

Dan Ranks

When numbering the dan ranks, Sino-Korean numbers are used (rather than traditional Korean numbers). In other words, the ranks are like those that we use when talk about Forms/Poomsae: Il dan, ee dan, sam dan, etc.

Different schools and styles use different names and meanings to different ranks. The list below is typical, but not universal.

1. **Il dan:** first degree black belt
2. **Ee dan:** second degree black belt
3. **Sam dan:** third degree black belt
4. **Sa dan:** fourth degree black belt (often referred as the first “*master*” rank)
5. **Oh dan:** fifth degree black belt
6. **Yuk dan:** (pronounced Yook) sixth degree black belt
7. **Chil dan:** seventh degree black belt (often referred to as “*kwan jan nim*” – grandmaster)
8. **Pal dan:** eighth degree black belt
9. **Gu dan:** ninth degree black belt (sometimes referred to “*chong kwan jang nim*” – Chief Master)

Background

Korean martial arts lacked a grading system up until the Japanese occupation of Korea (1910-1945) during which a variety of Japanese martial arts were introduced into the Korean culture. After the Japanese occupation ended, newly emerging martial arts like **taekwondo**, **tang soo do**, **soo bahk do** and **hopkido** adopted the dan and gup ranks common to Japanese martial arts.

Bo Dan and Dan Rank

Terminology varies from style to style, but generally someone who is a candidate to receive a Black belt is said to have the rank (*dan bo nim*). In english, this rank is commonly called *bo-dan* or *bo-black*. In some schools, a red-black belt is used to denote a bo-dan rank; in other schools, a red-black belt is used to denote a poom rank.

Someone who had received a dan rank of any kind is sometimes called a *yudanja*. Someone who has received a “high” dan rank (6th Dan >upwards) is sometimes called a *godanja*.

Poom Rank

In some Korean schools, most notably in Kukkiwon/WT style taekwondo, there is also a poom system in place. Practitioners who have not yet reached the age of 15 cannot test for dan rank. For them, there is a system of four poom grade instead. After the student reaches the age of 15, their poom grade can be changed to the corresponding dan grade without additional testing.

In some of these schools, young black belts (ie: poom levels) wear a solid black belt just like the “dan level” adults. In other schools, a black belt with a red stripe is used instead for the poom levels. The premise for using a different color belt is that it emphasizes to these young students that they are not yet truly dan level.

Symbolism of the Black Belt

Different symbolic elements are often attributed to the different color belts used in taekwondo.

Some of the symbols commonly attributed to the Black Belt include:

- Black is the opposite of White, thereby signifying maturity and proficiency.
- Black is the combination of all previous colors mixed, signifying proficiency in all the previously learned forms and techniques.
- Black symbolizes something that is well worn over time, having grown darker as it ages.

The color black does have some negative connotations (death, the end, etc.) which is why martial arts styles such as Tang Soo Do prefer to use a “Midnight Blue” blue belt rather than a black belt.

Adornment/Decoration

In many schools, it is commonplace to adorn the black belt with embroidered lettering and symbols. The adornment varies by school, but some typical examples include:

- the practitioners name
- the school’s name and/or logo
- the rank awarded, denoted a bars (I, II, III, etc.)
- the date awarded
- the name of the master who awarded the rank

Lettering of the text is usually embroidered in some combination of the school’s native language and Korean. Embroidery is often done in gold thread, though silver and red are also seen.

Kukkiwon/WT (World Taekwondo) Ranks

In Kukkiwon/WT Taekwondo:

- **1st – 3rd dan** are considered “trained students” who may serve as assistant instructors (*kyo sah nim*)
- **4th – 6th dan** are considered to be *instructors/masters (sah bum nim)*
- **7th – 9th dan** are considered to be *grand masters (kwan jang nim)*

Kukkiwon/WT 10th Dan – Supreme Grand Masters

In the Kukkiwon/WT style, only a few honorary tenth degree black belts have been bestowed by the Kukkiwon.

- One was the WT founder, *Un Yong Kim*

The others were bestowed posthumously upon masters:

- *Byeong Roh Lee* for the founding of **Jido Kwan**
- *Chong Soo Hong* for the founding of **Moo Duk Kwan**
- *Il Sup Chun* from **Jido Kwan**
- *Nam Suk Lee* from **Chang Moo Kwan**
- *Chong Woo Lee* from **Jido Kwan**

These masters were instrumental in developing the systems of their particular *kwans*, which later joined together to become taekwondo.