

United States Martial Arts Association

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The Collapse of the “Sensei” System

Everyone in the Martial Arts who is interested in the work of the United States Martial Arts Association (USMA) should understand the rank promotion policies of our Association. Three other USMA essays, “The Personal Touch in Martial Arts Promotions,” “The Story of Martial Arts Rank Standards,” and “What Martial Arts Ranks Stand For,” contain important thoughts concerning ranks. Along with these, I hope you will study this present monograph carefully.

The awarding of belt ranks is a vital part of the Martial Arts. It should be understood and studied thoroughly. It is especially important to know why the system of giving ranks came into use in the first place. Traditionally, each person has a teacher who is responsible for giving him his ranks. This teacher is called a “Sensei” in Japanese. The theory is that a student learns in his club, stays in his club for years, and is given his ranks by his Sensei when he deserves them. One of the strong traditions is also that the student never should ask his Sensei for a promotion.

The group of Martial Artists who train in a club are much like a family. The Sensei system is a marvelous system, nurturing love, respect and character development among its members. It is really only in this family atmosphere that true growth takes place.

The tragedy is that this Sensei system is dead in the water. The people of our nation are simply too mobile for it to work. In America we have perhaps a million Martial Arts club teachers (a web search recently brought up 1,050,000 clubs for me). Each of these clubs should be a little Martial Arts family; but tell me, who is the Sensei for these million club Senseis? Are all the million club Senseis part of a larger family, with one Sensei for all? Or even one Sensei for each thousand clubs? Unfortunately, the answer has to be no.

Who is the Sensei of the leader who got his rank in Taiwan and hasn't seen the person who gave it to him for 20 years? Who is the Sensei for the person who got his rank in Miami and then moved to Peoria, Illinois to start his club? Who is your Sensei if your Sensei dies or moves back to Korea or Thailand?

The incorrect answer sometimes given is that a person's national or regional political organization is his or her Sensei. This is not only incorrect, it is impossible. The Sensei system is based on personal knowledge of the student by the Sensei. What political organizations have leaders who know, or even attempt to know, all of the club leaders, nation-wide, in their organization? Perhaps a few small organizations do this, but I believe the USMA is the only large national group which makes this the primary focus of its work.

So in place of the Sensei system, rank promotions in many organizations have fallen into the hands of politicians. If you go to political meetings and attend big events and help the politicians, you get promoted, if you don't, you are ignored for promotion. That's the way it is increasingly, and it's a sad situation which hinders Martial Arts development a great deal.

You see, the club instructor, the teacher, *is* the Martial Arts. It is the teacher who decides to start a club, it is the teacher who gathers the members, it is the teacher who inspires them to work hard to learn. The whole of the Martial Arts is this: A personal transmission of knowledge and character traits from teacher to student.

When the teacher stops teaching, the Martial Arts die. But increasingly, we find that referees, coach certification officials, political presidents, secretaries, treasurers, chairmen of all kinds, editors, tournament promoters, movie actors, and a whole range of hangers-on around the edges of the Martial Arts proclaim that they are most important. The Martial Arts has become a strident battle ground between these officials, business people, and politicians, each seeking some special position or ego gratification. In this kind of atmosphere, the club teacher, without whom the rest of the crowd could not exist, is often ignored.

Rebuilding tradition—recreating the Sensei system. When we founded the USMA in 1995 we were determined not to engage in politics, but rather to struggle to correct this neglect of the club coach. We have started to recreate the true Sensei—student relationship. First and foremost, we want to help all of our individual club leaders to obtain the technical assistance, administrative support, and promotions they deserve.

I personally review the membership records of every single member of the USMA as often as I can. It takes me the whole year to do it, from A to Z. I go through our membership forms, folder after folder. It is my great honor to do so.

So we have in this country one organization at least which is attempting to make up for the collapse of the Sensei system. People from all over the country call me to discuss their problems. Some of them have been hard working club leaders for 20 or even 30 years, and have not been promoted above the student ranks of first, second or third degree black belt during all that time.

Usually, I find this out by asking them, not because they tell me. Following the tradition, they almost never ask for promotion. Sometimes they call me because they want to take advantage of our outstanding video and DVD program. Other leaders are interested in having a USMA a seminar, or in joining our USMA, and I ask how long they have been in the Martial Arts and how long they have held their current rank. I am always amazed at the number of dedicated leaders who have been unfairly neglected for their rank promotions. The number of people in this country who are over-ranked is tiny compared with the thousands who are badly under-ranked, and we of the USMA must do everything we can to help.

This means we are doing something new, something unusual: caring for the individual teacher. I deeply regret that we are opposed and even criticized bitterly for doing this. Returning to a wonderful tradition should not be considered as new or controversial. Because we are doing the unusual, we are bound to be criticized, but that worries us not at all. Our USMA leaders will continue to support our individual club teachers in every way we can. We will continue to fairly promote leaders who have been grossly neglected for rank promotion. It is our highest duty to do so.

Your servant and friend,

Philip S. Porter
Judán, Founder, USMA