

5 Lessons You Should Have Learned at White Belt

Processing my white belt trauma.



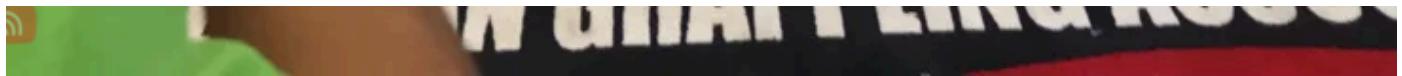
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2016 NAGA Oregon White Belt Champion — Not my proudest title, but my first 😊

White belt was the hardest belt to have.

I came into Jiu-Jitsu with the ego of an untested 17-year-old from the suburbs. I had hunger to be “the best” (I didn’t know what that meant), and a misplaced sense of competitive angst because someone jokingly told me on my first day of training that I could fight in the UFC.

I didn’t know they were joking. I just wanted to be good and I just wanted to scrap.

It’s been a long journey from “white-belt-who-wanted-to-face-punch” to where I am now — studying “ecological dynamics” so I can learn to coach better and trying to invent leg locks on the side.

I also didn’t learn everything the right way at white belt.

I got my black belt from a great coach, but I got my blue belt elsewhere. I bounced around a lot. I didn’t really do Jiu-Jitsu the way most people do it.

I was pretty much all-in from the start, trying to be as competitive as possible.

Today, we’re talking about 5 lessons that most people should have learned at white belt — but rarely do.

Lesson 1: Belts don't really matter.

When I was a white belt, I had a way bigger ego than I do now.

Even now, I struggle with it at times.

But as a white belt, I felt ashamed to even have to tie a white belt with no stripes around my waist.

All I wanted was a belt promotion, and I wanted it fast. This was the most important thing for me.

Because of this, white belt was the least enjoyable belt for me. I was not present at white belt; I was focused on my future belts that I hadn't even gotten yet.

There's a key life lesson in this point as well:

Lack of presence is directly related to unhappiness.

I wanted to be a UFC fighter as a white belt. I spent so much time worrying about the competitive goal that I never really focused on my Jiu-Jitsu development for the 6-8 months of training. All I cared about was winning, typically against other white and blue belts.

I wanted to establish myself. To stabilize my insecurities. To mark my territory in the martial arts world.

It made Jiu-Jitsu particularly not fun and particularly hard to improve at.

Solely getting the next belt or the next accolade is not a goal that brings out the best version of yourself.

Focus on building skills, habits, and learning to fall in love with Jiu-Jitsu. This is a lesson I learned at blue belt that I wish I'd learned at white belt.

Gyms with dumb rules are dumb gyms.

When I was a white belt, I trained at a gym where I had to bow onto the mat, call the coach "Professor", and I wasn't allowed to ask higher belts to roll.

I thought this was dumb, but my training partners said I'd understand when I was a black belt. They said it was about "respect".

Well, here we are 10 years later, and I am a first-degree black belt.

I still think it's dumb.

Don't call me Professor (I don't care if it's the Portuguese word for teacher, I don't speak Portuguese). You should be able to ask anyone to train, and they should be able to say yes or no. Bowing before you step onto the mat does not make you a more respectful training partner if your conduct on the mat does not follow the same level of respect.

But hey, what do I know? I've always been a little sassy.

I wish I had trusted my gut and found a gym I enjoyed sooner.

How to be a good training partner.

I didn't think bicep slicers were a real move because no one taught them to me.

No one ever said to me, "If it hurts, tap". Or, if they did, I didn't listen. Remember the ego thing I told you about earlier?

But I wasn't the only person in my gym who struggled with this. Since I came into Jiu-Jitsu with wrestling experience and competitive drive, a lot of coaches wanted to "humble me".

I remember training with my coach when I was a white belt in Oregon, and he put me in a bicep slicer. The bicep slicer hurt, but he didn't teach me about this move, and didn't know when to tap. I didn't know it was a real thing.

I just flopped around and took the pain until I could spaz out of the move. My toughness was commended, but in hindsight, it is a miracle I did not break my arm.

In hindsight, I wish that my coach hadn't wanted to hurt me with a bicep slicer.

I wish that I had trained in an environment where being a safe training partner was part of the culture. I did not have that in the early days. I was not a safe training partner, and I did not train with safe training partners. Thank heaven that none of us were doing heel hooks back then.

I remember riding my bike home in the rain in Eugene, listening to Sum41, cursing Jiu-Jitsu because my arm was throbbing. I went back the next day because I wanted to be the best I could be. I did a lot of dumb stuff at white belt.

I just wanted to be good at Jiu-Jitsu. I wish I'd thought more about my longevity and my skill development earlier on.

How to train consistently.

When I was a white belt, training hard was not difficult.

Training often was not difficult.

However, this is not the case for everyone when they start Jiu-Jitsu.

I showed up to every session I could, lifted hard several days per week, and I did my best. I skipped school to train (don't recommend that for most of you), didn't date for years (I'm getting married next year, so I turned out okay), and I was obsessed with improvement.

But not everyone is like this.

The difference between being a white/blue belt for 5-10 years and being one for 3-4 years is simple.

It all comes down to consistency. You don't need to sacrifice everything, but you will probably have to make sacrifices.

When I was in elementary school, my mom used to say that I had to brush my teeth because, as a kid, I was setting up habits for the rest of my life.

As a white belt, you're a kid in Jiu-Jitsu.

This means that you are building your habits for the rest of your training career.

How to lose and bounce back.

Losing and tapping are not the same thing.

I mean, I guess they are, but in training, when you tap, you can just respawn and try again.

When I first rolled with a black belt, I felt like a zombie in The Walking Dead. I got killed and then got up again and spazzed on my partner until he beat me up again.

I got tapped out many times in training, but the first time I got tapped out in competition, it hit differently. There was a sense of finality.

I lost.

In the tournament I competed in the picture above, the local NAGA in Portland, OI learned a very valuable lesson that I don't remember unless I really look at the pictu and reflect.

I competed in the no-gi division first, and I lost in the first round. I won the bronze medal match, but I lost to the guy who won gold. I was devastated, and I had to fight him again in the final of my gi division an hour later.

I had to take a loss and bounce back, and I did. I won the rematch by a referee's decision.

This taught me a valuable lesson about competition and Jiu-Jitsu in general:

The only thing that matters is being present. The only match that matters is the next one. If you are close in skill, you can beat someone who beat you just an hour ago.

Have a short memory when it comes to results. In training. In competition.

This is especially important at white belt, when you're getting beaten up every time you step on the mat.

Closing Thoughts

Being a white belt is the hardest belt in Jiu-Jitsu.

But I also think it's one of the most fun.

I said this once already, but it's a lot like being a kid. You can't really appreciate most of what you're supposed to appreciate until it's gone. You can't appreciate not being able to drive until you have to drive everywhere. You can't appreciate your parents buying you an ice cream cone until you can have an ice cream cone every day at your own expense. Self-funded ice cream cones don't hit the same.

You can't appreciate not knowing how to do any submissions until you know pretty much all of them, and you're trying to make up your variations just to have that feel of novelty again.

Jiu-Jitsu is hard. Being a white belt is about as hard as it gets.

If you're a white belt reading this, I hope you've gotten something out of this article and can work toward applying these lessons in training.

I hope you learn most of them a lot easier than I did.

If you liked this article and want more articles oriented toward white belts, try the

The White Belt Survival Guide

CHRIS WOJCIK • MAY 13, 2024



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.

[Read full story →](#)

27 Essential Things to Remember As a BJJ White Belt

CHRIS WOJCIK • APRIL 24, 2023



A few months ago, I wrote a Twitter thread for Jiu-Jitsu white belts that offered 10 things that I think every white belt should focus on.

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