

**A SPECIAL REPORT  
FROM THE MARTIAL ARTS PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS GROUP**

# **Choosing a Martial Arts School**

*A Practical Guide to Selecting a Professional, High-Quality  
Martial Arts School*

I want you to know that I respect you. You see, I assume that if you are reading this book, you are searching for a martial arts school and are looking for the benefits involved. Or, if you are a martial arts instructor, then you are looking to raise your standards. It is this spirit of improvement that makes you and I kindred spirits. In the martial arts we have a term which means constant and never ending improvement, “Kaizen”,. This is the spirit which martial artists cultivate. It is my goal with this report to de-mystify choosing a martial arts school. I hope to give you some practical tools to making an informed decision. In the process, I hope to raise the standard for the industry.

*The martial arts can truly change your life for the better.* For many, they become one of the most exciting and rewarding experiences of their lives. ***But for the uninitiated, entering into the world of martial arts can be mysterious, frustrating and even laced with genuine danger.*** Throughout this report, I will relate many of the negative sides of the martial arts, not to scare you, but to get you to ask informed questions. *The ultimate goal of this book is to give you the information you need to select the right school for you, so you can become a happy and successful martial artist.* But that requires some straightforward and opinionated discussions about what is not right and even plain dangerous in the martial arts. I am going to arm you with the right questions to ask to be an informed consumer. If you are asking the right questions, then fraud and un-professionalism in the martial arts industry cannot flourish. I apologize in advance to any who I might offend, but if I can spare at least one person a negative experience or an unnecessary injury, then it is worth the controversy.

I was pleased to be asked to author this report, but the actual inspiration for this report came when I had family members and friends in different states inquire about lessons for their selves and their children. Having been an active member in the martial arts community for more than 26 years, I know the ins and outs and was happy to call prospective studios to try and find a right fit. WOW, what an eye opener. Out of hundreds of studios, there were very few that I would even consider for my friends and family. There is a wide variation of standards and professionalism. Without prior knowledge, how can one sort out the frauds from the quality?

I have seen people receive insanely different impressions of martial arts when they go to choose a school. For some, choosing a martial arts school is a happy experience. They walk into a professional school with high standards and receive a warm welcome and get all the information they need to make an informed decision, and thus are off to a good start. For others, they walk into an inferior martial arts school and receive an absolute nightmare of un-professionalism. This negative experience tends to jade people and they are unlikely to ever try martial arts again.

Though millions of people across the U.S. have tried martial arts, as of 2002 still less than 1% of the population actively practices martial arts. What accounts for this dismal statistic? I believe it is a combination of 1) An un-regulated industry that is rampant with fraud and incompetence 2) A lack of understanding about what the martial

arts can provide and 3) an industry that is still in it's infancy and is struggling to mature. As a career martial artist, I get to see all the good side of martial arts. I know how valuable a practice they can be. So when I see statistics like the ones above, or I hear a tale of un-professionalism or incompetence in our industry, I shudder to think of how many good people will be deterred from taking up the martial arts. The good news is that the best academies are pushing the standards higher and are on the verge of an industry wide revolution that can change the face of martial arts forever. The bad news is that there are still more than a few boneheads out there. Caveat Emptor. But looks can be deceiving and if you do not know anything about the martial arts, you could pass up a high quality school and instead choose one that doesn't satisfy your needs.

I genuinely believe that the martial arts, correctly practiced, can be a wonderful, life-changing experience. Martial arts can provide unique benefits that no other activity can achieve. For me, the martial arts is a way of life that has provided richness and context to my life. I believe that if everyone were genuinely acquainted with the benefits of the martial arts, most people would take up the practice. People studying martial arts means people who are confident, healthy, and able to protect themselves from random violence. It means people who have greater emotional control, a greater mind-body awareness, and greater control over their lives. Children studying martial arts means fewer children who are victimized, and it means healthier happier children who are more resistant to negative peer pressure. It means children who are more polite, achieve more in school and who display respect toward their parents. In short, *people studying martial arts means a stronger community and a greater quality of life for many.*

If you find the right school and the right instructors, I am convinced that you will find martial arts a rewarding experience that you will want to continue for the rest of your life. Armed with the right questions and the right knowledge you will be successful in choosing a martial arts school that is right for you. As one of my colleagues put it, "You are climbing a very long ladder. You had better make sure you put the ladder against the right wall before you reach the top." I hope this report helps you choose the right "wall."

To your success,

*David Neal Brown*

Note: At the end of the book is a list of questions to ask prospective academies. If you are in a hurry, skip to the end and take that list with you as you visit prospective schools and use it to help you make your choice.

*“The longest journey begins with a single step”  
- Ancient Chinese proverb*

*“May you step in the right direction.”  
- David Neal Brown*

## **Professionalism Is the First Consideration**

(and often the last)

The tendency of people who are choosing a martial arts school, is to start by looking for a style (i.e. Karate, KungFu, Judo etc). As a lifelong martial artist, I have my own style biases and I do think style is an important consideration in choosing a martial arts school. However, as an educator and businessman I have to admit that ***it is not the most important*** consideration in choosing a martial arts school. I believe **the place to start in choosing any martial arts school is to look at the schools level of professionalism**. In my career as a martial artist, I have learned in people’s garages and I have learned in high-end, flashy schools. I have learned from excellent teachers and I have learned from terrible instructors. And though I am passionate about numerous different styles of martial arts, I believe that the quality of instruction and the school practices were far more influential and important to me in the long run than the style itself.

I can almost hear the shouts of protests from martial artists who are right now thinking; “But, but, but my style is the best.” Maybe so, but put that thought on the back burner for a while. You see, if you start with questions about professional teaching standards and ethical business practices, you can quickly weed out inferior schools and then make a good decision about what style feels right to you. Next you will find some of the questions you need to ask to determine if a school has an adequate professional standard.

# Professional Teaching Standards

*Ask these questions to determine if a prospective academy has high professional teaching standards.*

*Are you and your staff are screened and guaranteed free from criminal records?*

Unfortunately, not all instructors are decent people. You should ask if your prospective academy has a systematic way of making sure that all the instructors are good role models and are free from convictions of assault and abuse. Like all segments of society, there are rapists and pedophiles in the martial arts. What is unique about a martial arts instructor is the level of authority and influence they have. Many students, adults and children alike, look up to their instructors as heroes. You do not want to subject yourself or your children to someone who could be potentially dangerous. *If the school owner cannot enthusiastically tell you how she/he screens and selects staff, then you should not consider studying at that academy.*

*Do you or any of your staff have any gang or outlaw biker affiliation?  
Are you or any of your staff involved in illegal drug trafficking?*

It should go without saying that studying martial arts with gang members or outlaw bikers is just plain stupid. These are most likely the kind of people that you want to learn how to defend yourself from in the first place. Ask and make sure that none of the instructors in the school hold any of these affiliations or values. This may sound funny, after all martial arts are designed to build character. However, they can also attract a less mature element that harbors fantasies about hurting others. These people often take the wrong path; the dark side of the martial arts. While these people may present a high level of bravado about being “street worthy”, this is always a mask of insecurity and an indication of lack of true skill. But some people think it is cool to play the “tough guy” and so they find ways to get into trouble and justify it through their martial arts.

It is within your right and in fact, your obligation to find out about the background of the school owner and his/her instructors. If you think they have any gang or drug trafficking involvement, run, don't walk away! If they claim to have had affiliations in past but are now “clean” and “reformed,” consider this; most gangs will not simply allow you to “resign.” Once affiliated, it is usually for life. As well, it is not likely that a person who held the values that lead them to join a gang in the first place is smart enough to improve their character to the point that you would want to study with them. These people are not genuine martial artists. *Seek out genuine martial artists that are good role models and who are just as committed to developing character as fighting techniques.*

***Do you have an all-adult staff?***

You would be amazed at how many school owners make this mistake. I am all for having young adults assist in classes to help them learn leadership and communication, but what do you think happens when you put a teenage instructor in charge of a child. You guessed it: a whole lot of chaos and precious little instruction. Ideally, martial arts are a significant body of knowledge that takes years to learn. Putting a teenager in charge of a class demeans the position that martial arts instructors should hold. ***In a high-quality academy, the instructor is a highly trained professional.*** Teenage instructors also indicate a superficial curriculum is being taught. Real martial arts take years to learn. Learning to teach takes even longer.

As a parent you want an adult with maturity looking after your child. You want them to be nurturing to their self-esteem and age appropriate in their instruction techniques. As an adult, you want an instructor with enough life experience so they can relate to you and make your training relevant to your life. This only happens in academies that are professional educational facilities. This can only happen with an all adult staff. Ask if the prospective academy has a policy of staff being at least 18 years of age.

***Do you have a systematic way of teaching staff how to teach?***

It is one thing to be able to do an impressive kick. It is quite another to teach someone else to do one. Standards of instruction can vary widely unless the school has a systematic way of teaching staff how to teach. As a former educator, someone who has worked in the public schools, I was one of the first of a number of instructors across the nation that began implementing courses to specifically teach instructional technology. Since implementation, I have observed a remarkable quality difference.

The standard in many academies is to take the student who has been hanging around the longest and put them in charge of a class. This creates substandard instruction. Teaching is a science and an art. Academies that focus on teaching their staff ***how*** to teach will be able to deliver a higher level of skill to you than staff who have earned their position by default or for their physical skills alone. Look for academies that view themselves as professional educators and view their school's purpose as to teach you professionally. Make sure you are getting instruction from an educational institution, not a club.

*Ask if your prospective academy has an instructor-mentoring program. Ask how much "on the job training" is required to hold an instructor title and what professional standards are required of instructors.* I personally require that all my staff undergo 500 hours on the job training in order to be qualified as an instructor. This is in addition to their martial arts training. This is quite a lot by most standards, but what I have found is that it produces very high quality instructors. It produces instructors who can effectively communicate their art and provide a high level of service. If an academy does not have strong answers about how they train staff, then you most likely will not receive adequate

instruction. And if they do have a strong instructor-mentoring program, you may find that you might want to become an instructor someday.

### ***May I watch a class?***

This may seem like a perfectly reasonable request. But do not be surprised if very few academies will allow this. There are three main reasons for this. 1) A good instructor does not want his class disturbed by curious onlookers. 2) Most instructors are worried that you will not understand what you see. Some people will sit on the side lines and think, “that doesn’t look very hard” when in fact they may underestimate the amount of talent it takes or vice versa, someone may be watching and think; “I could never do that” when in fact it may not be that difficult and *a good instructor could mentor you to success*. 3) No professional academy owner wants people walking in and out of their space with out them getting the respect they deserve. So if they are ***a professional academy, they will schedule an appointment for you to see the facilities and have a dedicated staff member there to greet you and to answer your questions.***

Where I don’t outright object to people watching my classes, I don’t recommend it. If you want to know what is going on, you need to get up and move your body. Likewise, instructors need to evaluate you to see if you are qualified. All academies should have some form of introduction. This may range from one lesson to one month. This will give you a good idea on how lessons are taught and how you feel in the academy. One note of caution: it is a common practice to have a low-price introductory program as a loss leader (it gets you in the door) and then after the lesson you are presented with a much higher-priced package. I am a believer in making the price consistent. In other words, if your introductory lesson is one lesson, it should cost the same amount as one normal lesson. If your introductory course is one month, then it should cost the same amount as one month of tuition. If you have any doubt, ask about the regular tuition.

### ***What is your graduation rate?***

As one of my colleagues put it, his instructor walked out in front of a class of 100 and said: “Out of this class most of you will drop out by green belt. Of the rest, most won’t even get to brown belt. At most one of you will get to black belt.” Now, there are still folks out there that think “Gee, that’s pretty cool. Must mean they have some pretty tough black belts.” Get real! They probably have few or no black belts, their black belts are probably arrogant and they have most likely driven off many potentially good students. Consider this, if you were applying to Harvard and you asked what their graduation rate was, and they told you it was 1%, would you think they were a good university? Would you think that 1% was smarter than the other 99%? I don’t think so. Harvard has an excellent graduation rate - over 90%. The goal of every martial arts academy should be to get you to your highest level of skill possible. Ask about your prospective academies graduation rate. Ask what number of students who enroll who actually become black belts. The reaction that the instructor gives you will give you a good indication of the attitude of their school. If they expressly state their goal is to help

you reach a high level of skill (Black Belt) and they are endeavoring to get all students there, then mark that down as a definite plus for that academy.

### ***What is your quit rate?***

Ask for published statistics on how many people drop out each month. This will tell you the real story about what is going on in the business. Most instructors won't have the guts to tell you honestly what their quit rate is. If they do have the guts, good for them. They probably have good classroom management and a dynamic program. Just how important is this statistic? Well, you decide. If everyone who tries the program doesn't like it, what would it take for you to like it anyway? ***A high quit rate is a danger sign.*** If the quit rate is high, look for potential pitfalls before you sign on to a school.

Even great businesses do not keep all their customers, so if an academy has a retention rate above 90% then they must be doing something extraordinary to keep their students. ***A low quit rate means the programs they offer are well run and provide a great deal of value and meaning to their students. An academy with a low quit rate deserves your attention.***

Common mistakes school owners make that cause drop out are

- 1) They try to teach everything too quickly which causes overwhelm.
- 2) They don't have advanced curriculum for students when they reach advanced ranks
- 3) Poor teaching practices leading to injuries
- 4) They practice excellence by exclusion.

### ***Do you practice "Excellence by Exclusion" or "Excellence by Inclusion"?***

You need to know what the academies underlying teaching philosophy is. Some instructors loathe beginners. I'm not kidding. They think beginners are beneath them and they treat them like dirt. These are the ones who take beginning students and throw them on a floor with all other students and say "follow along." These instructors tend not to acknowledge the students until they have "been around for a while" They want to see if you can "take it" before they are willing to acknowledge you. This is what we call excellence by exclusion. In other words, "they don't develop strong students, they eliminate the weak ones." It is not teaching to take a natural athlete or fighter and show them some techniques. *Teaching is taking any individual regardless of their level of physical fitness, their outlook, or stage in life and taking them to the next level.*

The first sign of the academy's underlying philosophy is diversity. If you look around a prospective academy and you see a handful of athletes who won't give you the time of day, if the students all look and talk like the head instructor, then they are probably practicing "excellence by exclusion." If the atmosphere does not seem inviting to beginners, if you are not allowed to ask questions, or if the staff lacks diversity, then this is a warning sign. *In contrast, an academy that promotes "excellence by inclusion" will promote diversity. If you look around and see a wide variety of skill levels, ages, attitudes and professions, this is a good sign.* If the staff is diverse, this is a good sign. What diversity indicates is that the underlying philosophy of the academy is to teach people; ALL PEOPLE. For that reason, they are going to have teaching systems in place

that will serve you no matter what your level of experience, age, outlook, or natural ability.

The second sign of the academy's underlying philosophy is how you are introduced to the academy. In order for you to be successful, you need graduated demands. That is, the instructors' expectations should increase over time. You need a careful introduction to martial arts whether you intend to be the next Bruce Lee or you are a middle-aged couch potato just looking for a little distraction. I am not trying to demean you, but more attention up front means you get to ask questions and acclimate at a comfortable pace. As you grow, more should be expected of you. I have heard more than a few horror stories of people who, on their FIRST day of lessons, are thrown into the ring for full contact sparring with the instructor or senior student who then proceeds to knock the snot out of them. The people I have met who have experienced this, don't want anything to do with sparring or with martial arts. This is just plain stupid.

Ask what kind of introduction you can expect. If the academy has a systematic way in which they introduce you gradually to the martial arts and if they are genuinely eager to help you get acquainted with the customs and practices of the school, then mark this down as a plus. Ask specifically if the academy practices "excellence by exclusion" or "excellence by inclusion." *Is the academy diverse? Will they help you learn? If they are interested in helping you, at whatever age and whatever shape you are in, then make a note that this is a professional school.*

### ***What is your ranking system like?***

In the west, people readily identify martial arts with colored belts. When the term Black Belt is used, most people have at least some image about a martial artist with a high level of skill. But truthfully, colored belts are new (within fifty years) to the martial arts. Originally the belt was used to keep the gi (practice uniform) closed. Over time the white belt became worn and dirty and eventually turned black. That is the origin of the term black belt. Later the founder of Judo, Jigaro Kano, implemented a system of ranking using colored belts. This system was expanded to include many different colored belts and became so popular in the US that it is considered standard today.

But the subject of belts and rank can cause much controversy and confusion. Here is something to consider. Many styles do not use belts at all. Different styles have different ways of designating rank, time of study, and skill achievement. Some styles even start with a black belt and white belt is considered a sign of mastery. Some styles may have 20 degrees of black belt and for others they may not designate degrees at all. Some styles that traditionally have never had belts or ranks are adopting them and others who traditionally had belts and ranking are abandoning them. ***Do not be fooled by choosing the highest degree black belt you can find.*** If one instructor down the street says he has an eighth degree black belt and another says he has "a discipleship title," you have absolutely no way to judge which instructor really knows their stuff better. To make matters more confusing, many instructors promote themselves or just flat out lie about their rank. Ranks are often political or fictitious and they do not necessarily reflect skill. They are a poor indicator of whether or not you should study with an instructor.

***The truth is that rank matters only within the school. In other words, it should be a tool for the instructor to divide skill levels and to create motivation.***

Every academy you visit should be able to clearly and concisely describe the ranking system they use, be it belts, sashes, levels or whatever. Further, a good potential academy will be able to give you some idea of what you will be studying at each level. But a more important aspect is how the academy uses rank and what it means to them. For a really good academy, “Black Belt” will mean something. It will be a hard won goal that has significance to ones mind, body and spirit. ***Ask what the academy’s philosophy concerning rank is. Ask what it means to the head instructor.***

Here is one other very important thing to consider before you begin your journey through the martial arts. Most credible martial artists will consider black belt a beginning rank. That’s right, a beginning rank. If the art that an instructor is teaching has true depth, then it will take 3 to 5 years to lay a foundation suitable to teach higher aspect of the arts. If your goal is to enroll to get your black belt, you may be missing a more profound lesson of actually ***becoming a black belt***. Make Black Belt your goal, but ask questions to make sure you know what is beyond that goal.

***How does one advance in rank?  
What is the examination Process?***

Among martial arts schools, it is an insult to call another school a “belt factory.” The implication is that students are promoted for just having a pulse. Surely, academies like this exist. I am a firm believer that only skill counts and focusing on rank can be counter productive, but the insult itself is interesting. I have heard many school owners accuse others of having a “belt factory” when in fact what they were saying is I have no clue how you get so many students to black belt. So ask yourself if the school turning out dozens of Black Belts has low or no standards. In my experience, schools that have low or no standards do not stay in business very long. Pretty soon, the community catches on and they will dwindle away. On the other hand, ***the school that is turning out dozens of black belts and has a high standard is in fact what you should be looking for.*** If the criteria for advancement are clear and the instructors are good at teaching, students will achieve a high level of skill and will have the rank to reflect it.

***Look for consistency in the way ranking is applied.*** Rank can be misused as a control, but having a predictable testing system removes any possibility of abuse. Make sure there is consistent testing and clear expectations written out on what testing requirements are. ***Any prospective academy should be able to explain their testing procedures and set expectations for your advancement in your first meeting.***

***What is your class break down?***

Adequate class breakdown is a good sign of professionalism. If the instructor has one class per night that is all levels, guess how much attention you are going to get as a beginner. That’s right, either the instructor is going to teach over your head or under the

rest. Guess which one he'd rather choose. Think of it this way. The martial arts are a large body of complex knowledge (like chemistry, history, a foreign language etc.). If you went to college and enrolled in a chemistry course, and on the first day of class you found that there was only one class and one instructor for first, second, third, and fourth year chemistry, how do you think the class would go? This is why in college, they have designated courses that you sign up for, designated instructors to teach those classes, a set time to test whether you have mastered the skills of that class, and a progression of required courses.

Specific classes and instructors per level means better education over the long run. If you look at a class schedule and you notice few instructors and few level specific breakdowns, then it can mean one of several things 1) There is no progression to the curriculum. This probably means that the curriculum is a collection of techniques rather than an in depth style. 2) There is not adequate staff, which means not enough personal attention (note: this could be caused by the instructor's inability to produce qualified staff which is a serious issue 3) The school practices excellence by exclusion and does not care about beginners. It is my sincere hope that all my colleagues across the nation take a good look at the university model of education and adopt more credible teaching approaches. ***Class breakdown is critical for a decent educational experience. If the prospective academy has ample level- specific breakdown and adequate instructor coverage then give them high marks.***

### ***Do you have a philosophy of non-violence?***

The point of learning a martial art is to AVOID fighting. Make sure the prospective academy you are looking at has an expressed philosophy of non-violence. Many instructors suffer from a real inconsistency around this point. If you ask them about their fighting policy, they will tell you that they try to avoid fighting but moments later they may be trying to impress you with stories of street fights. This attitude will filter down to students and lead to macho attitudes and a desire to "test" their skills. In my experience true skill leads to a quiet, humble confidence. If a person really has experience then they know that conflict is not where they want to spend their lives and therefore search for harmony whenever possible. Look for what the underlying attitude of the school is by reading the student creed and asking students about their attitudes toward conflict.

Any academy you should be considering should spend ample time teaching you how to avoid a dangerous situation to begin with. Two things that should be taught in every martial arts curriculum are Verbal Boundary Setting™ and Adrenal Stress Conditioning™. Since I have introduced these technologies to my academy I have had numerous students use it to keep out of violent situations and to walk away with their self-esteem intact. Let me explain, many self-defense situations are preceded by some form a verbal testing. For kids we call it bullying. But even if you walk away without violence, the confrontation can stay with you and eat away at you for a long time. The saying "sticks and stones can hurt my bones but words will never hurt me" is simply not true! With Verbal Boundary Setting™ and Adrenal Stress Conditioning™ you will learn how to hold yourself that says "I am a nice person but I am not someone you can push around." You will learn how to effectively face fear and transform it into an ally.

Parents: Please be cautious here. A martial arts instructor can have a huge impact on a student's attitude. If you expose your child to someone who thinks fighting is OK, then they will pick up on those attitudes. Unfortunately, young people often lack the judgment of when to use their skills and when not to. This can lead to kids wanting to test their newfound martial arts skills. **THIS CAN BE A DEADLY MISTAKE!** *Any school worth training at should have an expressed philosophy of avoiding physical conflict where possible.* You should be able to tell what the attitudes surrounding physical conflict are, but if you are in doubt, ask the owner and ask the current students (the attitudes always filter down from the top).

# Safe and Modern Training

Many martial artists fear that by adopting modern teaching techniques they will lower their standards. Many instructors take it as a badge of honor that they lived through the "good old days" and are not going to change a thing to suit you. As someone who has lived through the "good old days" I can personally tell you that they were not all that good. But universally I have seen modern teaching techniques raise the standard of martial arts everywhere. Due to modern teaching techniques, more people are gaining more skill with fewer injuries and less frustration than students of 20-30 years ago. Still, there are some instructors who fancy themselves "hardcore" and are refusing to evolve with the times.

Traditions are nice, but it is important that the ways in which they are applied are the most up to date and scientific. Some traditional training methods may seem like the stuff of martial arts legends, but can actually cause damage to the body and leave one with permanent injuries. ***Head instructors should continually update their education. Ask if instructors are involved in continuing education in a variety of areas. Ask if instructors know modern sport science.***

## **HERE ARE SOME EXAMPLES OF ANTIQUATED TRAINING PRACTICES THAT YOU REALLY WANT TO STAY AWAY FROM!**

**Training on hardwood floors:** The traditional training surface of many styles is hard wood. I have to admit, I like the feel of hard wood beneath my feet. There are some advantages to training footwork on hardwood. But there are also some serious disadvantages to hardwood. One, it warps and holds the odor of sweat. Two, it is very unforgiving if you fall causing concussions or broken bones. Three, and most importantly, if you practice for any length of time, it can create stress on your joints. I know of at least one karate student in town who, after practicing for five years, developed bone spurs in his ankles and was forced to stop practicing not only karate, but all athletics. With this in mind, it should go without saying that training on concrete or carpet covering concrete is simply foolish. Demand better! There are many modern matted surfaces that are appropriate for both striking and grappling styles. The matted surface provides cushion for your joints and protection if you fall. Academies who have not upgraded to this kind of training surface are behind the times.

**Knuckle push-ups on hardwood or concrete:** This can cause injuries over time, particularly for children. In fact it is a formula for developing arthritis. Your hands are precious so take care of them. Remember, your training is something you want to support you for your entire life!

**Smashing your knuckles against a brick wall:** No really, I have read tales of karate practitioners who, as a right of initiation, would punch a brick wall as hard as they could in order to break their knuckles so they would reform larger and harder. Besides the fact that this is a stunt that is better left to MTV's Jackass, bone breaks do not heal stronger. This is a good formula for crippling yourself. Don't do it.

**Head butts:** Some instructors think you need to condition your forehead by smashing it against something. To them I say, "hey that thing between your ears is a brain. Use it." Repeated head contact will only make you stupid. Only engage in this practice if you think drooling is cool.

**Crotch power:** No I am not making this up. There are instructors who purposely hang things off their, um...their...oh you know...Then to top it off the ultimate achievement is when they tie a rope to their wang and pull a truck with it. I don't know about you, but this does not sound appealing in the least. This sounds like another case of being confused about what a particular body part is used for. I can't think of any practical application to this other than if you get in a fight, maybe you could demonstrate this technique to your attacker first and your attacker will fall down wincing at the thought of it.

**Breaking stuff:** OK, I am sure I am going to lose many of my colleagues here.

The funniest injury I ever witnessed was breaking attempt at a major demonstration. The Coliseum was filled and this martial arts master was going to break a steel wok with his head. Picture a wok turn upside down on a couple of cinder blocks. The guy rears back and smashes his head against the wok. The wok doesn't even move, but gives out this resounding "bong" like a bell has been rung in a Bugs bunny cartoon and the guy falls over backwards. Out cold. If you are not laughing right now, you have no sense of humor. The sad thing is, he did it to himself.

Many people are attracted to the martial arts by demonstrations of sheer power ala breaking boards and bricks. I have to concede that there are several advantages to breaking. 1) It can teach focus 2) It can build confidence to really hit something hard 3) it gives people a demonstration they can wrap their minds around. So why don't I teach breaking in my academy? Two reasons. 1) ***Most breaking feats are demonstrations of static power.*** In other words, the boards and bricks do not move, and they do not hit back. An opponent does. Being able to generate power against something that does not move does not translate to dynamic power in motion. If you want dynamic power, you need to

hit things in motion. We have developed specific training methods that will give you extraordinary "dynamic" power. 2) ***Sometimes the bricks and boards win*** and failed attempts result in serious injury. As a kid I have broken knuckles doing breaks and I have personally witnessed too many broken bones to list. So put them both together and you can see ***it is not worth the risk.*** I teach many adult professionals. I teach musicians, surgeons, transcriptionists, and adults who use their hands. You simply cannot afford to go into work with a cast up to your elbow because your instructor thought it would be cool to have you break a board. There are more practical and safer ways to develop power.

**Hard body conditioning:** Some instructors like practices called hard body conditioning where they break things over their bodies or bend spears with their throats. These are neat tricks, but they have no combat application. First off, think how much time and effort you are going to need banging your body to make this work. Your body is not a rock. This kind of training produces injuries over time. I know practitioners who can barely walk now because of what they thought was "tough" training. So if you or your potential instructor thinks this kind of training is needed for self-defense, consider the following story.

There was a master of hard body Qi-gong who met Bruce Lee. He told Bruce that is body conditioning could withstand anything and he wanted Bruce to punch him to demonstrate his power. Bruce said ok and the master got in a horse stand and began tensing his body in preparation for the punch. Bruce walked over and slapped the guy across the face. The guy lost all of his focus and became angry. At that point Bruce casually applied his one inch punch and folded the guy in two. Fighting is chaotic. If you think you are going to have time to brace yourself for a blow forget it. Meanwhile if you really want to have bricks smashed over your head repeatedly, save the money you would spend on tuition and use it for therapy.

**Rip stretching:** This is just what it sounds like. Painful. The student goes to a certain point on a stretch. As the student starts to fatigue, the instructor jumps on the student effectively “ripping away any resistance.” Umm, gee, I kind of like a little resistance in my legs. It keeps me upright. Needless to say, this is an outdated technique that results in permanent injury. Unfortunately, there are many instructors who emphasize high kicking that still use this technique. Any one still using it is negligent and should not be trusted.

**Full-contact sparring too soon:** I believe that if you are going to learn to swim, you have to get in the water. And in martial arts, if you are going to learn, you must “spar.” Even gentle martial arts like TaiJi require one to learn push hands (Tui Shou) in order to be proficient. But how one goes about learning to spar can be the difference between a lifetime of enjoyment and a truly negative experience. When I first started, every student sparred the first day. I quickly noticed that the Black Belts looked just like the white belts only a little faster. They were missing the progression to give them really good fighting skills. A good school will graduate demands and build skills so that you can be successful when you begin sparring. Ask how a school introduces sparring before you sign on

## **You need to ask the following question:**

*What is your injury rate and do you have systems in place for dealing with injuries?*

Injuries happen. It’s a fact of life. But a smart school will have good strategies to reduce injuries and a professional systematic way of dealing with injuries. At the very least, all staff members should be certified in First Aid have adopted the standard that not only do my staff need to be FA/CPR certified, but they need to be certified in one of our courses on teaching martial arts safely or an equivalent through ACMA (American Council on Martial Arts) or ACE (American Council on Exercise).

Unfortunately, the less-than-reputable instructors not only teach in dangerous ways, the way they follow up on injuries can be humiliating and as emotionally damaging as the injuries themselves. Let me share some real life examples.

- *When I was in the seventh grade, my Tae Kwon Do instructor was particularly rough. Before class I was working out on a heavy bag and twisted my knee. I was encouraged to go on and tough it out. After an hour and a half, my knee was as big as a melon. The result was permanent ligament damage which is why today I do styles of martial arts that are easier on my body.*
- *At a local studio, an adult student was working on an intricate form. The floor was concrete and the form called for a rather dramatic forward roll. The student damaged his shoulder. If that wasn’t bad enough, the instructor called him a “sissy” and tried to embarrass him into continuing. I don’t believe this student trains any longer.*

- *At another local studio, a middle-aged woman was engaged in class. The instructor set up a drill where students were supposed to run up a heavy bag kicking with both feet (you can argue about practicality later). So this poor woman does what she is told and her feet get tangled in the chain at the top of the bag and she falls fracturing her tailbone. The instructors response was, and I quote; "you are so STUPID. I have never seen any one so stupid as to get hurt that way." Talk about insult to injury!*
  
- *Still at another local studio, a middle-aged woman was working out in a jujitsu class. Now, I know this woman and she is pretty fit and not one to complain lightly. But her partner, a young tough guy, repeatedly ignored calls for control. She was thrown hard onto her head and seriously injured her neck. The instructor in follow up told her that maybe she "wasn't cut out for it".*

I hope I have not permanently scared you off of trying martial arts. Not all instructors are this crazy, but there are some boneheads out there. You need to be careful and to ask about how injuries are handled at your prospective school. If an instructor acts like one of the above examples, then they are covering up inadequacies in their knowledge of safe teaching techniques. ***A good instructor will be sensitive to all levels of fitness and abilities. A good instructor will ensure a safe classroom environment. If the academy has a systematic way of training staff and following up on injuries, then you can be assured that if an injury happens, it can be a learning experience and not a traumatic experience.***



# Ethical Business Practices

OK, so you've got some ideas about what to ask when you walk into a martial arts academy to see if they are professional in their teaching. Now I am going to take you into the back offices to see what their business practices are like. Most highly evolved martial artists will see their art as promoting integrity and therefore they will run their business with integrity. Still, it is rare to find a highly skilled martial artist who is also highly skilled at business. I was fortunate to have found some excellent business mentors early in my career otherwise I would not have an academy today. I, like 90% of small business owners, opened based on my skill and passion not realizing that none of my previous education prepared me for actually running a business. Some simple knowledge about the academies business practices can help you avoid some potential pitfalls. ***You need to know what goes on in the back office in order to make sure your potential school is stable and will continue to be able to provide services to you in the long run.***

*Ask these questions to make sure a prospective academy has ethical business practice:*

***What is the longevity of your academy?***

In 1998 the second-most opened business in America was martial arts. In 1999 the number one most closed business in America was martial arts. It is a very common scenario that a student looks around his instructor's school, counts heads and multiplies it by the tuition and says; "gee this could be a pretty good business" So the student strikes out on his own only to find that the world of "business" is quite a bit different than the world of martial arts. ***If the academy you are looking at is less than one year old, do not even consider it! Walk away fast.*** When I say less than one year, I mean a commercial presence, not just a garage group. I have seen it happen where an instructor who teaches at the YMCA or local church decides to open a studio and is ill prepared for the realities of holding a lease.

In the process of discovering the challenges of business, most will go under within five years. If they make it past the five-year mark, then it is possible that they both have a good program and are successful, or they are hanging on and refusing to die. The latter become small clubs where the owner works full time and then teaches martial arts as a hobby. If a school makes it past the ten-year mark, then they are probably a fixture in the community. Ask around and see what kind of reputation they have. Chances are they have a good one. But if you walk into an academy that has been around for ten years or more and you do not see a high level of excitement, then something could be wrong. Ask enough questions so you can be certain this is a school that is strong and not on the decline.

***What is the tuition price?***

OK, so your curious about martial arts. You want to try it on for size, but you want to know how much it is going to cost you. So you get on the phone and start calling studios for prices. Don't be surprised when ***almost no school will quote a price over the phone.*** The reason most schools do not quote prices over the phone is that most people do not have any context for their program. Making a price list of all the schools in town is meaningless, because it is like comparing apples to oranges. Let me put it another way, if you called a bunch of car dealers and asked; "How much does a car cost?" Well, how useful do you think the information would be? What you should be looking for is value, not price. In order to make a good decision here, you need to evaluate the school, the instructors, and the program itself. You need to know what you are getting for the price. ***Don't be afraid to ask detailed questions to know exactly what services are provided.*** If an instructor shows signs of hesitation or is uncomfortable with questions, then there is a good chance that there is inconsistency in the schools business practices. Be cautious.

Still thinking about price. I know, cash is tight, you have to be able to afford it. But let me ask you a question. If you were going skydiving would you want to buy the

cheapest parachute you could find? I don't think so. So if you may need to use your martial arts for self-defense, would you want to have the cheapest martial art at your disposal. I didn't think so. Well, now I am going to let you in on a little known insiders secret about tuition prices. **MARTIAL ARTS SCHOOL OWNERS ALWAYS PRICE THEIR PROGRAMS WHAT THEY THINK THEY ARE WORTH.**

**ALWAYS!** There is no nobility in being the cheapest in town. And the guy teaching club karate or non-profit karate to maintain a charade of purity is only telling you that s/he does not believe their program has much value. Here is another little caveat. The cheapest guy is probably going broke and before long, he will begin to dislike what he is doing. This is very bad for you as a student. The converse is also true. The academy owners who are successful in business tend to add more services, update their education more frequently, and tend to be good role models for success.

I know that for you as a potential customer, about to shell out your hard earned cash, you may be a little skeptical about what I am saying, but hear me out. If you know anything about business, then you will understand what I am about to say. When I made the commitment to upgrade my studios from a dungeon dojo to a serious professional studio I had to charge a high but fair price. In doing so, I opened up many doors that have always served my students better. I have been able to attract and keep the top staff in the industry and I have been progressively able to increase services and quality every year. Remember that any credible martial artist who is worth studying with has probably spent as much time and money on their education as any doctor or lawyer and will expect to be paid as a professional.

So does that mean you need to buy the most expensive program in town? **ONLY IF IT IS THE BEST.** The best approach is to make an appointment to go into the school see the facilities, discuss the program, and then get a thorough break-down of prices and services. From there, you can determine if what the school is offering is a good value. ***You should be able to walk away from your first meeting with a clear idea of tuition price and what it includes. If you do not, put this prospective academy at the bottom of your list.***

## **BUT BEWARE OF THE FOLLOWING DECEPTIVE BUSINESS PRACTICES**

### **Bait and switch**

Martial arts is a service industry. They are not going to run out of product. So if the academy advertises a special they most certainly should honor it. If the academy offers one thing to get you in the doors and then tries to switch you to something else, it is within your right to refuse. If they offer you a low-cost introductory program, you should feel comfortable taking advantage of that offer, but ask what they are going to offer after the introductory program. Costs and service should be clear.

### **Cash up front**

In many states, it is illegal to accept cash up front. Even if you are inclined to pay for your lessons in one lump sum, I do not recommend it. It is a far better business practice to budget out your tuition in monthly payments. The one exception is if you are taking a discreet course that is

one quarter or less. Otherwise, making monthly payments is reasonable. The best academies will use third party billing service to make it possible for students to budget their tuition. The best of these billing companies is the Educational Funding Company. If you see their name, you can be guaranteed professional service. If an academy insists on you putting a large amount of cash down before starting, this is a danger sign. I have heard of more than a few horror stories about an academy collecting large sums and then closing their doors and bolting for the next state

### **“Flexible pricing”**

If you are having a face to face conference and the you ask the instructor; “How much does it cost?” and he replies “How much do you got?” this is a danger sign. The tuition prices should be firm and non-negotiable. Entering a martial arts academy is more like enrolling in college and should not be like buying a car. If you can not afford the price, some academies may offer options for scholarships or barter. With in the first meeting, you should walk away with a clear understanding of what the price is and what it includes.

### **Hard selling**

Beware of hard-sell practices. Some schools may try to lock you into a long-term agreement before you have even tried martial arts. This is bad for both parties. Don’t be afraid to walk away. Unless you are sure that you have found exactly what you are looking for then walk away. The academy should offer a short term, low/no obligation trial period. In addition, the *best academies will GUARANTEE their services*. Ask upfront if there are any guarantees. If you feel pressured, remember you can afford to look at all your options and consider them carefully. Do not sign until you are comfortable.

*Look for a service organization. Their outlook is different. A service organization will spend more of their time educating you so you can make an informed decision. When I make contact with a potential student, no question I want them to start practicing martial arts, but what I want most is for them to start off on the right foot. If business details are discussed upfront, squarely and fairly, then there is a comfort level that allows a much deeper relationship to grow. I look at it as the difference between getting a customer on a hook and developing a good student for ten years or more.*

### ***Do you have contracts?***

An instructor, who is uncomfortable with money and business, will advertise “no contracts.” The idea is that the love of the art should be the only thing that keeps a student at the academy. That is true to some extent. But what they are missing is the fact that a contract is an agreement between both parties. *It guarantees certain services, at a certain price, for a certain period of time.* It binds the academy to you as well. If you want your instructor to commit to you, then you need to commit to them. Contracts are an accepted business practice in all areas of business and personally I like them because it clearly lays out the ground rules between two parties. Almost all good martial arts academies will have some form of contract.

It is not uncommon for an academy to present you with a one-year agreement after a trial lesson. After six months they are likely to ask you to commit to a Black Belt Program, which is usually three years or more. This is a fairly standard practice. You need to know upfront if this is how the academy structures their agreements and you need to decide if this is acceptable to you. In some cases the price may increase dramatically when you renew. **Ask what the beginning agreements are and ask what terms will be presented down the road.**

I have tried a number of ways to structure agreements at my academy and have finally settled on what I think is fair on all sides. If someone is interested we have him or her do one month for the cost of our monthly tuition. If they like the program and we feel they are qualified to enroll, then we do a one-year agreement at the same price. There is no sudden increase in price. After that we do the same one-year agreement renewed annually by mail with only a cost of living increase. This assures that there is no surprise increase in tuition and everyone feels it is fair and balanced. Ultimately, you need to feel that the agreement is fair. If you do not feel it is fair, walk away and explore all your options. Do not be hasty in an endeavor that you are in which going to invest your money and time.

### ***What is your cancellation Policy?***

Ask what are the ways you can get out of the agreement. I know you are not joining just to drop out. But, you need to be clear on what a contract binds you to. Your word is your bond and it is important that you know what you are agreeing to before you sign a contract. Different academies have different attitudes about contracts. Some are absolute and when you sign an agreement they will send you to collections if you break it. And from the business owner’s point of view, this makes sense. Quite often an academy owner will put up with a lot of wishy-washy people who have little integrity around their word. For my personal tastes, I have come up with three guarantees 1) *if a student has a health issue and can not continue to train they can cancel immediately* 2) *if the student moves out of the area they may cancel immediately* and 3) *for any other reason they may cancel with 90 days written notice.* *This seems to be a good balance between flexibility and stability.* **Make sure you ask what kinds of cancellation options are offered with an agreement.**

### ***Do you charge testing fees?***

It is not uncommon for an academy to charge each time you test for rank advancement. Testing fees can add up to hundreds of dollars. The down side of charging for testing fees is that the academy owner will always have a profit motive attached to rank advancement. Even the staunchest of instructors may be tempted to pass little Johnny to the next belt because they need to increase revenues that month. Having test fees rolled into the price of the agreement is a better method. That way, instructors are not pressured to advance students in rank when they have not earned it. ***Ask about testing fees up front before you sign an agreement. You need this information to get the actual price of the program.***

### ***Do you use a tuition billing company? Who?***

Many academies use third party billing companies. And there is a very good reason for this. The more time a school owner spends tracking down late pays and accounting for billing, the less time they have to spend on developing a good program. I have been very fortunate to have a relationship with the Educational Funding Company which is the oldest and most professional of the martial arts billing companies. Over the past ten years they have mentored me in professional business practices and help to elevate the level of my academy. I am exceptionally pleased with their professionalism and their service. I could not do a better job myself of taking care of student billing and to top it off the president of EFC, John Cokinos, is one of the most upstanding and honest people I have met anywhere in any walk of life. This sounds like I am biased, and I am, but I promise that they did not pay me to write that endorsement.

If an academy does its' own billing, you will want to pause and consider it carefully. This means either they are huge and have the resources to have a full-time tuition collections department or more likely instructors are going to be running after tuition problems and late pays. I have repeatedly seen schools where this strains the student-teacher relationship. ***You want your instructor to be there for you as a teacher. In order for them to do this effectively, the academy need to employ a third-party billing company. Ask if they do this and if so, which one.***

### ***Is the facility clean?***

Why would I put this question under ethical business practices? Few things are more telling about what goes on inside the school than the external appearance. You may have been taught not to judge a book by it's cover, but in the world of martial arts, a clean school matters. Unfortunately, some school owners believe in the "good old days" of the dungeon dojo. These schools are dark dank and look like someone's basement. They smell like sweaty feet. Oddly, some instructors think this is a sign of authenticity. ***A clean facility shows professionalism and care. Lack of focus in this area probably means a lack of focus in other areas. Hey, would you really want to enroll in an academy that didn't bother to clean its toilets? Would you really trust an academy with your money if the place they spent most of their time in smelled like old sweat socks?***

But there is one critical aspect of any facility and that is the flooring or workout surface. ***You need to ask about how the floor is cleaned*** and how often. Humans carry all kinds of nasty little things. Ask any high school wrestler who has contracted ringworm (a topical fungus) from wrestling mats and they will tell you the value of a little disinfectant. The training surface should be disinfected (not just cleaned) at least once per day. This will protect you from athlete's foot, ringworm, and other communicable diseases. If the prospective academy does not have a systematic way to disinfect their training area, put them at the bottom of your list.

*I hope you enjoyed reading this report. All these are great questions to start with. This information arms you with the knowledge to make a great choice about which martial arts academy to join. I sincerely hope that you do not delay your search for a great martial arts academy. Once you are involved in a great martial arts program you will understand just how fantastic the benefits are and how exciting it can be. With these simple questions, you will be able to sort out the wheat from the chaff and as I said earlier, "step in the right direction."*

*Good Luck!*

**WARNING: CHOOSING THE WRONG MARTIAL ARTS  
SCHOOL CAN BE DANGEROUS!**

When viewing a prospective academy, you should ask these questions:

<b>Professional Teaching Standards</b>	<b>School #1</b>	<b>School #2</b>	<b>School #3</b>
Are your staff screened and certified free from illegal drug activity, pedophilia offense, sexual assaults, felonies or other grievous offenses?			
Do you or any of your staff have any gang or outlaw biker affiliation?			
Are you and your staff good role models? Why?			
Do you have an all-adult staff?			
Do you have a systematic way to teach staff? How much educational training do you require to become an instructor at your academy?			
May I watch a class?			
What is your student quit-rate?			
What is your graduation rate?			
Tell me about your ranking system			
Tell me about your exam procedures			
Do you practice excellence by exclusion?			
What is your class breakdown? How many classes per level? How many instructors per level?			
What is your policy/philosophy on violence?			

**WARNING: CHOOSING THE WRONG MARTIAL ARTS  
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When viewing a prospective academy, you should ask these questions:

<b>Safe and Modern Training</b>	<b>School #1</b>	<b>School #2</b>	<b>School #3</b>
IS your training safe and modern?			
Do you use any of the following practices? If so please explain why you still use them.			
<i>Training on hardwood or concrete?</i>			
<i>Knuckle push-ups on hardwood or concrete</i>			
<i>Smashing your knuckles to make them larger</i>			
<i>Head butting</i>			
<i>Crotch power</i>			
<i>Breaking bricks and boards</i>			
<i>Hard body conditioning</i>			
<i>Rip stretching</i>			
How soon do you introduce sparring and how do you do that?			
What is your injury rate? How do you handle injuries?			

**WARNING: CHOOSING THE WRONG MARTIAL ARTS  
SCHOOL CAN BE DANGEROUS!**

When viewing a prospective academy, you should ask these questions:

<b>Ethical Business Practices</b>	<b>School #1</b>	<b>School #2</b>	<b>School #3</b>
How long have you been in business?			
How long have you been in this location?			
What is your tuition price?			
Do you consider yourself a service organization or a sales organization?			
Do you have contracts?			
What are the terms of your contracts?			
What are the terms of your renewals?			
Do you charge testing fees? If so, how much are they?			
Do you use a tuition billing company? If so, who?			
Rate the cleanliness of the facility.			
Does the facility appear to be well equipped?			
What is the flooring of the workout area?			
Do you sterilize the floors daily?			

## About the author

Mr. David Neal Brown was asked to write this report for the Martial Arts Professional Standards Group because of his many contributions to the martial arts industry and his breadth of experience and knowledge. Mr. Brown has been an active martial artist since 1977. He has been a student of Dr. Leung Ting since 1983 and is considered by many to be one of the foremost experts on the WingTsun system of martial arts. Mr. Brown is one of the few direct disciples of the arts founder, Dr. Leung Ting in America. In addition to WingTsun, Mr. Brown holds expert ratings in Muay Thai kickboxing, Filipino Escrima, and has mastered several Qi-Gong sets. Mr. Brown considers himself passionate about the martial arts and has exposed himself to as many different arts as possible but prefers the WingTsun system for its direct and practical nature. In 1993 he relocated to Bellingham and established his martial arts school, which thrives today. Mr. Brown holds a B.A. in Asian Studies from the University of Puget Sound and is a scholar of Chinese history and philosophy.

Mr. Brown worked in experiential education and special education for nearly ten years and while he found it very gratifying, he; “left education to be a full-time martial artist because that is where I (he) can have the most positive impact and help our community the most.” Mr. Brown still draws on his education experience to create dynamic and exciting classes. He has a thorough background in Neurolinguistic Programming and behavioral psychology. This experience makes him uniquely suited to understand the dynamics of teaching martial arts and what specifically happens during the learning process. For this reason, many have sought Mr. Brown for consultation on “How to Instruct” martial arts. Mr. Brown has pioneered many of the teaching technologies used in the most successful martial arts academies across the nation today. Mr. Brown was pleased to contribute to this report in an effort to raise the standards of martial arts everywhere.

When not teaching martial arts, Mr. Brown enjoys the company of his beautiful wife Katherine, dog ZuZu and cat Hazel in the quiet and pristine setting of Northwest Washington. He loves being in the outdoors, meditating, cooking and has a love of Asian art and culture. Mr. Brown may be reached at his academy in Bellingham, Washington at 360-738-1290 or you may contact him through his website at [WWW.TCMA.BIZ](http://WWW.TCMA.BIZ).



The Author and his beautiful wife  
Katherine Holmes