The first and most important criteria for promotion is performance and technique. Can you successfully apply your moves in training in the dojo against people in the belt category above yours? Or, for those who like to compete, have you consistently excelled in local competitions within your current rank? To this fundamental demand there are some other considerations. There may be some handicaps that a student has that soften our demand for performance. The age of the student, for example a 55 year old blue belt student wouldn,t be expected to tap out a 22 year old blue belt.We also look at the breadth and precision of the student's technique. If he consistently wins in class with only a few sloppy moves from a limited number of positions due mostly to advantages in strength and size,we will be reluctant to promote him until he improves his technical repertoire.The vast majority of your training years will be at black belt level and beyond, so the amount of time taken to acquire the various early belts is not a significant issue. In all truth, you do most of your learning over a life time post-black belt. Accordingly people grow into their belts over time.

Barney's Brief History of the Belt Ranking System

The modern martial arts belt ranking system first started emerging in 1907 when the creator of Judo, Jigoro Kano, introduced the iconic Judo uniform and belt. Before that, his students practiced in traditional Japanese kimonos. However, back then there existed only two belt colors: white and black. White belts were those in the process of learning the fundamentals while black belts were students who mastered the basics, knew how to use them functionally and were ready to pursue Judo on a more serious and advanced level. The white coloring represented purity, avoidance of ego, and simplicity while the black symbolized a fuller repertoire of knowledge.

A popular belief within the martial arts community is that every student started off with a white belt then gradually it darkened in color from all the blood, sweat and tears of training. However, there exists no real historical evidence of this practice and it is generally regarded to be little more than a myth. Here is a list of the traditional Judo ranks:

6th grade (rokyu)

5th grade (gokyu)

4th grade (yonkyu)

3rd grade (sankyu)

2nd grade (nikyu)

1st grade (ikkyu)

1st degree (shodan)

2nd degree (nidan)

3rd degree (sandan)

4th degree (yodan)

5th degree (godan)

6th degree (rokudan)

7th degree (shichidan)

8th degree (hachidan)

9th degree (kudan)

10th degree (judan)

It was not until 1935 that other colored belts such as yellow, orange, green, blue and purple entered the ranking system. Mikonosuke Kawaishi is generally regarded as the originator of this practice when he started teaching Judo in Paris in 1935. He believed western students would show greater progress if they had a visible system of many colored belts recognizing achievement and providing regular incentives. This is very interesting because in many ways it reflects the contrasting views of the east and west. For example, people from Japan and other Asian countries are known for having a high degree of patience and a "long term" perspective of life. On the other hand, Americans have a reputation of thriving on quick results and focusing heavily on the "short term" future, made evident by the modern practice of black belt commercialization. This explains why Jigoro Kano never felt the need to have any more belt colors other than white and black while Judo was still only practiced in Japan. It seems as though the in-between plays a much more important role than the beginning and end in the eastern cultures, as shown by the way they practice their martial arts.

As Judo grew in popularity both within and outside of Japan, other martial arts began adopting Jigoro Kano's gi, belt, and ranking system for their own uses. Interestingly, if one were to randomly ask a person today the first thing that comes to mind after hearing "Japanese fighting style" he or she would most likely say "Karate" and envision a black belt practitioner donning a gi, when in actuality Karate originated outside of Japan and had nothing to do with the gi or belt system until the later days of its development.

Eventually, groundwork specialist Mitsuyo Maeda made his way to Brazil in 1914 and passed his knowledge of Judo to the Gracie family (and others), where over time it was modified and changed until it became a completely different art—Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu. Naturally, the gi and belt stuck around, serving as an eternal reminder of BJJ's roots.

These days, Jigoro Kano's contributions to the martial arts continue to live on. Enter any martial arts academy, be it for Tae Kwon Do, Jiu-Jitsu, or some other style, and you'll most

likely see students wearing the traditional Judo uniform (or some variant of it) with various colored belts around their waists; striving to one day attain the coveted “black belt” status—an often misunderstood ranking within the martial arts community. This is largely due to the influx of martial arts films in the 1970s which often depicted fictional heroes boasting black belts in Karate and Kung-Fu; thus being unstoppable hand-to-hand combatants–a Hollywood vision that couldn’t be farther from reality. In fact, these films became so popular that commercialized martial arts schools(“McDojos”) began appearing all over the country with intentions of profiting from them, and continue to fool the uninformed to this day. These illegitimate academies are notorious for offering lackluster instruction and promising “street-ready black belt status” in just a few short years, all while charging preposterously high membership fees. As one can tell just by looking at the average “8 year old black belt,” this deceptive practice has heavily degraded the reputation of Karate, Tae Kwon Do, and other traditional arts.

Belt promotions themselves are a subject of particularly high interest in the martial arts. As a student, one is always wondering what needs to be done to reach the next level and attain a higher ranking. Going back to Eastern philosophy, many people (mostly westerners) think more about the end than the in-between. They place too much focus on the “status symbol” of being at an advanced level, and not enough on actual training progress. It’s a bit cliché, but the saying “the journey is more important than the destination” applies here. Requisites for belt promotion vary from instructor to instructor. A student must be able to execute techniques properly against a fully resisting opponent rather than simply demonstrating a predetermined set of techniques to the instructor (“kata”) or taking a “belt test.” If there’s anything we can learn from the McDojos, it’s that upholding standards, even at the expense of short-term monetary gain, is important in belt promotions.