

Our Belt, Our Logo

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Company logos—which ones pop into your head? Walmart? Mountain Dew? McDonald's? Transformers? Some are so familiar that it's hard to imagine a world without them. A logo represents the presence of its company; it represents what that company is and what it has to offer. The Sonic logo makes me think of summer drive-in lunches—ordering from the speaker on the menu box with its little red button, and, especially, drinking cherry limeades with my Mom during a long day of shopping, talking about small stuff and life stuff in the car. The Amazon logo makes me think of cardboard boxes and shopping on my phone—the world of commerce at my fingertips. Challenge Martial Arts, like other martial arts studios and businesses, has a logo. Our logo has layers of symbolism and meaning, such as the two stars that represent our themes of Confidence and Connection, or the solid lion that represents our physical nature and the glowing lion representing our spiritual nature. Another kind of symbol that represents each one of us as martial artists, though, is our Belt. And while each Color Belt represents a different stage along the path of the way of the martial artist, the Black Belt is especially laden with symbolism. A Black Belt is, in fact, no more and no less than a symbol of who you have become, what you have achieved and what you have failed at, as well as where you still have to go.

Perhaps one of the most noticeable, and iconic, characteristics of people who have earned their Black Belts is strength of will—indomitable will. Throughout the journey, from a student's first day as a White Belt, through the Black Belt test itself, willpower is forged and tried. We learn that we are capable of more than we think we are. We can push through pain. We can endure criticism. We can handle boredom and even learn to benefit from repetition and focus. Every student who makes it all the way to Black Belt in our studio has wrestled with self-doubt and hardships. **Every. Single. One.** Quitting is an attractive option at so many points along the way. Quitting offers more free time, less stress, no more failure and

criticism, and no more Belt tests. Through health problems, family issues, time crunches, time off, the siren lure of other activities, and so much more, every martial arts student has to dig deep and grind through challenges to their bodies and minds. However, while the physical trials are significant, most find that it's the mental challenges that make for the biggest, most persuasive reasons to quit. Doubts and fears are strong and insidious enemies. Rationalizations for quitting come readily when we start feeling overwhelmed, intimidated, or bored. Or frustrated. Or angry. Even moments of victory can lead to second-guessing and a sense that maybe it's best to quit while you're ahead. And it's only by conquering those temptations that the strength of will, which is a key tenet of Black Belts around the world, is developed. Like a butterfly struggling out of its cocoon, Black Belts are made strong through the very trials that entangle them throughout their journey. Black Belts learn from personal experience, often times over and over again, that they are capable of overcoming. In fact, by the time they receive their Black Belts, those Belts call to mind not just the years' worth of struggles that they have overcome, but the straight-up fact that have become a ***person who overcomes***—as a way of life.

Another quality that should be associated with Black Belts is humility. While my Black Belt is a huge achievement for me, the process of earning one was humbling. Moments that stand out in my mind include being beaten 6 – 0 within less than a minute by a young woman at a tournament. Screaming and sobbing on the ground after shredding my ankle by stepping on my own foot pad during a sparring match. Finishing my sit-ups after everyone else had already finished their push-ups... while they were forced by instructors to stand around me cheering and clapping loudly until I was done... not once, but many times. Fortunately, these memories are also accompanied by such achievements as defeating a six foot man in sparring at a tournament; getting strong enough to do push-ups when doctors had

told me that I would never be able to do so without surgical repair of my torn rotator cuffs; surviving a grueling First Degree Black Belt test held outside in San Antonio, Texas in the sweltering summer; and surviving an outdoor Second Degree Black Belt test held outside in a sleeting freak cold snap of a San Antonio winter—while I was sick as a dog with a severe head and chest cold. True humility should walk with every Black Belt, because we have all been humbled and we have all achieved. I have come to understand that no matter how high my rank, I am never as good as I want to be, I am rarely the best, and, more and more as I age, my physical skills are no longer improving, but instead are decaying.

This aging, in fact, requires that I be ever more diligent to remain fit and to maintain my skills. I have always been in a battle with my own body because of chronic health issues, but the battle just intensifies as the years go by. Injuries take longer to heal, my joints keep getting more unreliable, and the pain is a constant companion. On the other hand, years of experience have taught me the importance of diligence, as well as how to be diligent. While my First Degree, Second Degree, and even Third Degree Black Belts reminded me of how hard I worked for them, Fourth Degree represents how hard it's been to keep going... and how blessed I am to be able to keep going. God has repeatedly provided me with strength and even a miraculous ability to get on the mat when it seemed impossible. I have cried in pain as I drove my car to to the studio, exhausted after a long night of sleepless physical torment, only to step onto the mat and teach classes, then even do my own work out after classes! God's grace has not freed me from my hardships, but it has enabled me to accomplish truly amazing things in spite of them—as long as I've been willing to push on, God has made it possible.

Because I could not do any of what I do without God's grace, compassion, and strength in my life, my Black Belt represents His blessings and love for me – and for others. God's love is such an integral part of what I try to convey to my students.

His love for them brought me to Alaska. His love for them opened this studio. His love for them keeps me coming to class. Our Black Belts have two lions on them; these two lions represent Body and Soul. The LORD God made our bodies and He calls to our souls. God's loving investment in His creation motivates me to keep going through the pain—not just my physical pain, but the emotional rending that comes with sharing the walk and the burdens of others.

Since I've become an instructor, my heart has grown to include each and every student. God's love for them drives me and I strive to be a blessing in their lives as they struggle with their children, their husbands and wives, their finances, lost jobs, aging parents and addict parents, school bullies, work hardships and losses, mental and physical disabilities, and so many other challenges that life brings.... Children who are living with the chaos of addict parents. Parents who are watching their kids grow up and make scary choices. Marriages torn by selfishness. In the face of such distress and despair, I feel small, ignorant, and helpless. But our God is a God of infinite love, and He uses me to minister to these lives in a way that humbles me. My Fourth Degree Black Belt is the first Black Belt that I have earned that is a Challenge Martial Arts Black Belt, and it represents the lives that I have become entwined with here. We don't earn our Black Belts without help (in class and out of class), or without other people in our lives making sacrifices for us. Our Black Belts represent our love and gratitude for the people we have come to know at CMA, as well as those who were already in our lives who have supported and encouraged us along our journey. We are not walking this path alone. I, myself, receive words of encouragement and support from my husband, my daughter, and so many of my students and their families. The parents of students have lifted me up when I have felt despondent. Even grandparents, friends of our students' families, and by-standers at some of our events have reached out to give me words of encouragement. One of the best, most uplifting things that I see is past

students—those who have had to quit for one reason or another—coming back to our events to work (for free!) to make CMA events happen. These past students see the value of our studio so much that even when they can't keep attending classes, they still want to support us and the other students that they came to know and appreciate. Love moves through and around us at Challenge Martial Arts in ways that are subtle and profound.

I don't have words to express the depth of gratitude that I have come to feel for God bringing me to Alaska and setting me on this path. From how I got started in martial arts to how I came to Alaska and opened this studio, I can see His hand guiding me, clearing paths, and holding mine. Of course, His blessings did not just start with my martial arts journey. From my own adoption by my parents, to my marriage, through my daughter's adoption, through my and my husband's service in our congregations over the years, and through the service dog training organization that we established, as well as through this studio, God has filled my life with love and purpose. In our Black Belt Quest program, we study the Character Component of Gratitude, and it has helped open my eyes to how much I have to be grateful for. My Black Belt is a physical manifestation of this. In particular, God has matched me with a strong Christian man as my husband. His love and support throughout my martial arts journey from White Belt and up has been crucial to my perseverance and success. My Black Belt represents his encouragement, the money we've spent, and the hours we've spent both together and apart because of my journey. As a Color Belt, there were evenings when I sat on our stairs at home in Texas, hurting physically and emotionally, in no mood to stand up, get my keys, and drive to class. Without fail, my husband (sometimes gently, sometimes firmly), told me to go. He knew how much I needed it and that I would feel better, at least about myself, if I went to class. He has been my partner throughout my journey—ever more so as we started talking about moving to Alaska, as he built out our first studio, as he began

his own journey towards becoming a Black Belt, as he stepped up to take over our Little Lions program. My Black Belt represents gratitude for my husband, in so much more than I can say—gratitude so intense that my heart aches with it. How can one Belt represent so many, from God my Maker, to my beloved husband, to all of my instructors and my students over the years? No wonder it sometimes feels heavy.

If there's another characteristic of Black Belts that is widely recognized and expected, it's the ability to endure pain. My Black Belt absolutely represents pain endurance, but so does everyone's. Even the most physically gifted athletes in martial arts must learn to persevere through pain and discomfort, whether it is difficulty walking for a couple of days after a test, or spending an eternity in a middle stance, or catching a punch in the throat in sparring, every Black Belt has not only experienced pain, but has come back for more. On the other hand, some Color Belts actively avoid testing, choosing instead to spin their wheels in the curriculum of a single Belt rather than endure a grueling Belt test which would promote them to new (and more challenging) curriculum. Some, I'm sure, have quit rather than test. But Black Belts didn't quit. All have shown up for test after test, knowing that they were working their way towards the ultimate test... their First Degree Black Belt test. They kept coming back. They kept striving to make progress. They kept suffering. Even more, many people with Black Belts have also faced personal trauma... injuries, health issues, surgeries, even traumas that happened long before they started martial arts, such as bullying and sexual assaults. Those who make it to Black Belt work through their fears and set-backs to earn that Belt around their waist, growing along the way in confidence, self-control, patience, and compassion—not just towards others, but towards themselves. Every Black Belt has proven their ability to endure over and over again, which is why, universally, the Black Belt has come to mean fortitude.

All of this fortitude provides an opportunity for martial artists to gain nearly phenomenal abilities of focus. First, White Belts start to learn how to know and move their bodies. They start with crossing their center line (a neurological feat that is surprisingly difficult for pretty much all students) and connecting their brain to their feet (the **back** foot is especially challenging to find and control if you aren't looking at it). Towards the end of their White Belt curriculum, they even start exercising fortitude and focus as they must sit in a middle stance for extended lengths of time. All of this is humbling. All of it takes diligence and teaches fortitude. But also... this develops over the years into the ability to cast focus to any body part, to isolate one limb from the others, to balance on one leg, to run forms over and over working towards perfection—even while knowing that perfection is an impossible goal. Along the way, students also develop their focus on mental tasks. Meditation moves to higher levels. Reading and writing improve. Students learn how to notice others—the needs and emotional states of people besides themselves. Problem-solving improves. By the time students test for their Black Belts, they have gone through a crucible on the mat that has forged their mental abilities to a sharpness that serves them in many other areas of their lives as well. All grow through the journey to become a Black Belt... and continue to grow after that if they stay in training. Without the foundation laid by the physical challenges, this high quality of focus would not be able to mature.

It is, in fact, maturing that is so important for Black Belts who are walking in the Warrior Way. Our Black Belts should represent not just what we have learned, but our continued growth into the kind of maturity that can help others. Just as we should always be growing in Christ, so we should continue growing as Black Belts—not just self-improvement for our own sakes, but so that we can pass on the skills and philosophies that we have learned to others. The author of Hebrews wrote to early Christians who were falling back into their old ways instead of maturing into

the next part of their path: “For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the actual words of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food.... But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to distinguish between good and evil,” Hebrews 5:12, 14. Just as those Christians needed to be reminded that learning the basics isn’t enough to sustain a lifetime of walking with Christ, and that teaching others is an important part of the journey, Black Belts need to grow in understanding of our art and into teaching it to others.

Although there are a number of parallels between growth as Christians and growth as martial artists, when it comes to martial arts philosophies, I have been selective in my choices for what I took as my own and what I left. Like Bruce Lee said, we must, “Absorb what is useful, discard what is not, add what is uniquely your own.” For example, the Warrior Way teaches service to humanity; the Bible, however, teaches me service to God, who loves humanity. It’s a small nuance of distinction, perhaps, but it makes a huge difference in some situations. The Warrior Way teaches indomitable will; the Bible teaches complete submission of my will to God’s. But in His service, as a warrior, I must have a relentless faith—I must be unyielding against the dark forces... and against my own weaknesses and doubts. The Warrior Way teaches that the attainment of a warrior is mastery of fear; the Bible tells me that there is no fear in love (I John 4:18). As for fortitude and perseverance, two of the most notable characteristics of martial artists, we have Paul speaking to Timothy in II Timothy 2:3, “**Suffer hardship** with me, as a good soldier of Christ Jesus.” In Romans 5:3, Paul wrote, “And not only this, but we also **celebrate in our tribulations**, knowing that tribulation brings about **perseverance...**” [*Emphases are mine.*] The ability to suffer hardships, celebrate in our tribulations, and develop perseverance are all godly traits that we must learn, and what better venue is there, in which to learn them, than a system specifically

designed to teach fortitude and perseverance in the face of trials? Certainly, people can learn fortitude and perseverance in other ways, but martial arts deliberately sets out to instill them in practical and repetitive ways over the course of years. My Black Belt represents, to me, lessons from God—how He has grown me into His good and faithful servant. It is evidence that I have put the Warrior code philosophies into practice, but, specifically for me, that I have tested them against the Word of God.

As I have embraced the Warrior Way, walking it has made me a better Christian—stronger, more able to keep the faith, a better servant. And I believe that it has done the same for the Black Belts that I have trained who also consider themselves Christian. I have seen them, especially the younger students, learn and grow in their faith throughout their journeys. I may be the master at my studio, but we are all growing together in our character, and those who are also people of faith have grown in Christ. So far, nearly all of my students who have made it to Black Belt are also Christians. Perhaps many secular students quit simply because the prevalent humanism among our culture today doesn't lend itself to valuing suffering; instead, modern culture teaches us to do what feels good and makes us happy. Practicing martial arts does not always feel good, and the "happy" feelings are more of a deep-seated sense of satisfaction and fulfillment than a momentary intense emotion. Throughout the hardships of practicing martial arts, the couch at home has a siren call. Even other, flashier, sports call out to many of our young students, who enjoy flitting from one new experience to another. Martial arts requires sacrifice in so many ways, and without a worldview that places value on that, what would be the point? Our Black Belts represent that we have prioritized the journey—that we have chosen it over other appealing options.

After all of this talk of symbolism, let's look at Black Belts practically: they are virtually useless—they don't even hold your pants up! They don't carry your integrity, or make you stronger, or more skillful. They are simply a physical

emblem—like a logo. They represent what we have accomplished, what we have learned, and where we still need to improve.

My Belt is changing a bit when I pass this upcoming test, and I have mixed feelings about it. My Fifth Degree Black Belt will include the usual white core, which symbolizes where all Black Belts started, and the importance of holding onto the attitude of a White Belt who is humble and eager to learn; it will also include an extra inner layer of red over that white core and beneath the black exterior. This red layer symbolizes mastery. It feels bold to claim such a thing. As always, I'm acutely aware of my physical limitations. I have students who are faster, who can do jumping, spinning, flying techniques better than I was ever capable of. But I also recognize that I've developed skills over these years that none of my students are even close to yet—teaching, empathy, and an ability to guide and inspire. These skills are more difficult to define, and are definitely more difficult to test. Instead of a discrete test that takes a few hours, mine has been playing out over years of classes taught, of curriculum developed, of lives touched. I don't know how the panel of Black Belts will choose to test me, but I trust them and I'm proud to call them my Black Belts. God brought them through the doors for His own purposes—out of His love for them. He put them in my hands and I've done my best for every single one of them to teach and guide them. They've given me grace when I'm wrong and when I'm weak. They've proven themselves worthy of their own symbols of indomitable will, humility, diligence, love, gratitude, fortitude, and focus, and have continued to walk the Warrior Way even after achieving their Black Belts. I don't know what else would qualify me as a master than that. I'm impressed by them. The red in my new Belt will represent them, and all the other students I've worked with—those I've felt successful with, those who have quit, and even those I've let down in some way. Because the Black Belt doesn't just represent success, it acknowledges the failures

that are part of the journey. I'm going to continue to strive to be better—as a master, a wife and mother, a friend and mentor, and most of all, as a child of God.

I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Therefore, all who are mature, let's have this attitude; and if you have a different attitude, God will reveal that to you as well; however, let's keep living by that same standard to which we have attained.

--Philippians 3:14-16

