



Teens pushed to limit during 48-hour black belt test



Spencer Privette bows before demonstrating a fighting routine during a 48-hour test to earn his first-degree black belt in poekoelan, an Indonesian martial art taught in Oakland.

By: [Laith Agha](#) | September 30, 2010 – 11:00 am

The hard part was over. Each of the East Bay teenagers sat on a white sheet, facing their superiors in a room illuminated by the candles on the mantle in front of them. Over the last 48 hours, they had fended off attackers in the dark. They had run 10 miles. They had spent hours demonstrating their full repertoire of fighting techniques. They had taught a class to the studio's lower level students. They had broken concrete bricks and cooked dinner for 16—all without sleeping for two nights. Now, they were ready to ascend the poekoelan tjimindie tulen ranks and become black belts.

Poekoelan is a sparsely taught Indonesian martial art that borrows its graceful movements from wild animals. As is typical with most martial arts, the black belt denotes an expert in the craft, and

to earn that distinction, practitioners must pass a test. But tests in most martial arts traditions aren't as grueling as the one endured by these teenagers, all of whom have been training since they were about 7 or 8 years old.

Prior to the test, the studio's goeroe—which means head teacher—had predicted tears from the test takers. At 52, Louise Rafkin, the owner and goeroe of Studio Naga in Oakland, is slim, with short, dark hair. Other than her black poekoelan outfit and a ceremonial red sash wrapped around her waist, she looks more like a *San Francisco Chronicle* columnist, which is her other gig, than a fifth degree black belt. Having conducted several tests as an instructor and taken several on her way to earning her own black belt—including her failed first attempt in 1991—she is aware of how demanding the process is. "I wouldn't put anyone up for a test if I didn't think they were ready," Rafkin said. "But it's a test. And there's always a choice" between continuing with the test or succumbing to its challenges.

The poekoelan test is longer and more intense than those of the more mainstream martial arts, which generally only require students to demonstrate ability in the fighting forms. The poekoelan test lasts two days, takes place indoors and out, requires the students to work individually and together, and intersperses fighting with meditation, community service and teaching other students of the martial art. "It's a dramatic and difficult test," Rafkin said. "It is teaching you this reserve, that you are always capable of more than you think." Physically and emotionally challenging, the test gives its takers self-esteem and a sense of accomplishment, she said.

Poekoelan, formed from a combination of more ancient Indonesian martial arts, has been around for about 60 years. The Oakland studio is one of 13 in the world where the art is taught, according to the official poekoelan website. Primarily a method of self-defense, it looks much like a dance, the rhythmic quality coming from its animal-based systems of movement. A poekoelan artist fights as a crane, a monkey, a snake, or a tiger. When fighting as a monkey, an artist's arms dangle like a simian's. A one-two beat of the chest and an ooh-oo-ah-ah sound help the artist channel the monkey spirit. The crane is practiced up high with whooping sounds, while the tiger fights on all fours with controlled growls. The snake is done with a slither. "There's a lot of personal expression in it," Rafkin said. "No two people look the same in it."

The same can be said of the five teenagers who had started out on this 48-hour journey. James Wiley, 17, a junior at the Oakland School of the Arts, is built like an NFL quarterback, but prefers the arts to the athletic field. Naomi Zingman-Daniels, 16, a diminutive, self-professed "nerd," performs in school plays. Spencer Privette, 15, is tall and lanky with a light brown mop of hair. Xian Wong, who goes by Xianee (pronounced Shawnee), was adopted from China as an infant. She's slightly above average height and slender, but Xianee's meek appearance is offset by her black belt status. Lindsay Price-Friend, 15, is a shorter version of Xianee.

Having earned her first-degree black belt when she was 13-years-old, Xianee had endured the 48 hours before. Soon she would become a second-degree black belt. The others had each completed a 24-hour test to earn their brown sashes, the level below black belt. Heading into the black belt test, they all said they feared the 24-hour test more, since, as their first-ever endurance test, it was an unknown. Though the black belt test was twice as long, they said they knew what to expect. There was just more of it.

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The test started at 8 p.m. It was a Friday in the studio on San Pablo Avenue, just a few blocks south of Oakland's border with Berkeley. About two dozen family members and friends sat on fold-out chairs inside the front door, watching as their loved ones, dressed in white uniforms, were joined on the wooden floor by 18 other

students in white and the studio's 17 black belts, dressed in all black.



Xian Wong meditates shortly before earning her second-degree black belt in poekoelan.

The support network, or community, as the studio members call it, is emphasized in poekoelan, and it is a significant part of the test. It involves family, friends and other students associated with the studio, including some who come from out of town for the test. Third-degree black belt Ethan Kaiser-Klimist, 19, a sophomore at Long Beach State University, returned for the weekend to support the testing students and to help conduct the test. "There are so many parts to the test that I think it's going to find something that is hard for you," Kaiser-Klimist said. "Everyone goes through it their own way. I can't say I went through it the way they're going through it."

The black belt hopefuls opened the evening with a synchronized rendition of their animal forms, each motion completed with a pause and the shout of "Dee-ah!" before going to the next move. Next came simulated fighting, with each testing student confronted by three attackers—in each case, a combination of lower level students and black belts. That was followed by a self-defense exercise that required them to defend against a series of attacks—again, involving fellow studio members—involving wooden daggers, guns and other weapons. Drenched in sweat, they had been moving constantly for an hour. Just 47 more to go.

The audience dwindled as the night progressed. The test transitioned from routines to fighting and then to distance running—a 10-miler along Berkeley Harbor that the first-time testers ran starting around 5 a.m. Because Xianee was testing for her second-degree black belt, she did not take part in many of the physical tests, including the run. "A lot of her test was about teaching," Rafkin said, adding that Xianee instead taught private lessons to lower level students throughout the weekend. "A lot of second-degree is about giving back."

The first-degree test included a teaching component as well. After meditating for a couple of hours following the run, the testing students, including Xianee, returned to the studio to teach a 10 a.m. class. But when students of lower ranks showed up, there was one less instructor than expected. James hadn't been feeling well before the test, and had skipped dinner beforehand. As the other four gathered back at the studio, James was in the hospital being treated for dehydration. Though James' classmates were saddened by his withdrawal, they pushed on toward black belt status. The test continued.

After the class, the four remaining testing students cleaned up the studio, then set out to perform what is known in poekoelan as a "selfless service" task. Past tests have required the testers to do tasks such as yard work for a local woman who just had a baby or to teach self-defense classes at a local community center. This particular test called for the four to cook dinner for 16—the number of black belts that would be dining at Rafkin's house that night.

After turning out hamburgers and pasta, the testers next headed to Berkeley's Aquatic Park for the most challenging event of their second night. This portion of the test took place on a narrow greenbelt that runs along the east edge of the park's lake, a narrow, mile-long body of water wedged between Interstate 580 to the west and train tracks to the east. Called the "night walk," this part of the test was conducted in near darkness and required the students to each make their way across the park to a lit candle roughly a football field's distance away, fending off attackers who emerged from hiding spots along the way. As with the first night's drills, the attackers were

played by others from the studio; some hid behind trees and bushes, others crouched in the grass. Going one at a time, the testing students could move through the park however they chose, whether engaging in combat with their obstructers or running past them—they just needed to keep moving. Night fighting, Rafkin said, “is a lot about facing your fears in the moment.”

Naomi went first and passed on her first attempt. But for Spencer, a dread of the unknown struck almost immediately after he started. He struggled to move past the first attacker. “It wasn’t so much that she stopped me, it was more that I stopped myself,” he said. “I was afraid to go on because I didn’t know what to expect.” Recognizing that Spencer had stalled, Rafkin told him to start over again.

Spencer knew he had to approach his second try with a different mindset. If he didn’t succeed this time, he would be given only one more try—after that, he would have failed the test and been denied a black belt. “The second time I tried not to think as much,” Spencer said. “When you think about it is when you let it get to your nerves.”

The night walk started again. On Spencer’s second try, the same attacker engaged him in combat for a moment, but he quickly managed to get past her. After running past the next couple, Spencer was stumped by one who nearly pushed him back to the starting point. He eventually shook that attacker off, but his toughest obstacle was still ahead of him: a black belt named Julia, who managed to pin him down for about 20 seconds. Spencer doesn’t remember how she took him down; much of the night walk seemed a blur. “I remember who got to me, whether they just touched me or hit me, but I don’t remember what happened in between,” he said.

In fact, when he finally got back up and headed for the end point, he didn’t realize how close he was to finishing. “When I got past the last person, I didn’t know where the candle was,” he said. “I sprinted like 100 feet past it.”

The next phase of the test was not nearly as strenuous. After the night walk, the students meditated through the night at Rafkin’s house, a few blocks from the studio. “Sitting and doing nothing seems like it’s easy,” Rafkin said, “but it’s very hard to stay awake. It’s very hard to stay focused.”

Sunday morning was spent doing yard work—more selfless service—followed by a noon class at the studio in which the testers sparred with other studio members. Rafkin said this segment was not part of the original test curriculum, but she sensed that not all the students were holding up well, and that she needed to push them. “It was unclear up to a few hours before the end of the test if everyone would pass,” she said.



Members of Studio Naga meditate during the closing ceremony of a 48-hour black belt test.

More meditation followed the sparring session. The remaining four spent the next several hours around a fire pit in Rafkin’s backyard. Sitting on the ground, Naomi stacked pebbles and wrote in her journal. Lindsay mostly sat on a rock with her head turned to the right. Xianee, wearing a hooded, black sweatshirt and a white down vest, spent much of her meditation zoning out over the flames. Spencer did much the same. During a break from her meditation, Naomi said she had been thinking about James’ absence. “I’ve been training with him for a long time, and he’d been real positive,” Naomi said. When her friend couldn’t finish the test, she said, “I tried to go to a high place. At first I went to a real low place because I knew how hard he worked for it and how much he wanted it. So I knew it meant a lot to him.”

The meditation was the last step before the four students returned to the studio—back to the place

where the 48-hour process began, and back to where they spent much of their childhoods training for this moment. They were exhausted, with purple bags under their eyes. As they described their experiences, their speech slurred slightly. James, back from the hospital, had returned for the closing ceremonies to support his friends, and looked refreshed and cheerful.

With the other poekoelan students, including James, arranged in a circle, Xianee, Lindsay, Naomi and Spencer entered the candlelit room sash-free and sat on their individual sheets, each encircled by 13 red rose pedals that signify the 13 phases of training in poekoelan. With a semi-circle of the lower-level students behind them and some of the studio's elders, including Rafkin, in front of them, they spent the next hour in meditation, during which they were served tea and white rice.

After the meditation, Lindsay, Naomi, Spencer and Xianee put on red sashes, the ceremonial wraps worn by black belts, then took them off. Then Rafkin fastened their black belts around their waists. She asked each whether they chose to continue training or whether their time with the studio was complete. By each going to the other end of the room to blow out a candle representing the past, and lighting another one representing the future, each student confirmed a continuing dedication to poekoelan.

As her students rejoiced with family and friends moments after the ceremony, Rafkin stood with her arms folded, a faint glow of pride for her students on her usually stoic face. "It wasn't easy for them," said Rafkin "There were some moments."

James, she said, will be able to take the test again in about three months. Though disappointed he was unable to earn his black belt, James said that poekoelan is more about the process than accomplishments. "It's not just about getting a black belt," he said. "It's about friendship. It's about the community."

As new black belts, Lindsay, Naomi and Spencer are expected to refrain from asking questions in the next year while training. "They are supposed to grow into their own authority," Rafkin said. "It's about beginning again."

Though elated to pass the test, the three said they didn't see earning their black belts as the completion of a journey. "In poekoelan, we say the belt is only a color around the waist," Naomi said. "It's just another step in the training."

Author Bio



Laith Agha enters graduate school with a background in engineering, real estate, and a four-year stint as a reporter at The Monterey County Herald, where he covered the Carmel area, the city of Seaside, education and sports.