

Judo's Kyu Grade System

Although Kano had adopted and put into use, the Kyu / Dan grading system from other sources, there was at the time in 1883, no visual way of differentiating between the Kyu or Dan grade holders in Judo. All practitioners regardless of rank, wore a white belt until 1886, when the first formal awarding and wearing of black belts to recognise Dan grade holders occurred.

Therefore, Kano had seen the need to distinguish between beginning and advanced students. Beginners or Mudansha (ones without Dan), wore white belts (Shiro No Obi) and were considered unranked i.e. pure, empty. However within this classification there were different levels known as Kyu.

The Kyu grade system used in various other areas of Japanese Culture, such as the logical board games, Go or Shogi, could contain many levels of Kyu (some up to 30) and this varied from one area of culture to another. However Kano, for the purpose of his Kodokan Judo syllabus, originally settled on just 6 Kyu levels before Dan levels.

New students (Nyumonsha) started grading at the highest Kyu, the level decreasing with experience, skill and proficiency to 1st Kyu, the last level before promotion to 1st Dan, the level of rank symbolised by the black belt.

Kano's adoption of the Kyu system was based on keeping his students interested in the training of Judo. He realised early on in the formation of Judo, that beginners, often young college students, found training hard and difficult in the first few years and that he needed a system by which students could see progression being made and targets being set and achievable, a system that students would be motivated by and eager to learn and better themselves. This system would incorporate regular incentives and time periods between grades.

By using this system, it was understood that Kyu levels were only an introduction to the more advanced training from 1st Dan level upwards. The Kodokan Kyu syllabus being devised so as to be progressive in itself, from less strenuous, to technically difficult, to advanced. Therefore Judo's Kyu system was a sort of count down of basics to beginning formal Judo studies at "Dan" level.

This original 6 Kyu system is still used by several worldwide Judo associations today for adult practitioners.

However, Kyu as well as meaning "class" or "rank", can also mean "ninth". Many have adopted a belief that Kano, although originally settling on a 6 Kyu system, in fact created a syllabus of nine-ninths study to the basic Judo syllabus, before an individual could attain the "Dan" rank. Therefore this evolving system of Kano's could be increased to 9 Kyu levels to compensate for the increase of students with Kano's future visions of other national Dojo and of future expansion of Judo worldwide.

Judo at this time was conducted in small classes where everyone knew each other, therefore progression could be made quickly, an increase in future larger numbers

practicing, could possibly allow for breaking down the syllabus further to allow for practitioners of differing abilities, practicing together in larger numbers, i.e. beginner, intermediate, advanced. Therefore, via this system, the “10th” Kyu would symbolise a student as un-graded or nothing studied, nothing achieved, a new beginner (Nyumonsha).

The 10 Kyu Grades – Where Used

The Kyu grades in order, being titled as follows : -

Nyumonsha – Beginners : -

10th Kyu – Jūkyū (十級じゅうきゅう)

Mudansha : - One’s Without Rank

9th Kyu – Kyukyū (九級くきゅう)

8th Jyu – Hachikyū (八級はちきゅう)

7th Kyu – Nanakyū (七級ななきゅう)

6th Kyu – Rokkyū (六級ろっきゅう)

5th Kyu – Gokyū (五級ごきゅう)

4th Kyu – Yonkyū (四級よんきゅう)

3rd Kyu – Sankyū (三級さんきゅう)

2nd Kyu – Nikyū (二級にきゅう)

1st Kyu – Ikkyū (一級いっきゅう)

The Introduction Of Coloured Belts

Again, it was not Kano who devised the coloured belt system used to identify proficiency and progression of Kyu grades. This was started much later after Judo had spread outside of Japan and was being practised in the western world.

It is generally regarded that Mikonosuke Kawaishi, 7th Dan Kodokan, was the first to introduce the various coloured belts for Kyu grades in Europe, when he started teaching in Paris in 1935. He realised that the westerners held different idealisms to that of the east. Eastern practitioners were more akin to an ethos of self-betterment and a way of life through training. Western cultures were impatient about progress and required a visible system at each level to gauge their progression, something to recognise achievement at regular intervals. Kawaishi felt that these western students would show greater progress if a system of coloured belts was used.

This “Kawaishi” Kyu system included white (Shiro-Obi), yellow (Kiiro-Obi), orange (Daidaiiro Obi), green (Midori Obi), blue (Aoiro-Obi), and purple (Murasaki-Obi...see note) belts before the traditional brown (Chairo-Obi) and black belts (Kuro-Obi).

Note : - there seems to be mixed research and agreement on the colour purple being used as a belt, it has never actually been confirmed, although some associations in Europe seem to have adopted it. Generally it is considered that the colour was just

blue and the colour purple was a mistaken shade or derivative of this colour depending on the belt maker and on what source you read from, the colour violet has also been mentioned, another shade of blue.

Likewise, Kawaishi's system of coloured belts would allow for the continued expansion of Judo in Europe on a wider basis. Therefore when students from others areas met who did not know each other, they could instantly recognise others of similar rank and abilities, a sort of benchmark as to where they were within their training. They would then choose to train with similar graded people, the colour visually signifying junior or senior status to them.

However Kawaishi cannot be granted the original idea of using coloured belts, information as to the actual individual does not seem to be known. However, the London Budokwai, formed in 1918, began using forms of coloured belts to distinguish Kyu levels as early as 1922. Again the Seattle Nisei Judo Club, the oldest Judo club in the west, began using forms of coloured belts in the late 1920's.

Today's Kyu Systems

Since Kawaishi's system of Kyu grade recognition, just about every country has adopted a coloured belt Kyu system. There is no actual international agreement on order of colours used to signify the Kyu rank and many countries use a variety of colours to denote the same, sometimes combining two or more colours on a belt. This can also occur within a single country that has several Judo associations within it. Different colours may be used for different Kyu rank.

Likewise, the Kyu system itself can vary from country to country, most start with at least 6 Kyu ranks and go up to about 10. Again some associations impart more Kyu ranks and even half Kyu ranks, as steps between Kyu grades.

Yet again, most countries or associations use varying coloured belts or stripes / tabs on belts to differentiate between junior and senior grades. The stripes or tabs being disbanded when the practitioner has reached the adult stage and graded as a senior. Often the junior grade system is given a different title to that of Kyu, as an example, the British Judo Association uses the term "Mon" meaning gate for children aged 8 – 14 or 16.

Again, such is the popularity of Judo today, that other Judo ranking systems are now being used, as the intake of children has become younger. As an example, the British Judo Association uses the "Kano" system for children aged 5 – 7, this is non competitive, but allows for them to study simple actions and refereeing terms and then demonstrate them. Special certificates and badges are awarded for successes in the Kano examination system. However, there is no actual stipulation at what age a child can start Judo, the actual preference is up to the individual club instructors. Some individual clubs even run schemes for younger children based on "Judo Play" games.

Many Dojo in Japan itself, still use only the white and black belt, to distinguish between Kyu and Dan grades. Some Dojo have incorporated a brown belt to designate the practitioner is nearing completion of the basic syllabus and will shortly be achieving a Dan grade. Some Dojo use a green belt to signify the practitioner has

completed a year of practice. Some Dojo use both the green belt to identify intermediate practitioners and brown to identify advanced practitioners of the Kyu grade system. Whilst larger Japanese organisations, dealing with mainly schoolchildren's Judo also use a full range of coloured belts.

However, all systems using coloured belts, regardless of the colours used, seem to denote the brown belt as the colour that precedes attainment of the black belt (Dan grade status).

The Kyu Syllabus

Again, the Kyu grade syllabus is not standardised internationally or even nationally, most Judo associations utilise their own syllabus that contains, theory, terminology, throws, hold downs, chokes, strangles, arm locks, combinations and competitively gained promotions.

Most Junior syllabi run along similar lines to the adult syllabi, however safety is linked into these syllabi with the requirements of competitive Junior gradings often omitting the chokes, strangles and arm locks that are permissible in adult promotions, but there may be a requirement to know them in their theory examination.

The thought process of "Kawaishi" used throughout, is that the natural progression of the coloured belts become darker as the student progress's from beginner to advanced practitioner and his knowledge and skills increase, until finally he attains the much sought after black belt. However at this stage, it is generally accepted that the student has achieved completion of the basic Judo syllabus of that association and that their learning and study of Judo has only just begun.

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