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A way to mastery. Mastery in martial arts

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Abstract

The aim is to describe the route to mastery in martial arts and attempts to identify patterns. What is the average time taken to achieve first master degree, to achieve the highest technical degree, and to achieve the highest rank of master (10 dan)?

Background. Theories of sports training, the humanistic theory of martial arts and the anthropology of martial arts give us a scientific perspective for the research. Particularly relevant here are the concepts of “long-term athlete development”, “the highest technical degree” and “*budō* ontogenesis”.

Material and method. Material for the study was obtained from sports CVs and by analysing the route taken to mastery by selected outstanding practitioners of martial arts (Instructors, Masters) and combat sports (Olympic athletes and champions). To develop a longitudinal study (for the years 1998-2014) a diagnostic survey questionnaire technique (N = 285) was included, but some of the data was collected by analysing the contents of various written sources (literature and documents, published interviews) and online (monitoring sites). The ANOVA test was used (Fisher-Snedecor test of variance) and counted the average results for each level of mastery.

Results and conclusions. It was found that the average time taken to achieve first master degree is about 10 years with regular training. Mastering the entire curriculum of the school / style of a martial art usually requires about 30 years’ training. After this time, some masters set up their own, separate schools, or create their own styles. However in order to achieve confirmed mastery at 10th dan one needs to practise a particular martial art for between 30 and 70 years.

Introduction

The aim is to describe the route to mastery in martial arts and attempts to identify patterns. The cognitive aim was to determine the average time needed to obtain the first master degree (1st dan), to achieve an instructor’s licence, to achieve the highest technical rank (HTD¹, one of the fundamental concepts of the humanistic theory of martial arts) and to attain the highest degree of master (10th dan).

The theoretical perspective is co-created here by: the theory of sports training (including the

concept of LTAD – “long-term athlete development” [Ważny 2000; Ford *et al.* 2011; Balyi, Way, Higgs 2013]), the humanistic theory of martial arts [Cynarski 2004] anthropology of martial arts [Cynarski 2012], and additionally, competitive theories of combat sports [Dittrich 1988; Renninghoff, Witte 1998; Kalina 2000; Czajkowski 2005]. Furthermore, the specificity of martial arts, their teaching and training, make the “*budō* ontogeny” unique, understood as the road to mastery in a broader sense than sports mastery [*cf.* Tokitsu, 1994; Cynarski 2002a; Cynarski, Obodyński 2003]. Thus the contents of the training process in martial arts and in combat sports are significantly different [*cf.* Cox 1993; Renninghoff, Witte 1998; Dykhuizen 2000].

¹ “The highest technical degree”, the highest master degree, for which a technical examination must be taken. Higher master’s degrees are awarded as “honourable”.

The way of martial arts is a training and educational process whose goal is in particular personal, moral and spiritual development [Cynarski 2000a, b; Czochara 2006; Sasaki 2008; Szyszko-Bohusz 2011]. Specific training methods serve that. It is long-term, multilateral training, combined with gaining knowledge in close contact with everyday practice [Ambrozy 2004, 2005; Cynarski, Litwiniuk 2005; Cynarski, Obodyński 2003, 2005; Figueiredo 2009]. It is only partially connected with the theory of martial arts training, either because its scope does not fit the reality of martial arts in all their richness or because it lacks understanding of training with traditional weapons [cf. Dittrich 1988; Kalina 2000], or varieties different from fencing [cf. Czajkowski, 2005; Cynarski 2006]. Most frequently the various reductionist approaches do not take into account the non-physical aspects of the way to mastery.

Material and methods. The research material contains sports biographies and analysis of the route taken to mastery by selected outstanding practitioners of martial arts (Instructors, Masters) and combat sports (Olympic athletes and champions).

The longitudinal study (1998-2014) included a diagnostic survey in the form of a questionnaire, but some of the data was collected by analysing the contents of various written sources (literature on the subject, documents and published interviews) and online sources (monitoring of websites).

Questions in the “*Budo* questionnaire”, in several languages, related to years of training, types of martial arts or combat sports practised by the respondents, dates they achieved subsequent master degrees/ranks in martial arts, dates of their biggest successes, training loads, dates of serious injuries and qualifications obtained and confirmed by documents as well as physical parameters (stature, body mass) and personal information (date and place of birth). 301 questionnaires were collected, and after eliminating the incomplete ones, $N = 285$ questionnaires were accepted for further analysis.

The results obtained were subjected to substantive and statistical analysis using the Microsoft Office Excel 2003 program. The analysis of individual questions was performed using ANOVA (the Fisher-Snedecor single factor test of variance). The level of statistical significance $\alpha = 0.05$ was accepted. The mean time taken to reach the next level on the way to mastery was also calculated.

Results

1. Time taken to attain a black belt

The average time taken to obtain the first master

degree is about 10 years (10.1). However, depending on the types of martial arts and in individual cases, it looks different and can take from 4 to 27 years (after excluding extreme values). The variance test for people who have obtained 1st dan (or equivalent), HTD or the highest master degrees showed no statistical significance in relation to the entire sample ($F = 9.55$ TEST > $F = 0.144$).

2. Instructor's licence and HTD

1st dan is just a “first step” on the way to mastery. This first step is reached from between a few months and about 20 years – there is very wide diversity depending on the type of martial arts. This also applies to the way of obtaining an instructor's licence. For example in *taekwondo* it may be obtained after approx. 4 years of training, and in *jūjutsu Hakkō-ryū* after one year.

In the era of commercialization an instructor's licence may also be awarded to people who do not have a master degree, but, for example 3 *kyū*, or do not have any technical degrees at all.

Generally, in Europe, an instructor is often a person with 1st dan i.e. one who does not know the whole curriculum yet. However, in Japan, to become *renshi*, one has to reach HTD (usually a minimum of 5th dan). But only *kyōshi* and *hanshi* are considered instructors and teachers, that is, they must be holders of more than technical degrees. The confirmation that someone knows everything (has competence in terms of knowledge and skills) from the programme of the school / teaching of the master, is (in the classical Japanese martial arts) traditionally licenced as *menkyō kaiden*.

Mastering the curriculum of a school / style of martial arts requires a minimum of a dozen years or so of practice, more usually about 30 years. However, this depends on the number of techniques and forms, and their degree of complexity. This can be achieved between the ages of 32 and 42, provided that training starts at the age of 6 (in accordance with the tradition of samurai families). Here are some examples:

1. Fumon Tanaka obtained the licence of *gokui kaiden* and became *sōke Enshin-ryū kobudō* at the age of 32. At the age of 46 he had achieved 8th dan and the title of *hanshi* in *kobudō*.
2. Masaaki Hatsumi – at the age of 41 became *sōke* of the *Togakure-ryū ninjutsu school*.
3. Yoshio Sugino – at the age of 35 became *menkyō kaiden shihan* of the *Tenjinshōden Katori Shintō-ryū kenjutsu/kobudō school*.
4. Risuke Otake – at the age of 42 received *gokui kaiden* and became the main *shihan* of the *Tenjinshōden Katori Shintō-ryū school*.

Tab. 1. Creators of new styles and schools

No.	Who (name)	Age	Years of martial arts practice	Confirmed qualifications	What was created?
1	Choi Hong Hi	32	20	2 dan karate <i>shōtōkan</i>	<i>taekwondo</i>
2	David Cook	49	31	8 dan karate	<i>tsu shin gen</i>
3	Alain Floquet	41	32	7 dan aikidō <i>yoseikan</i>	<i>aikibudō</i> CERA
4	Sven R. de Hooge	58	32	3 dan <i>zendō</i> karate	<i>te-katana-do</i>
5	Roland J. Maroteaux	53	36	6 dan aikidō <i>takeda-ryū</i> , 5 dan <i>iaidō</i> , and <i>jōdō</i>	<i>aiki-jūjutsu marotokan (takeda-ryū maroto-ha)</i>
6	Eryk Murlowski	50	34	5 dan <i>jūjutsu</i>	<i>shinyōshinden-ryū yawara</i>
7	Hidegori Otsuka	42	36	<i>menkyō kaiden</i> in <i>jūjutsu</i> , advanced level in karate	<i>karate wadō-ryū</i>
8	Masutatsu Oyama	34	25	4 dan karate <i>gōjū-ryū</i> , <i>judo</i>	<i>karate kyokushin</i>
9	Shigeru Oyama	48	39	8 dan karate <i>kyokushin</i>	<i>oyama karate</i>
10	Edmund Parker	28	1?	1 dan <i>kenpō</i>	(American) <i>kenpo-karate</i>
11	Albert Pflüger	70	54	7 dan karate <i>shōtōkan</i>	<i>karate koshinkan</i>
12	Erich Rahn	21	1	advanced level in self- defence/ <i>jūjutsu</i>	<i>jūjutsu & judo</i> school in Berlin
13	Jan Slopecki	63	49	10 dan <i>jūjutsu</i> , 3 dan <i>judo</i>	<i>mukashi-to kindai jūjutsu</i>
14	Alan S. Thornton	38	21	6 dan karate	Senai Seishin-ryu
15	Morihei Ueshiba	59	46	<i>shihan jūjutsu & aikijutsu</i>	<i>aikibudō</i> , <i>aikidō</i>

[Source: own research]

5. For comparison – Woczech J. Cynarski at the age of 44 received an analogical licence of *menkyō kaiden* in the *Idōkan Yōshin-ryū* school and became *kaiden shihan*.

Very often instructors themselves have not achieved HTD. They may instruct legally under licence (authorization) from a competent master. Alternatively, they may use a legal status that allows them to teach anything after registering as a business activity.

3. Creators of new styles and schools

Some masters for various reasons create their own schools, styles or combat systems. Only some of them last longer than their creators. Some of these creations are high value, forming successive stages of the development of the ways of martial arts. Others are strictly commercial products. Tab. 1 is a compilation of new types of more-or-less well-known martial arts and combat sports on a national or global scale.

Taking into account the cultural context, average periods for martial arts practitioners from East Asia and, separately, for non-Asians inhabitants of Europe or North America have been established. This is the average time of practice before starting their own school or setting up their own style; for the Asian masters – 33.2 years (from 20 to 46 – tab. 1), age – 43 years (32 to 59) and rank of 5th or 6th dan (from 2nd to 8th dan, or licence of *menkyō*

kaiden). In the case of non-Asians it is similar. The time of practice is on average 29.1 years (1 to 54), rank of – 5th or 6th dan (1st to 10th), and average age – 47.1 (21 to 70).

The non-Asians practise for a little less time, but full independence as leaders of martial arts schools is reached at a slightly older age, compared to the Asians. The average difference in both cases is 4 years.

According to the types of martial arts the time taken to develop mastery is a function of the scale of difficulty of the task, of mastering the whole curriculum. At this point new varieties are derived from martial arts methods previously practised by individual masters, in a simplified version or with new elements.

4. How much time is needed to reach 10th dan?

10th dan is, in most martial arts organizations, the highest accepted master rank. It is awarded by organizations for outstanding contributions, after a certain number of years of practice (internship) and at a certain age. These are honorary degrees.

Among N = 285 prominent figures from the worlds of martial arts and combat sports there are 23 people who have obtained 10th dan (of course in boxing, fencing, and wrestling such gradation is not used), and this study has managed to collect complete data on their road to mastery. This group includes four people (H. Otsuka, Y. Sugino, L. Sieber and H. Kanazawa) who have received the

Tab. 2. 10 dan – time taken to obtain a rank

No.	Who (name)?	Age	Years of martial arts practice	What martial art/ combat sport?	Nationality/ Country
1	Jon Bluming	60	40	<i>karate kyokushin</i>	Holland (not a nationality that, in English, is Dutch)
2	Wociecz J. Cynarski	48	35	<i>judo-do/ido</i>	Polish
3	Anton Geesink	69	55	<i>judo</i>	Holland
4	Klaus Härtel	63	48	<i>judo-do/ido</i>	German
5	Yuchoku Higa	82	70	<i>karate</i>	Okinawa/Jap.
6	Morio Higaonna	70	55	<i>karate (gōjū-ryū)</i>	Okinawa/Jap.
7	Hirokazu Kanazawa	71	52	<i>karate (shōtōkan)</i>	Japanese
8	Keith Kernspecht	55	42	WingTsun kung-fu ²	German
9	Richard Kim	84	77	<i>karate</i>	Kor., USA
10	Krzysztof Kondratowicz	70	52	<i>jūjutsu</i>	Polish
11	Takayuki Kubota	60	55	<i>karate</i>	Jap., USA
12	Siegfried Lory	52	33	<i>jūjutsu</i>	German
13	Hidenori Otsuka	80	74	<i>karate</i>	Japanese
14	Masutatsu Oyama	70	60	<i>karate kyokushin</i>	Kor., Jap.
15	Shigeru Oyama	67	58	<i>oyama karate</i>	Japanese
16	Shizuya Sato	73	68	<i>(nihon) jūjutsu</i>	Japanese
17	Lothar Sieber	45	30	<i>jūjutsu & judo-do/ido</i>	German
18	Jan Słopecki	58	44	<i>jūjutsu</i>	Polish
19	Yoshio Sugino	77	65	<i>kobudō</i>	Japanese
20	Keiji Tose	80	39	<i>iaidō</i>	Japanese
21	Ilija Yorga	68	49	<i>karate</i>	Serbian

[Source: own research]

highest title of *meijin*. Tab. 2 shows the individuals and their time taken to achieve the highest master rank³ according to age and length of practice.

The average time of practice for Asians to achieve 10th dan, is over 55 years (55.45) of continuous practice (from 39 to 77), which they obtain on average at the age of 74 (60 to 84). However, for the non-Asians this period is generally shorter. Practice time – 42.8 (30 to 55), age – 58.8 (45 to 70).

It also differs depending on the type of martial art. The highest level can be achieved faster in European *jūjutsu* or *judo-do/ido* (already within 30-35 years) or in *iaido* (39). In *jūjutsu* the average time is generally 40 years (30-68), and in *karate* 59 (40-70). In Japan especially, the highest ranks and honours may be achieved by the longest-living masters. However, for example Heribert Czerwenka-Wenkstetten received 10th dan in *jūjutsu* posthumously (he was 74), similarly to Hidetaka Nishiyama (he died at the age of 80) who was awarded 10th dan in *karate*.

² Actually it is 10th master rank (equivalent of dan). In the Chinese tradition of martial art sometimes the term *toan/duan* is accepted.

³ Incidentally, some masters (M. Hatsumi, K. Kernspecht, K. Kondratowicz) expanded the scale above 10th dan. Whereas, for example in *taekwon-do* ITF Gen. Choi Hong Hi has established 9th dan as the highest rank.

Discussion

Jigorō Kanō practised *jūjutsu* since 1877, for only a few years, nevertheless, he is still considered one of the greatest masters. This is in large part because he contributed greatly to the development of Japanese sport and modern education. For example, in 1878 he founded Japan's first baseball club [cf. Bazyłko 2004; Shimizu 2008]. Other judo people can be Grand Masters also without the highest degrees. For instance, Prof. Ewaryst Jaskólski, 5th dan *judo* from Idokan, was eminent master-teacher, coach, educator and scholar [Kalina 2007].

According to Masutatsu Oyama [1979] the way to mastery in *karate* requires 10,000 days of training. Depending on whether it is practised daily or say, 3 times a week it gives this amounts to 28-64 years. In turn in the *Hakkō-ryū jūjutsu school*, in order to achieve the level of 4th dan, 1,000 hours of practice are provided, which is about 8 “school” years [Riesser 2006: 34-39].

The Okinawa *karate* master Eizo Shimabukuro (born in 1925) received 10th dan in *karate* at the age of 34 years [Lind 1992: 90]. However, the oldest Japanese organization Dai-Nippon Butoku-Kai (DNBK) and e.g. *takeda-ryū martoto-ha* requires the applicant to 10th dan to have had 60 years of training and to be 85 years old [AikiGoshindo 2006:

10]. The range of requirements specifics of practise are apparently very wide. And the way is sometimes very long. *Shihan* Strauss is the example: "He achieved his first master rank in the martial art of *jūjutsu* in 1962, he gained 1st dan in *jūdō-dō* in 1968. In 1999 he was awarded 10th dan in *jūdō-dō*. In 2007 he achieved 10th dan in *jūjutsu*." [Strauss, Słopecki 2014]

Istvan Balyi, Richard Way and Colin Higgs [2013] in Chapter 1 of their book ("Sport for Life Philosophy") analyse sport from the perspective of life philosophy, and in Chapter 7 – with "intellectual, emotional, and moral development capacities". It is a similar understanding of the problem as in the case of martial arts. The results of empirical studies confirm the fact that for the people who practise martial arts they are an important component of their personal identity and adopted lifestyle [Tokitsu 1994; Cynarski, Cieszkowski 2009; Cynarski, Yu 2012].

Obviously, as in many other environments there is also an element of pathology. There are self-proclaimed masters and frauds [Cynarski 2002a; Słopecki 2013]. However, in general, the martial arts expert community and elite organizations around it do not accept such frauds and refuses to cooperate with such people.

The results confirm that a long-term progressive training model leads to master ranks among seniors, while the intensive model only gives sport results among children and teenagers (and their sports careers end at that point). 71% of *judo* champions began training at the age of 10 to 15 [Harasymowicz 2004]. They reached sports championships, unless they were discouraged by too large training loads in their younger years. In contrast, following the traditional understanding of the way of martial arts, or in the original *jūdō*, it was supposed to be the way for the whole life (as in *Kanō's* – 'educational way').

The model of long-term training by Renninghoff and Witte [1998: 31] supposes a sports career of about 20 years, followed by "Abtraining", while Cynarski [2002b] introduced the "M-Q Scale", where:

M (Jap. *mūkyū* – *débutante*, *mudansha* – student, lower than 1st dan) – 1-2 points
 A – agonistics, participation in competitions – 2
 Y – *yūdansha*, holder of a "black belt" – 3
 I – instructor – 4
 Ii – International instructor – 5
 H – the highest technical degree – 6
 O – other important achievements – 7
 S – *shihan*, *hanshi* – 8
 J – *jūdan* (10th dan) – 9
 Q – *meijin*, *sōke*, Grand Master – 10

In the model of the ontogeny of the martial arts warrior [Cynarski 2002a, b] the time taken to gain the highest sports achievements (level O, 7 points) precedes attaining proper mastery (10th dan level) and the highest master titles.

The subject of further research should be concerned with factors (e.g. training loads) and barriers (e.g. sports injuries); comparison of the career paths of Olympic athletes and martial arts masters; the issue of versatility on the way of martial arts; and the impact of physical predispositions and personality needed to achieve mastery.

Conclusions

The average time to obtain a first master degree is about 10 years. Mastering the whole curriculum of the school / style of martial arts usually requires about 30 years of training. After this time, some masters set up their own, separate schools or form their own styles. On the other hand, to reach mastery confirmed by 10th dan, one needs to practise a particular martial art from between 30 and 70 years. This does not apply to the self-proclaimed masters, who declare themselves the holders of the highest ranks and titles.

The work is a proposal for further consideration within the subject matter of research and a starting point for further, more in-depth and objective of testing penetration in this area.

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Droga do mistrzostwa. Mistrzostwo w sztukach walki

Słowa kluczowe: sztuki walki, sporty walki, trening sportowy, mistrzostwo

Abstrakt

Celem badań był opis drogi do mistrzostwa w sztukach walki z próbą uchwycenia pewnych prawidłowości. Jaki jest średni czas uzyskiwania pierwszego stopnia mistrzowskiego, osiągnięcia „najwyższego stopnia technicznego” i dochodzenia do najwyższego stopnia mistrzowskiego (10 dan)?

Perspektywę naukową dla przeprowadzonych badań dają teoria treningu sportowego, humanistyczna teoria sztuk walki i antropologia sztuk walki. Sięgnięto m.in. do koncepcji „długoletniego rozwoju sportowca”, „najwyższego stopnia technicznego” i „ontogenezy budō”.

Materiał i metody. Materiał badań stanowią życiorysy sportowe i drogi do mistrzostwa wybranych, wybitniejszych przedstawicieli środowisk sztuk walki (instruktorzy, mistrzowie) i

sportów walki (olimpijczycy, championi). Długoletnie badania (lata 1998-2014) obejmowały sondaż diagnostyczny techniką ankiety, lecz część danych zebrano w drodze analizy treści różnych źródeł pisanych (literatura przedmiotu i dokumentów, opublikowane wywiady) i internetowych (monitoring stron internetowych). Przyjęto do opracowania $N = 285$. Zastosowano test ANOVA (test wariancji jednoczynnikowej Fishera-Snedecora) oraz policzono wyniki średnie dla poszczególnych poziomów zaawansowania.

Wyniki i wnioski. Stwierdzono, że średni czas uzyskiwania pierwszego stopnia mistrzowskiego wynosi około 10 lat.

Opanowanie całego programu nauczania danej szkoły/stylu sztuki walki wymaga zwykle około 30 lat treningu. Po tym czasie niektórzy mistrzowie zakładali własne, osobne szkoły lub tworzyli własne style. Z kolei, aby osiągnąć potwierdzenie mistrzostwa stopniem 10 dan, trzeba uprawiać daną sztukę walki od 30 do 70 lat.

Praca stanowi propozycję dla dalszych rozważań w obrębie podjętej tematyki badawczej i punkt wyjścia dla dalszych, bardziej wnikliwych i obiektywnych penetracji badawczych w tym zakresie.