

# United States Martial Arts Association

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## WHAT MARTIAL ARTS RANKS STAND FOR

Although Martial Arts traditions go back thousands of years in European, American, and Asian cultures, the practice of assigning numbered ranks is only about 120 years old. It is said that Dr. Jigoro Kano, founder of Judo, started the numbered rank system in the late nineteenth century.

In ancient times, ranks were often very few in number: one was either a knight, having been duly knighted, or one was not, that was the only rank. In some cultures, rank, ie being a samurai, was hereditary, that is, one was born into the samurai class. In many cultures, the position of Martial Arts teacher was given a separate title. Sometimes, as in Sumo, ranks are based only on fighting ability.

Despite all the diversity, over the past one hundred years a fairly solid tradition has built up to define the meaning of the numbered ranks. To begin with, there are almost always ten ranks, numbered from one, the lowest, to ten, the highest. In a few cases, higher ranks are personally granted, almost always by founders or heads of systems. Thus, Dr. Kano assumed 12<sup>th</sup> Degree, and one famous Ninjitsu leader has now assumed 15<sup>th</sup> Degree. This is certainly their prerogative, as they are in charge of these systems.

Please note also that the style of uniforms worn, and the color and style of the belts around the waist of the uniforms, vary a great deal from system to system.

A table with a brief summary of the numbered ranks, the titles or adjectival description of each rank category, and a rough indication of the time in the Martial Arts needed to attain the rank is note below. Understand that this is a unique American system, set down by the USMA, and it may be different from other systems.

### What Do American Martial Arts Ranks Stand For?

**Students.** First, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Degree Black Belts are **students**.

1<sup>st</sup> Degree = Advanced Student = about two to five years of Martial Arts training.

2<sup>nd</sup> Degree = Senior Student = up to eight years of Martial Arts training.

3<sup>rd</sup> Degree = Senior Advanced Student = up to 12 years of Martial Arts training.

These three ranks traditionally wear black belts.

**Skillful Technicians.** 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Degree Black Belts are **skillful technicians**. They are sometimes called “**Renshi**” in Japanese, or by the following descriptive names:

4<sup>th</sup> Degree = Skilled Martial Artist = up to 16 years of Martial Arts training.

5<sup>th</sup> Degree = Senior Skilled Martial Artist = up to 21 years of Martial Arts training.

These ranks traditionally wear black belts, but in some systems, wear a belt with alternating red and black blocks about six inches long around the belt.

**Teachers.** 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Degree Black Belts are **teachers.** They are sometimes called “**Kiyoshi**” in Japanese, or by the following descriptive names:

6<sup>th</sup> Degree = Teacher = up to 27 years training and teaching in the Martial Arts.

7<sup>th</sup> Degree = Senior Teacher = up to 35 years training and teaching in the Martial Arts.

These ranks traditionally wear a belt consisting of red and white blocks about six inches long around the belt, they may also wear just a black belt if they desire.

**National Leaders.** 8<sup>th</sup> Degree Black Belts are “**National Leaders,**” or “**Important People**” of **the Martial Arts.** They are often called “**Hanshi.**”

8<sup>th</sup> Degree = Important Person of the Martial Arts = about 40 years of teaching, leading, and training in the Martial Arts. This rank traditionally wears a belt consisting of red and white blocks about six inches long around the belt, they may also wear just a black belt if they desire.

**Masters.** 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Degree Black Belts are **Masters or Grandmasters of the Martial Arts.** They are often called “**Hanshi.**”

9<sup>th</sup> Degree = Master = about 48 years leading, teaching, and training in the Martial Arts.

10<sup>th</sup> Degree = Grandmaster = about 55 years leading, teaching, and training in the Martial Arts.

These ranks traditionally wear a solid red belt. They may also wear just a black belt if they desire.

I hope this essay clarifies some of our rank policies for USMA members. I have now been training very hard in the Martial Arts for 65 years. I’m still training and learning. In fact, knowledge seems to be coming faster now than ever before. They say that when a teacher dies he leaves behind nothing but his students and his writings. It is my hope to write many books and train many students in the years that God sees fit to keep me active; so that vast scope of knowledge I have been privileged to learn is not wasted.

Although they have passed away, my great teachers: Sumiyuki Kotani, for a long time the only living Japanese 10<sup>th</sup> Dan in Judo; Trevor Pryce Leggett, 9<sup>th</sup> Dan in Judo, Tadao Otaki, 9<sup>th</sup> Dan in Judo, and Walter Todd, 9<sup>th</sup> Dan in Karate, still live in my heart.

Please call upon me at any time for any service I may be able to render to you.

You are always in my heart.

O-Sensei

Judan, Founder, USMA