

What Am I Doing Here?

An Outsider's Look at the Shodan Test

Towards the end of Rick Parlante's Shodan test, I leaned over to his wife Chris and said, "Wow, that knife looks real."

"It is," she said.

As I sat back in my metal folding chair, I thought, ok, what am I doing here?

I had only known Rick for about six months before his test and actually only met him face to face twice. But we talked on the phone about work stuff all the time and got to know each other pretty well. I'd just recently redesigned his Niseido Jujitsu class brochure for him. When he told me that he was training for his black belt test in December, I thought that was great. I had already figured out that Rick lives life at 100 miles per hour, so going for his black belt at 50? Not too surprising.

Then November came and I got an email from Rick with the details of the test – where, when, etc. And he started talking to me about how rough the test was, how brutal, how unrelenting the judges were, how they hurled insults at you about your technique, how they came out to the mat and whacked you with a stick if they thought you were slowing down even a little. So I'm nodding and smiling, and replying with phrases like "Oh really? They do that?" and "Wow, sounds rough", all the while silently thinking to myself, "It can't be THAT bad".

On the day of, I drove from my home in Hollywood to West Palm. When I got to the gym, I found Rick and Chris, who were both a little nervous, and sat myself ringside. The gym was alive with energy – men, women and children in Jujitsu uniforms running here and there, getting positioned on the mat or at the judge's table. Civilians like me trying to decide if they should sit up front or a row or two back. Some had been to other

tests, some had never been, all were anxious for this one to start. I was starting to pick up on the electricity and began to wonder just what I was in for.

Honestly, most of it went by like a flash. Opponents would come up, Rick would toss them away or cut them down. I was impressed with the moves and that Rick was taking out guys half his age. There would be a shout from Rick announcing the move, a grunt and then the wallop of someone hitting the mat hard.

Rick was working hard, giving it his all, his face beet red. Between flashes of white uniform flying through the air, the judges were shouting, “Do it again! Who taught you how to do that? Do it over!” The Grandmaster came out with the switch, the loud thwack of it against Rick’s back was almost unbearable. There was applause mixed with “oohs” and “aahhs” from the spectators. Chris was yelling, “Breathe Rick! Breathe!”, and the people sitting around me murmuring, “It’s almost over, it’s almost over”, as if beseeching God to make it so.

I was ready for it to be over too. After hours of sweat dripping, muscles twitching, heavy breathing, adrenaline rushing, heart beating a mile a minute, unrelenting tension...and that was just me, I could only imagine how Rick was feeling.

The test went on, the opponents kept coming, with bats, sticks, clubs, punches, kicks, chokes. Then the knife came out. Then the gun – which wasn’t loaded, I’m told. And Rick successfully defended himself against them all – amid the din of the crowd.

When it was all over, Rick had passed with flying colors, many of the judges commenting on his excellent technique and patting him on the back. What I realized at that moment was that this test was not just about throws and hits and physical strength, but emotional strength too. Lots of people are strong physically, but they falter because they are weak emotionally. Seeing this test taught me that this sort of training shows you how to build up both kinds of strength – equally. It’s the only way to master this test, this discipline. So thanks Rick for the opportunity to see you earn your Shodan rank – even

though, like everyone that knows you, the test only reinforced why you're already my friend.