

United States Martial Arts Association

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THE PERSONAL TOUCH IN MARTIAL ARTS PROMOTIONS

For many years I was the President of the largest Judo organization ever formed in our country. Founding and building that organization was a long and arduous 50 year struggle. Every skill I learned during those 50 years of building Martial Arts leaders and champions is being used right now to build our United States Martial Arts Association.

The results have been greater than even my always enthusiastic and optimistic expectations. In 13 years we have grown to over 1,500 clubs administering the ranks and other services of over 1,000 different Martial Arts to nearly 10,000 members in 23 countries. We have a winning formula going, **and personal attention to every member is at the heart of it all.**

I continually apply the personal touch with every one of our members I work with. The personal touch as far as Martial Arts promotions are concerned means that the national leader must know where every one of his club instructors stands for promotion. The national leader must be the Sensei for thousands of club leaders (please see my essay, "The Collapse of the Sensei System"). Frequent review of individual records, discussions at meetings and tournaments, and constant personal attention are required. The leader must truly be a Sensei, watching over every one of his people. The personal touch must be used!

I do this by attending our USMA International Training Camp each summer, by traveling all over the country on seminar tours during the year, and by a constant flow of letters, email, newsletters, and phone calls to our club instructors and members. My only regret is that there aren't enough hours in the day to do more. It has been my custom for many years to work long hours seven days a week. I still do, it's a part of running our Association.

The biggest battle we had in former years was getting our teachers up to the rank they deserve. In some cases, especially in Judo and Aikido, customs for promotion are totally unlike the homeland of these arts, Japan. In Japan, in 1951, when I started Judo, there were 2,700 Judoists of 6th Degree Black Belt rank under the age of 30! And mind you, that was 54 years ago. The custom in Japan is that every teacher should hold teacher's rank, which is 6th Degree or higher. By contrast, in America it is not unusual for a teacher who has been training and teaching for 30 or even 40 years to be a 2nd or 3rd Degree, a real injustice.

This is a truly ridiculous and distressing situation. Therefore, we worked very hard for many years to correct this unfairness. One of my methods in the old Judo association was to promote members of our old national promotion committee, the politicians who always seek and gravitate to national positions, to 7th and 8th Degree. Some of them were less than well qualified, but I felt that if I could get them up high enough, then they wouldn't resist promoting deserving teachers to teacher's rank. This may explain to you why some of those people, who haven't done as much as you have to develop the Martial Arts, hold such high ranks. Although this was partially successful, there was much bitter opposition to fair promotions. Often, politicians who have attained high rank don't want anyone else to be promoted. They always harp on "standards" although for the most part not one of them has ever taken an examination. In this regard, please see my essay "The Story of Martial Arts Rank Standards."

The tradition of the Martial Arts, and it is a good one, is that no person should ask for promotion in rank. At the same time, no Martial Artist should attempt to refuse to be promoted by his or her teacher. The ideal situation exists when every person is carefully watched over by their teacher and promoted when they are ready. The main criteria for promotion should be time in grade, years of service, and of course other technical requirements. In another essay, I have described the meaning of the numbered ranks. Generally, 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Degrees are students, 4th and 5th Degrees are skillful practitioners, 6th and 7th are teachers, 8th is an important leader, and 9th and 10th are masters. Usually, but not always, a person who has worked 30 years or more should hold teacher's rank, 6th or higher, especially if he or she is in fact a teacher.

To be sure, these customs vary a greatly among the thousand Martial Arts practiced by USMA members today. Some arts don't even have numbered ranks (the numbered rank custom is only about 120 years old). In many other cases a leader will start his own Martial Art, and will designate himself as 10th degree when he does. This is certainly understandable and acceptable. The granting of high ranks varies greatly. Some systems of Karate have many 10th degrees. In the case of Judo, on the other hand, there are only six living 10th Degrees in the entire world (Anton Geesink of Holland, Henri Courtine of France, Ichiro Abe, Toshiro Daigo and Osawa of Japan, and myself), and only about 50 leaders of 9th degree rank, as far as I know..

You should also understand fully that we will never permit Martial Artists of any other nation to dominate our unique USMA promotion system. Just as the days of the single Martial Arts organization are numbered, so is foreign control of American Martial Arts and Martial Artists. In the past, American Martial Arts have been famous for being subservient to oriental teachers. This situation has been commercially exploited for the past 50 years. Often, oriental Martial Artists receive what we call "airplane promotions." They climb on a plane in the Far East as 3rd Degrees, and land in American to seek their fortunes as 7th Degrees or even 9th Degree Grandmasters. The fact is that we have leaders in this country in many Martial Arts who have worked harder, studied more, and know more, after 40 or 45 years of training, than foreigners who have very high rank after only 25 years of training. We respect all Martial Artists, the world over. But we accept domination from no one. We have come of age, period.

With this explanation, it may be easier for you to understand our totally unique USMA promotional system. I believe that for the first time in American Martial Arts we have a fair and equitable promotion system, totally free of politics, because our Association does not have a political structure. We respect every leader and student of the Martial Arts, regardless of their rank. We also intend to stick very closely to our personal touch program of promoting people for long service to our Association and the Martial Arts.

In your own case, think back over your Martial Arts history. Have you been treated fairly by your Martial Arts leaders? If you have 25 or 30 years in your art and are a teacher, do hold teacher's rank of 6th Degree or higher? If not, you have been short changed. The USMA was created to help you. I invite you to study our materials, especially several of the essays I have written on Martial Arts ranks, and join with us in the growth of a unified system for American Martial Arts. The future is indeed bright. Thank you for your work in our chosen field, the Martial Arts. Please call upon me at any time for information or assistance.

You are always in my heart.
O-Sensei