

AVOIDING MCDOJOS

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What is a Black Belt?

First of all, I must explain that, in this day and age, if somebody has a “black belt” in a martial art style, it doesn’t necessarily mean a whole lot. In other words, there is no universal certification process. So many different schools, clubs, dojos, or organizations issue black belts to students, with various different requirements and curriculums relating thereto. Therefore, a “black belt” can mean so many different things to different people.

If you wanted, you could go to any martial arts store, local or online, and buy yourself a belt of any color you desire. You could buy yourself a certificate, embroider your belt to your liking, and call yourself a “black belt” in whatever style you would like to claim. If you really wanted to go crazy, you could throw 10 stripes on your new belt and call yourself a “GrandMaster.” Depending on how much money you have, you could even open up your own school and make a business out of it!

Sadly, people do just that. This is why there has been an epidemic in the MA world, called McDojos.

What is a McDojo?

I hate lies. Especially when a salesman tries to lie to me in order to make money. The biggest problem in the world of Martial Arts is that of McDojoism, Bullshido, and Belt Factories. If you haven’t heard the terms, let me first refer you to some mandatory external articles. After you read these articles, you may continue to read mine. Here you go:

[Click Here](#) for the Wikipedia treatment

[Click here](#) for a F.A.Q. on McDojoism. It is very important to understand that **this article is biased and has flaws***. I have been debating whether or not I should recommend this article, but I have concluded that you should be aware of other people’s definition of “McDojos.” The author has his own ideas about what constitutes a McDojo based on his experience. I condone most of the article, however some of his ideas are obviously stemmed from personal grudges and an accumulated frustration with a particular organization: the American Taekwondo Association. See my “notes” section at the end of this article for the flaws contained in this F.A.Q. The article was written by someone with firsthand experience in a McDojo, and “tells all” with this McDojo F.A.Q. article.

[Click here](#) for a how-to-find-a-legitimate-school article. (While the article is for Karate, its principles extend to the entire MA world at large.)

I've explained it before in this manner, but will put it in writing to eternalize its effect. As a raw powerlifter who trains many people in gaining strength, let's pretend that I own a gym and a little club called "the 300 club." This club is for those who can bench press 300 lbs or more. If this club is similar in nature to a "McDojo," I will reel people in and, in my sales pitch, *guarantee* membership in the 300 club in 6 months, regardless of age, gender, or physical status. They have to be locked into an overpriced program straight from the get-go, contracts and all. Oh yes, and they are prohibited to lift weights at any other gym. Doing so would nullify their contract and perhaps incur some legal issues. This kind of exclusivity has a purpose, which I'll get to soon.

During their first session, I "max" them out, which means that I gradually put more and more weight on the bar until they can't press one more rep. This is a common procedure in the lifting world, to the end that one might learn his/her strength level.

Let's say that Johnny, a 30 year old software designer with no previous experience lifting weights, barely puts up 115 lbs. He looks at the bar, then at me and says, "Gee Patrick, are you sure you can get me to 300 lbs in 6 months?"

I reply, "I guarantee it! With my expert experience in the special forces working with elites such as Boo Radley, a 5 time Powerlifting World Champion with 30 years of experience, you have nothing to worry about!"

I make sure that he pays me his mandatory 500 dollars a month, and each time he "tests," or maxes out, I charge an additional 50 dollars. At his final testing, however, he will be charged 1000 dollars. At times he questions me about the amount of money he is paying me, but I then make him feel guilty by using special, emotional based verbal techniques to which I've accustomed myself for those very situations. After all, it is a required skill in order to make money in the world of fraud.

All along, as the months went by, I was actually putting fake, styrofoam plates on the bar. He was thinking he was moving real weight, but in reality he was paying me a lot of money so I could lie to him and boost his self-confidence. Two weeks before his final testing, he counts up the weight as I rack up the plates, and he says, "wow, that's 285 lbs!"

"Yes, you are on your way kiddo!" I reply, knowing that it was actually 135 lbs.

His day of testing finally comes around and he passes! He lifts 140 lbs, but he thinks it was 300 lbs. He now has a world of confidence and will be able to brag to all of his co-workers that he is now a member of the 300 club!

I just made a lot of money and he now has a lot of confidence...why is that so bad? He did improve his strength. He did lift 25 lbs more now than six months ago. I mean, I gave him confidence right?

Wrong! I lied to him, and that's all there is to it.

That is what a McDojo does. It lies to people to make money. Beware of them. Do your homework so that you will not be one of the unfortunate. Now, I must admit, my analogy is very unrealistic and exaggerated, but that's just my point. IT HAPPENS in the martial art world, all the time! It's not quite as clear cut as a precise 300 lbs, because it deals with more subtle material. While in the gym you may have to lift a certain amount of weight, but in the streets you may never get into a fight. You may never find out that your McDojo Sensei lied to you. (He is always counting on that.)

A McDojo mimics and counterfeits true martial arts.

It takes a heap of training to learn how to identify a counterfeit dollar bill. To the untrained eye, it looks like real money: usable, spendable, savable, and valuable.

If you go to an MA school to investigate and see an authoritative man in a fancy Karate uniform with ten stripes on his elaborate belt, you assume he is a legitimate Karate master. He may have trophies and framed pictures with serious-lookin' old asian Grandmasters with names that you don't recognize. If so, then DO YOUR HOMEWORK!

I classify schools into four categories, with the goal of finding a school that has the least amount of McDojoism as possible.

Class D: Pure Bullshido! 75-100% McDojo

It's important to understand that very few schools are 100% Mcdojo. That would be equivalent to a real dollar bill adjacent to a monopoly game dollar bill. TOO OBVIOUS! However, I have seen them.

Class C: Part McDojo: 25-75% McDojo

Many schools are 25-75% McDojo. Half lies. Part truth. Very hard to distinguish between these ones, as they do have good qualities mixed with some ugly ones. These ones typically make some good money, at least at first, depending on the fraud skills of the owner.

Class B: Less McDojo: 10-25% McDojo

These are relatively good schools. Sure, they have some flaws, but Johnny will be (hypothetically) benching a legitimate 285 lbs at Black Belt level rather than the actual 300 lbs promised. Still watered down by about 15 lbs, but not bad.

Class A: Mostly or Purely Legitimate: 0-10% McDojo

A “pure” MA school is hard to find, therefore very few schools are 0-10% McDojo. Unfortunately, these are the ones that typically don’t make as much money because they are honest. However, there are those that are able to make money because they are both reputable and honest. Don’t be too discouraged. There is yet hope!

MY STORY

First of all, I must explain something. One might consider my favorite school in which I trained as one containing attributes of a McDojo. HOWEVER, you must understand that it is a very legitimate school. *More legitimate* than anything else! (I did my homework before joining). I considered it a “Class A,” with about “1% McDojo.” I joined primarily because the instructor was/is an amazing martial artist and an even better teacher. My respect for him never ceases.

As earlier stated, it is difficult to find a school that has absolutely no attributes of a McDojo. Basically, if the school makes a lot of money they are under immediate suspicion. The thing is that even the legit owners *need to make money*. In order to make money, the legit schools have to lower their standards slightly to appeal to a wider audience. If every school was “elite,” only a few members would be participants and, consequently, the school would not make enough money to function. There are exceptions, but they usually have alternative sources of income to compensate for the lack thereof from their MA school.

I also earned my Black Belt in under a year, which would otherwise most certainly raise up so many red-flags in the Bullshido community as to completely disqualify me for any validity in the MA world. HOWEVER, in my 11 months of training, including cross training at a different, unaffiliated Karate school; I religiously put in a documented average of 6 hours a day, 6 days a week. This amounts to 36 hours a week, 144 hours a month (approximating a 4 week month), and a total of 1,584 hours. To do the math a little differently, that amounts to 66 straight days of 24/7 training. For most schools, you train two to three days a week, for one hour sessions. If someone was to spend an extra 1 hour of outside-training to every 1 hour of formal class training, which is a generous minimum on my part, they would spend six hours a week, 24 hours a month, 312 hours a year. For a white belt to achieve black belt in the same amount of hours spent training as I’ve spent, at this rate they would need to train for just over 5 years. This is also assuming that their proficiency and ability to learn would be equal to mine. If the student *only* practiced during classroom time, it would take him/her about 10 years to earn a Black Belt.

I will admit, there is a degree of maturity that is achieved through years of study. I will not attempt to take away from that. If you want to argue that my Black Belt isn’t as valid as somebody else’s, I won’t stop you. You have a valid point. As mentioned at the outset of the article, a black belt can mean so many different things to many different people. The curriculum through which I trained was strict and difficult. It helped me in

countless ways and provided a great foundation upon which I am building my skills. If anybody would like to challenge my knowledge or abilities, they are welcome to do so by any means necessary, including checking out my website's videos and articles. I will not lie to you and claim that I have more experience than I actually have.

If you are familiar with Einstein's Theory of Relativity, the common theme is that "time is nothing." An article written by a man named William H. Sachs, explains, "*Ask a physicist for a definition of time, and you may well elicit a lengthy discourse on Albert Einstein's Theory of Relativity. A philosopher, on the other hand, may tell you that time is basically a way to measure all changes and, more particularly, that change which we call life. Last, but not least, it has been stated, quite seriously, that time is nothing but an illusion.*" **

I completely agree. Time essentially means nothing! The ability to grasp a concept and take it to another level in a quick and efficient manner means everything. Life is short. If you don't have that ability, you are at a disadvantage in an ever-so-changing universe.

I don't play by the *rules* that "you must have 10-20 years of experience to call yourself a Martial Arts Practitioner," and similar opinions. I have developed an obsession with the Martial Arts in indescribable, personal ways. To me, that is enough. If you don't like it then you don't have to be here on my website wasting your time by reading my material.

A word about my original MA school

The Southwick Black Belt Academy is an incredible school. Master Southwick, its master instructor, never guarantees a black belt rank to anybody. In fact, I failed twice before I earned my black belt. Every rank testing, from white to black, costs the same amount of money, and only goes to the facility's overhead, the cost of the belts, etc.

I had a trade-deal with Master Southwick, which made my training fees significantly less. We exchanges services. I've been a personal trainer, and he wanted to get in better shape. We made a deal that accommodated both of our goals. I must admit, though, I feel as though I got the larger end of the deal because I ended up with a stronger desire in Martial Arts than he had for fitness. I only mention this to say that he did not hound me for money, but instead gave me so much more training than I compensated him for. He could have made it more expensive for me, but he didn't, and that's the point.

The school had a heavy emphasis on reality based sparring, competing, grappling and other MA styles, and discipline.

The school had no "hidden fees." Master Southwick was not the richest man in the world, but he loved martial arts to the ends of the earth and would share his knowledge by working with anybody no matter their financial situation. He proved to be very

flexible, and may not be the greatest martial artist in the world, but he is the greatest instructor I've ever known. He is most certainly one of my heroes.

One of the articles I referred you to says it best, "The quality of the instructor is far more important than what style they happen to teach."

NOT JUST TAEKWONDO AND KARATE SCHOOLS ARE MCDOJOS!

I've personally investigated several martial arts schools and have been on the receiving end of several sales pitches. I've found McDojos in Aikido, Kung Fu, Judo, JiuJitsu, and in the new MMA craze. Out of respect, I will not name names. However, if I receive an email from somebody who is searching for schools I may personally recommend some and discourage others. I'm not necessarily out to destroy McDojos (even though it would be nice) because if somebody doesn't care about self defense and the street application to MA techniques and just wants to learn how to dance and dress up like a Martial Artist...then perhaps a McDojo is for them.

I once had an experience with a supposed "master" of a martial art style that I will leave anonymous. He was 45 years old and had been studying for 15 years, starting from age 30. He attempted to reel me in to his school, or club, which didn't even have a venue, it was located at public parks. He advertised that, in just 21 days you can be an instructor for a one time fee of \$10,000 dollars, and \$365 dollars a year after that. So...after twenty one days for ten thousand dollars you can become an instructor! That's about \$477 dollars a day!

Now, to just be one of his students, it would just cost (at least) 100 dollars a month. That wouldn't be too bad if he had a facility, equipment, or maybe even some uniforms or something to establish some form of unity. Even if he had those things, it still wouldn't change the fact that I found him to be an incompetent instructor, at least an inflated and self-promoted one.

The first session wasn't amazing but it was fun! We practiced a little of his MA style and he showed me some cool things, but the next time we met was different. He expressed weird ideas and tried to employ guilt and other emotional mechanisms to push me into paying him money. He said, "I can't do this for free. I need to eat. When I go too long without food, I begin to lose meat on my bones, and I get mean! I get angry! And you don't want to see me angry! Nobody does."

That's just an example of a McDojo. Sadly, it's a rather extreme one. You'd think his antics would be too obvious, but believe it or not, there are people in this world who get conned, scammed, and are just plain old gullible.

More about the new trend:

I've seen plenty of MMA McDojos because of the rise of the UFC, PRIDE, Affliction, and TAOUP. It is important to understand that these are current fads and trends.

Businessmen will make a McDojo out of something that is the current trend instead of picking something out of the ordinary. They want to be appealing to what is popular. Therefore, it is vitally important that you understand what the current trends are, in your quest for avoiding McDojos and finding a good school. Here are the two biggest trends right now: MMA and JiuJitsu.

In the eighties and nineties, Taekwondo and Karate pretty much dominated the western world of McDojo Martial Arts, at a growing rate. Now it is MMA. The media and film industry have put UFC and other such organizations into mainstream mania, with films such as "Never Back Down" and a multitude of reality shows glorifying combat sport fighting.

I'm not saying that all MMA and JiuJitsu schools are McDojos. I'm not saying that at all! I'm saying that businessmen will use those trends against you to steal your money and con you into false training methods.

There are legitimate schools out there, but you just have to do your homework in order to spot them. The problem is that an MMA club is not a "dojo" or a "traditional martial art." IT IS A SPORT, very much like boxing, kickboxing, and wrestling. I've mentioned before that there is a huge difference between combat sports, traditional martial arts, and street self defense. They cannot all be intertwined without taking away from one's purity or another.

Notes

*This article, or F.A.Q. on McDojoism claims that if there is one of their "red flags" present in any school, with no exceptions, then it is to be considered 100% McDojo. Making absolutely no room for exceptions is unrealistic and biased.

-One of their "red flags" for a 100% McDojo is if a student is promoted quickly and reaches a black belt rank in less than three years. Another part of the article says two years, which is contradictory. At any rate, if their "legitimate" Black Belts got their rank in 5 years, even 10 years, how many *hours* spent training did they undergo? Was it their full time job? For 11 months, it was my full-time job, and I put in my 1500 hundred hours. See "my story" for details.

The article states that "2 years for a black belt is a joke. Like anything that requires some form of mastery or skill, things take time, maturity, and experience in addition to knowledge. Think of a doctor. Would you trust someone who, instead of 7-8 years of schooling, only had 2, even if he read of the same books and knew the material? You'd be crazy. Would a Marine still be a Marine if there was a way for a recruit to get through the multiple month training in 1 week, even if still met all the requirements at the end for a normal recruit? No. You need years of experience and maturity along with your knowledge and this you don't get from a martial arts school who gives out black belts in 2 years."

The flaw is not making room for exceptions, on either side of the qualification spectrum. I personally have met very wimpy Marines (including a brother-in-law of mine) and extremely unqualified doctors who have somehow gone through the necessary training to earn their titles. My mother-in-law earned her Master's Degree in Mathematics before she turned 21. **There are exceptions. Don't rule them out.**

-Another "red flag" is if an instructor claims to be a high ranking master and is under 50. Then in another part of the article says it is a McDojo "if the instructor is a master, yet under 40." Another slightly contradicting statement.

-The article states, "Board breaking as a means for entertainment or fun is fine, *but it serves absolutely no training benefit.*" While I do agree that board breaking alone will not secure your life on the street, I will say that it is naive and ignorant of somebody to say that it has "absolutely no training benefit." If somebody can punch through 10 concrete blocks, I can guarantee he can do some serious damage to somebody if he's able to make contact. Board breaking is effective training, not only because it toughens your skin and bones, but it also teaches power in striking. My school had plenty of sparring, reality based sparring, and full contact sparring. It also had board breaks. Those who were able to break harder boards could hit me harder and train me better. **The article has good generalizations, which is why I condone it, however it makes little or no room for exceptions, therefore is biased.**

--More proof that the article is biased is in the statement: "I hate the American Taekwondo Association and call it the epitome of a McDojo."

I don't "hate" ATA schools, possibly because I've never been in one, but I have heard that the majority of them are McDojos. It is just another biased statement on the author's part, that's all.

Remember, if I thought that using the F.A.Q-tripod article would be detrimental to a) your learning about avoiding McDojos or b) my representation of personal qualifications, I most likely wouldn't have used it. The article just required some additional clarification

Notes about my MA lineage:

Master Southwick's school is one of the many great ones under the [International Martial Arts Council](#), whose founder is [Grandmaster Stan Witz](#). His school was not the only school from which I've received formal training. I don't believe in a superior style. I believe in a healthy balance of all martial art forms in the journey of finding one's place in the MA world.

Other Works cited

** "The Level of Time," by William H. Sachs http://www.themasonictrowel.com/Articles/degrees/degree_2nd_files/the_level_of_time.htm

An excellent finding of somebody's MA experience:

<http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20080830135710AAqN0jf>

Many of the best schools and best teachers have aspects of "McDojo". From Tae Kwon Do, to karate, to the "Gracie Academies", all of these contain "symptoms" of McDojo.

My own school has some aspects that some would think are McDojo, but I know my Master is legit because of his credentials.

Some people think that if a school is interested in money, then it must be a McDojo. I argue that by saying that if this is my master's only source of income, and he works about 70 hours or more per week, then I think it's fair that he makes a decent living. I have no problem with a school making profit.

Contracts are typical for schools that are interested in money, but a contract doesn't mean that the instruction is poor. It is also a way to verify a sincere desire to train and a commitment to learning for a said time period.

I would focus on your school/instructors credentials, how long they have been in business, the flexibility of their class schedule, and their standing in the community.

For example, my school has been in business for over 20 years, my master has been on the cover of TKD Times magazine in 1996 and published a book "Competitive TKD" in 2006 that you can buy at B&N or Borders anywhere in the country. He is a former Olympic coach. We also had foreign Olympians train with us this summer in preparation for Beijing. I have video of myself sparring against a Beijing Bronze Medalist (Chika Chukumerije of Nigeria). My Master has also holds an annual tournament for charity and does other charity work. He is also a former FBI Academy instructor and has thank you's from multiple law enforcement agencies. We also have local police and prison guards that train with us.

While it doesn't take those types of credentials to make a good teacher, it shows you that you're not getting taken by a fraudulent black belt.

Do I agree with everything my master does? Of course not. He has kids I think he lets grade faster than they should. We have advanced students who are not as skilled as they should be. But I must be humble in my perception of what he does. I know that when I went to him, I already had 20 years of experience, and I know now that I he has made me better, so what more can I ask for?