you’re playing well, you feel confident that no matter what you are up against, you are going to come out on top.

Focus: Focus means concentrating on the task at hand, and being oblivious to everything else going on around you. When you are completely focused, you are totally absorbed in the moment; you have no memory of the past and no qualms about the future. Putting the distractions of home, work and other anxieties out of your mind while training will put you in the right frame of mind and body to accomplish great things. When this happens training becomes natural, all your moves are smooth, and for that time your training seems like the greatest thing in the world.

Instructors can do a lot to assist students. Providing senior training sessions to ensure students have opportunities to perfect their techniques will increase confidence as well as ability. Encouraging students to proceed to grading and competition, and ensuring critique is constructive and precise will also assist students to make progress. However, instructors need to remember that sometimes students may interpret correction as criticism. The person you see at training is just the tip of the iceberg, and there may be significant challenges taking place in other aspects of their life, which could be affecting their training.



Students facing *The Hurdle* should recognise that the Art of Taekwon-Do requires more than physical prowess and technical ability. A change in mental attitude must also occur. Almost all students will struggle with competing social, family, health and employment demands at some stage in their training. What marks the successful student is the decision to take command over their lives and their emotions. Start with a positive attitude and make sure you practice outside the club environment, to improve your physical ability.

Remember “self-training is a test of self-discipline” (*McPhail, 1995, p.4*). When you are in control of your life, your training will be more enjoyable - this is critical because if you don't enjoy Taekwon-Do, your future in it will be limited. Try not to take criticism and correction personally. You cannot learn if you do not know where you are going wrong. ***Remember, if your instructor is trying to help you improve, they obviously think you are worth the investment.***

Finally, if you are facing *The Hurdle*, it is important to remember that your Taekwon-Do future is not up to your instructor, it is in your own hands. While, as Master McPhail said, “it's the instructor's job to try and push you to your maximum” (*1995, p.6*), it is you that is the end product. Don't be afraid to ask for help and support from your family, your friends, your instructors, or from fellow club members. And when that hurdle looks too high to overcome, remember there are others who have faced it before you and have made the leap - you can too.



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