

The White Belt Survival Guide

Things I wish I knew.



CHRIS WOJCIK

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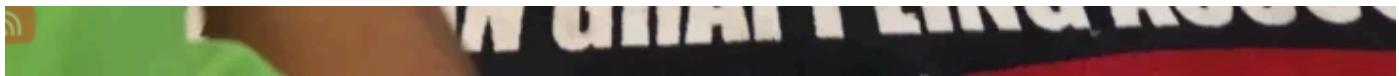
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My first white belt gold medal — Portland, Oregon — Circa 2016

When I was a white belt, I spent a lot of time reading Jiu-Jitsu blogs and trying to figure out what the hell I was doing.

I wanted to figure out the best way to get as good as possible, as fast as possible.

I trained every day, sometimes twice a day, I lifted weights, I ran, I went to wrestling practices, and I competed quite a bit too. I also was interested in doing MMA at the time, so I did a lot of boxing and Muay Thai as well.

I was *obsessed* — but my progress in the early days was still slow.

I got stuck a lot.

In the end, that feeling of stuckness (and the lack of quality answers to my question) was sort of what led to the creation of *The Grappler's Diary*. I ended up in a unique position as one of the only competitive grapplers who was also an avid writer, and I tried to create the resources I wish I had.

When I was a white belt, I thought about quitting Jiu-Jitsu a lot. I almost didn't "survive".

That's why today, I've written The White Belt Survival Guide.

Let's dive in:

White belts get the most stupid injuries.

This is a hard truth about Jiu-Jitsu.

If you're a white belt, you are at the highest risk of getting injured due to spastic movements or unsafe training. The reason is not because you're bad, it's because yo

don't know what good is.

This is a key distinction that most beginners take years to understand.

I had a pretty sucky LCL tear at white belt because I tried to rip a calf slicer on my training partner just 10 minutes after I learned it. It wasn't that I was bad, it was that I didn't have the control and experience to perform the technique in an informed manner.

I also had to deal with a lot of overuse injuries because I wasn't efficient with my energy use. I just wanted to scrap.

I also had the problem of dealing with some egoic training partners who took it upon themselves to "humble me" because I was competitive, but even then, my problem wasn't never failing to tap to submissions, my problem was trying too much.

My problem was getting injured because I didn't have the knowledge to not get injured. The best favor you can do for yourself is learn to train safely.

Learn to play the long game without ever quitting the short game.

White belts are flaky.

The hardest part about being a white belt is that if you quit, no one really cares.

Yes, your instructor will care if they lose your membership and some of your new training partners will be sad to see you go, but as a white belt, you are at the highest risk of quitting.

[No matter how much we make fun of blue belts for quitting](#), white belt is always going to have a higher turnover rate. It's easy to quit hobbies that you've only been doing a few months.

I can't tell you how many times I've started and quit the guitar — I've been playing and off since I was 10.

I've been doing Jiu-Jitsu non-stop (without quitting) since I was 17. I've been writing non-stop since I was 22.

In order to make a hobby an integral part of your life, you need to practice it consistently. This means avoiding those month-long breaks. Even if you're injured, come to the gym.

This might go against conventional wisdom.

People always say “Jiu-Jitsu will always be there”, and while they’re right, so will the guitar for me. The reason I’ll never be a really good guitarist is because I can’t stick with it.

The reason I am a high-level grappler is that I have stuck with it for years.

White belts don't have (quality) specific goals.

When I was white belt, my only real goal was to get my blue belt.

I couldn’t see past this achievement.

Most white belts are like this too. They just want that belt so that they can get the validation of becoming a blue belt. It’s a whole thing.

There are a few problems with this:

- I hate to say it, but getting your blue belt in Jiu-Jitsu is not a “good” goal. It’s just the easiest goal to set.
- Trying to become a blue belt doesn’t help you develop skills, which is the best way to get a blue belt level of understanding.

- Obsessing over your blue belt might turn you into an ass-kisser, and no one likes ass-kissers.

Obsessing with shiny object goals is easy to do.

I didn't get good at this until I became a black belt and there were no longer belts to chase — only skills to be earned.

This taught me that I should have been focusing on skills and specific goals way sooner than I did.

You're going to care about the next belt, but I just want you to do it a little less.

White belts don't grip fight well.

You *don't* need to be attending wrestling seminars and going to a Judo gym on the s

This is something that I read in Jiu-Jitsu blogs when I was younger and something that I did for a bit.

The problem with learning specific grappling arts from experts in those arts and then trying to apply those techniques to Jiu-Jitsu as a white belt is that you don't even know Jiu-Jitsu yet. You have no idea what you're doing.

It's the equivalent of trying to learn to use fiction writing to help you improve your non-fiction writing when you don't actually know how to write non-fiction yet.

I think the best approach is to focus on grip-fighting. Every white belt needs to spend more time grip-fighting.

The reason that you don't do well in Jiu-Jitsu as a white belt is not because you don't know techniques, it's because you're always having techniques done to you. You're always having techniques done to you because you don't win any grip-fighting sequences. You're always playing from behind.

The best way to learn grip fighting is to study the application of hand-fighting at the highest levels of Jiu-Jitsu.

Most white belts don't work on their athleticism.

You don't need to be the next Nicky Rod to be a good athlete for BJJ.

However, it would help if you worked on some basic strength and conditioning, wrestling, and other activities that help you move your body better for the sport than you're trying to do.

I did a really good interview with Alex Sterner of Electrum Performance last week, and his advice is excellent for new BJJ practitioners.

You can read the whole article here:

How to Get Strong on the Mat (According to a Professional)

CHRIS WOJCIK • MAY 6, 2024





Today, I have another interview for you all. This article is a 10-question interview with Alex Sterne! Alex is an entrepreneur, strength coach, and Jiu-Jitsu brown belt. He's been working as a strength coach since college, he helped Atos win team IBJJF World Titles in 2017 and 2018, and he's the founder of Electrum Performance, a one-of-a-kind strength and conditioning facility in San Diego, California.

[Read full story →](#)

Again, you don't need to be doing flips, but you need to be doing strength training.

When I was a white belt, I was lifting weights 3x per week.

This was probably too much at the time. I wasn't getting strong, I was always very sore, and I was doing a lot of other stuff — in college, striking several times per week, training every day, being 19 and stupid, etc.

The average person would get a great deal of benefit from just 2 full-body lifts per week.

But reread the article above with Alex — there's even a sample program in there.

White belts don't know how and when to tap.

I said earlier that I didn't struggle with this, but that's not entirely true.

I haven't struggled with this *for a long time*.

As a white belt, I got tapped out a lot, had some painful experiences in submissions (bicep slicers), and spent most of my time as a beginner in BJJ just fighting like hell to escape submissions.

I don't get injured in submissions anymore. I used to.

Now, I know when to tap, I'm not afraid to tap, and I also know that some days I have more to give in those submissions than on other days.

This is an important realization.

As a white belt, you need to switch your mindset from viewing training as a competition or a fight and you need to start viewing it like a video game. The best players in games also respawn.

If you learn this, your ability to learn and develop in BJJ will multiply faster than you can imagine.

I know some incredible grapplers who never learn this skill, and that's why they're stuck.

White belts focus on results over habits.

When I was a kid, my mom always said that I needed to eat healthy and exercise often because I was setting up habits for the rest of my life.

When you're a white belt, you're setting up habits for the rest of your BJJ career.

I set up the habits of:

- training daily
- following a weekly lifting routine
- pushing myself
- competing regularly
- always trying to learn

I didn't know it at the time, but those habits are what took me from a crappy white belt who didn't even win very many matches to eventually a blue belt world medalist and a purple belt world champion, and eventually the various black belt achievements that I've been able to earn as well.

Results are indicators that things are working or not working, but no result is ever as important as the habit for the system of habits that you used to get there.

Finally, some simple training tips for white belts.

When I was a white belt, I did what every white belt does:

I just learned whatever they taught me in class, and then I rolled as hard as I could. I got my ass beat up a lot. It was fun, but progress was slow.

Here are 5 simple training tips for white belts in Jiu-Jitsu:

- **Don't just take class and roll** — take class, roll, and try to do the things that you learn in class while rolling.
- **Develop a flow-rolling habit** — I'm not an expert on the "ecological approach" and I don't really know how it works, but I do know that the ability to train at a slower pace than full speed is huge for developing an understanding of the techniques that you're trying to learn. Learn to train light — both for understanding and longevity.
- **Try to practice the things that you learn in class on your own time** — it's not enough to drill something once on the day your coach teaches it to you. You need a lot of repetition of the essential skills of BJJ.
- **Take notes** — I didn't start taking notes until I was a blue belt, and I really wish I had started sooner,
- **Work on pin escapes** — You're going to spend a lot of time getting pinned because you haven't had the time to develop guard retention. While you're developing guard retention, you really need to learn the art of escaping bad positions like mount, back, and side control.

Closing Thoughts

White belt is the hardest belt in Jiu-Jitsu.

The irony is that once you graduate from white to blue, you're no longer at the hard belt, but you're the most unpleasant belt — blue belt.

That's why at white belt, you need to focus on good training habits. You need to set a sustainable BJJ routine so that you can survive the marathon that is blue belt and rest of your Jiu-Jitsu career.

The goal of this article was to list out the main mistakes that white belts make and analyze ways that you can improve them.

I gave you all of the mistakes that I made as a white belt — and then some.

I hope that you can learn from my failures and use them to propel yourself toward your own future success.

Thank you for reading.

BTW — If you liked this article but you're actually a blue belt (or maybe you just got your 1 belt) — check out [The Blue Belt Survival Guide](#) from a few months ago here:

The Blue Belt Survival Guide

CHRIS WOJCIK • NOVEMBER 20, 2023



I'm pretty confident when I say that blue belt is the worst belt in Jiu-Jitsu. A blue belt is like a white belt in terms of ability (a little bit higher, but not much), but the beginner's perks usually start to wear off. The honeymoon phase of BJJ doesn't usually last through blue belt.

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