

The Judo Rank System



Achievement in Judo is recognized by a series of ranks. The student ranks are called *kyu* and are usually differentiated by colored belts (*obi*). Different colors may be used around the world and in some countries there are more than 6 *kyu* ranks. The ten black belt, or expert, ranks are called *dan*. The traditional Judo ranks are:

English	Japanese
6th grade	rokyu
5th grade	gokyu
4th grade	yonkyu
3rd grade	sankyu
2nd grade	nikyu
1st grade	ikkyu
1st degree	shodan
2nd degree	nidan
3rd degree	sandan
4th degree	yodan
5th degree	godan
6th degree	rokudan
7th degree	shichidan
8th degree	hachidan
9th degree	kudan
10th degree	judan



In the days before Kano created Judo, there was no *kyu/dan* ranking system in the martial arts. A more traditional method of recognizing achievement was the presentation of certificates or scrolls, often with the secrets of the school inscribed. Kano started the modern rank system when he awarded *shodan* to two of his senior students (Shiro Saigo and Tsunejiro Tomita) in 1883. Even then, there was no external differentiation between *yudansha* (black belt ranks) and *mudansha* (those who hadn't yet attained black belt ranking). Kano apparently began the custom of having his *yudansha* wear black *obi* (belts) in 1886. These *obi* weren't the belts *karateka* and *judoka* wear today -- Kano hadn't invented the *judogi* (Judo uniform) yet, and his students were still practicing in *kimono*. They were the wide *obi* still worn with formal *kimono*. In 1907, Kano introduced the modern *judogi* and its modern *obi*, but he still only used white and black belt ranks.

Around 1930 Jigoro Kano created a new belt to recognize the special achievements of high ranking black belts. Other arts such as the tea ceremony and swordsmanship provided recognition for their masters in the form of a special tea pot or sword. Jigoro Kano chose to recognize sixth, seventh, and eighth degree black belts with a special *obi* made of alternating red and white panels (*kohaku obi*). The white color was chosen for purity, and red for the intense desire to train and the sacrifices made. The colors red and

white are an enduring symbol of Japan, and they have been used in Judo since Jigoro Kano started the first Red and White Tournament in 1884. He also created the red belt to recognize 9th and 10th degree black belts.

Theoretically the judo rank system is not limited to 10 degrees of black belt. The original english language copy (1955) of Illustrated Kodokan Judo, by Jigoro Kano, says: "There is no limit...on the grade one can receive. Therefore if one does reach a stage above 10th dan... there is no reason why he should not be promoted to 11th dan." However, since there has never been any promotion to a rank above 10th *dan*, the Kodokan judo promotion system effectively has only 10 dans.

Other colored belts for students who had not yet achieved black belt originated later, when Judo began being practiced outside of Japan. Mikonosuke Kawaishi is generally regarded as the first to introduce various colored belts in Europe in 1935 when he started to teach Judo in Paris. He felt that western students would show greater progress if they had a visible system of many colored belts recognizing achievement and providing regular incentives. This system included white, yellow, orange, green, blue, and purple belts before the traditional brown and black belts.

The Judo practice uniform and belt system eventually spread to many of the other modern martial arts such as aikido and karate which adapted them for their purpose. Karateka in Okinawa didn't use any sort of special uniform at all in the old days. The *kyu/dan* ranking system, and the modern karategi (modified *judogi*) were first adopted by Funakoshi in an effort to encourage karate's acceptance by the Japanese. He awarded the first shodan ranks given in karate to Tokuda, Otsuka, Akiba, Shimizu, Hirose, Gima, and Kasuya on April 10, 1924. The adoption of the *kyu/dan* system and the adoption of a standard uniform based on the *judogi* were 2 of the 4 conditions which the Dai-Nippon Butokukai required before recognizing karate as a "real" martial art. If you look at photographs of Okinawan karateka training in the early part of this century, you'll see that they were training in their everyday clothes.

Promotion requirements for each rank vary according to the sensei and the national organization that you are affiliated with. There is no worldwide standard for each rank, although it is generally accepted that a blackbelt has had many years of practice and can perform at least the *nage-no-kata*, the *gokyo-no-waza* and the [grappling techniques](#). For further information about promotion requirements see your *sensei*.