



I WANNA QUIT!

WHY CHILDREN QUIT & WHAT WE CAN DO ABOUT IT

by Dr. Robyn J.A. Silverman

"I wanna quit!" are three dreaded words we never like to hear. It happens everyday, everywhere. You may not be able to avoid it completely. But there is something you can do about it. Let this child-development specialist and character-education expert provide you with, first, the strategies to lay the groundwork for commitment and, second, what to say when that next child utters those dreadful words.

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Nobody likes to admit that it's happening to them. High quit ratios are the proverbial thorn in our side. Sometimes it feels like our entire student population is leaving our school in droves. Somebody lock the back door!

Retention is one of the most common concerns among all professional school owners. As a school owner myself, I have gone through the same frustrations as countless others. We put our hearts and souls into each student who joins our school. Many become like family. Then one day, they move on or, worse yet, they quit prematurely. Haven't we all had those students who are a wink away from black belt just quit right before our eyes? It feels like we have been sucker-punched.

Many of the school owners who I coach or consult for ask me why this keeps happening and why they never saw it coming. They ask, "Is it me?" *The school? My staff?* These are good questions. The answers might just give you the information that you're seeking.

The Four Main Reasons Why Children Quit

Children quit for all different reasons. Some children feel bored while others feel overwhelmed. Some children have unrealistic expectations that they're going to be performing the kind of martial arts that they see "in the movies" on the first day that

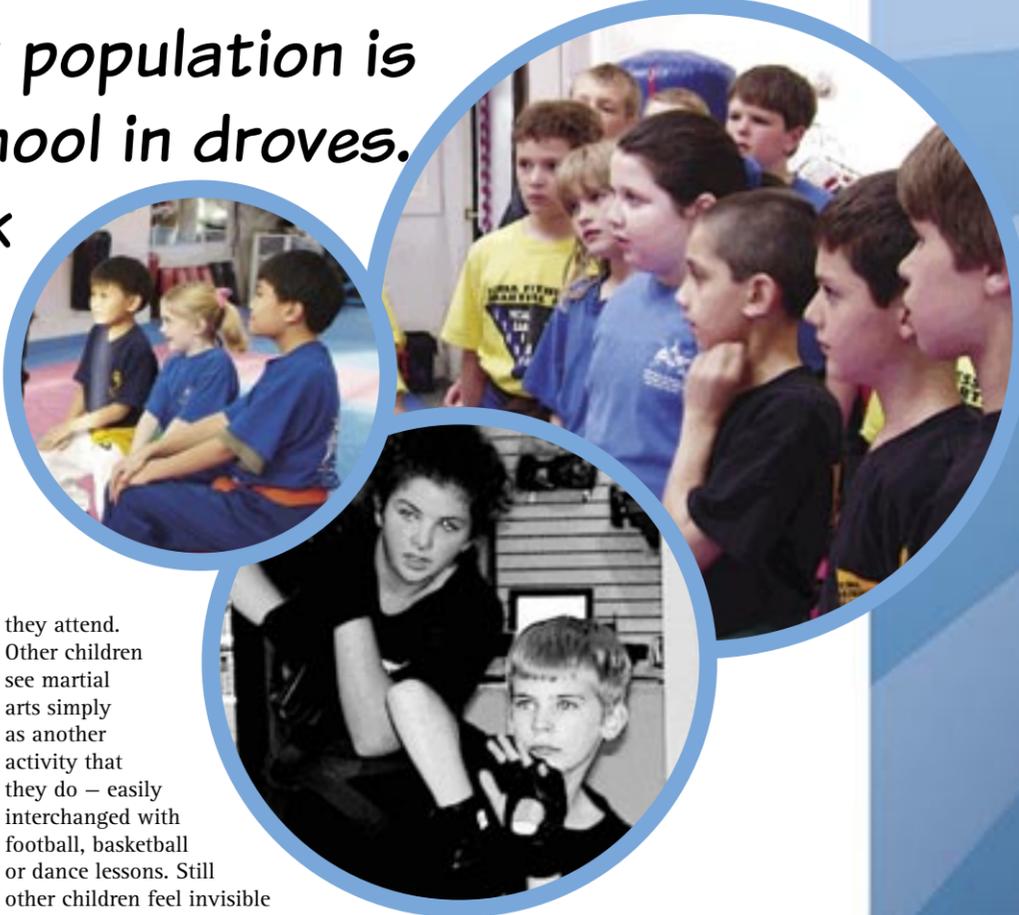
they attend. Other children see martial arts simply as another activity that they do – easily interchanged with football, basketball or dance lessons. Still other children feel invisible to the instructor, picked on, misunderstood or scared when they take class.

The first major reason for quitting is the instance of a "Curriculum-Based Clash." Simply put, when children feel overwhelmed or under-challenged, they will want to quit. After all, when something is too difficult or too easy, it isn't fun anymore!

The over-challenged child may feel as though he cannot keep up, catch up, or otherwise progress at the pace that the

other children in class are progressing. The under-challenged child may feel uninterested, disinterested or just plain bored.

Whatever it is, there's clearly a clash between the child's learning level and the curriculum you're teaching to them at this time. These children will surely start looking for other ways, whether it's in football, hockey, dance or a marching band, to fill their time and hold their interest.



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The second major reason for quitting is the case of the "Value-Based Clash." If a parent doesn't value what you teach, she will easily pull her child from your school.

A parent might see your martial arts program as "just another stop on the way between football and piano." Know the type? This parent might not know the value that your school provides that clearly separates you from (1) other academies, or (2) from other after-school activities. Why should they be concerned if their child wants to quit something that has only little or no perceived value?

Children tend to take their cues from their parents – so when mom and dad don't care, neither do they. If the value of your program is unclear, it will be the first thing cut when there's a change in schedule, interest or homework load.

The third major reason for quitting is the often elusive "Personal-Based Clash." When children or parents feel uncomfortable in your academy, uncomfortable around you or undervalued by your staff, they will likely want to quit. There may have been a

misunderstanding or miscommunication that led to this clash. Boundaries may have been breached in some way.

Perhaps the most common personal clash is when the child perceives that you don't "like him" or "care about him" like you do about the other children in class. Perhaps there's some truth in this assessment? Instructors and school owners are often left wondering what happened, since many personal-based clashes are left unresolved, unmentioned or disguised as something unrelated.

Finally, the fourth major reason for quitting is the instance of the "Situational-Based Clash." While the above reasons have a negative undertone causing a "falling away" or a "falling out," situational clashes are due to an actual lack of money, resources or ability to continue.

When families don't have the money to pay for lessons, the car to get their children to your class, or the person to bring the child to your school, they will likely need to quit. There may have been a divorce or a death, a new job

opportunity, an illness or a layoff that caused this situation to arise.

We're often very sorry to see these students leave, given that they would stay if they could.

When there's a clash, you need to fix it or be ready to let these people go. People don't need to clash in all four of these categories – just one – and if it



remains untreated or unfixed, those people are out the door. Of course, when you find a match, things just feel right. It feels easy and comfortable. When people match on all four of these criteria – you have a student for life.

Perhaps you believe that creating a student for life isn't the problem here. "We are in crisis mode," you might say. "Just tell me what to say when children want to quit!"

Let's not put the cart before the horse. If you skip over the next step, you have lost your students even before they officially walked out of your academy!

Teaching Commitment

Laying the groundwork for commitment needs to happen as soon as a new student walks through the door. If the first time you are talking about commitment is when someone is trying to quit, you are too late.

Here are seven ideas to help solve the problem.

1. Teach commitment before it becomes an issue. Respect for commitment and hard work should be part of the daily lexicon of any parent and teacher. Small praise phrases such as, "I appreciate your hard work and commitment to this class," can assist in bringing the notion of dedication to the forefront.

Even nonverbal cues can assist in teaching commitment. Take the extra time to give a child a high five or a meaningful smile for earning a stripe

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or a new belt. This can help children to realize that commitment means approval and praise.

One eight-year-old student told her mother recently, *"I think Dr. Robyn likes me since she knows I always keep my promises."* They know. They can read you like a book.

In addition, your retention-based character program should effortlessly intertwine lessons of commitment into each month of discussions, projects and parent-connection letters. This way, when the children are discussing the importance of goal-setting, courage and achievement, they're also talking about stick-to-itiveness. It's vital for every good teacher to realize that, if you say it, it can be challenged; when the children say it themselves, they perceive it as the truth.

2. Reach out for assistance. Believe it or not, you don't need to know everything about retention to run a successful martial arts academy or Personal Development Center. However, if you or one of your staff members is not an expert in child development, character curriculum writing, martial arts retention systems or commitment, make it easy on yourselves.

Purchase a monthly character curriculum that incorporates retention-based language and join a

consulting company that will give you some pointers on running a professional school. You can also enlist the help of a personal success coach for you or your staff who can help you lay the groundwork for commitment. These programs and coaches can become your partners in success!

3. Evaluate the match. You should be using some kind of Potential Student Evaluation Sheet. Using it, find out if the program is suitable to this child and this family. You will want to know the answers to some critical match-based questions such as: Does class meet at a time when the child is energized or grouchy? Does it meet at a time when the parents

are available or stressing out in traffic? What is this family expecting of the instructor? What are the instructor's expectations of the child?

Assess whether the child and the family who walks through the door will have the greatest success, based on their goals and desires, at your academy. Not every school is appropriate for every child.

Six years ago, a very strict martial arts instructor at a school across town

yelled at an inquisitive eight-year-old student for interrupting him during an introductory appointment. The school enforced traditional values like *"children should not speak unless spoken to."*



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we have big jackets on, and Christmas morning is right around the corner."

6. Put it in writing. Have you heard of a promissory note? It binds the borrower and the lender in writing. We use a promissory note of a different kind at our school. It is between the instructor and the child. The instructor promises to teach and the child promises to attend class. In order to have the child feel like part of the commitment process, you can have him put his name down on his own agreement.

I have often had parents and children put the commitment down in writing, sign it in front of the instructor, and then hang it in a prevalent place where they can see it each day. The process is especially useful for those parents who say that their child has trouble keeping his commitments.

Sometimes the lack of commitment may be due to the fact that the child was never really involved in making the promise to commit. The commitment should be read out loud at the time of signing so that the child understands that commitment is taken seriously at your academy.

7. Educate the parent about burnout and over-scheduling. Children need downtime. They need cuddle-time. They need decompression time. Don't you?



discuss what everyone is agreeing to so everyone understands.

The child should be made aware of the time commitment as well as the commitment to effort that s/he must give throughout the time that s/he is part of the program. Parents should be encouraged to discuss the benefits of joining the program with the child as well as what the child will have to give-up while s/he is in the program. This way, there are no surprises.

5. Explain it in their terms. When explaining commitment to a younger child, I encourage instructors to explain it in terms that a child can understand. It makes no sense to use abstract terms with a child who, developmentally, thinks concretely.

Avoid abstract explanations like, *"Joey, are you ready to commit for the whole time?"* Remember, this is the same child who asks, *"Are we there yet?"* every five minutes when on a two-hour trip to the beach. Time doesn't really make much sense to him.

Use concrete terms that a child can understand. One good example of a concrete explanation of commitment is, *"Jessie, you know how it is really warm out and we are wearing shorts? When you commit to being part of this class, you will be in it until it gets really cold out, when*

The family knew it wasn't the right school for their son.

A week later, the boy shyly entered our martial arts school and met the upbeat, progressive instructor. It was a perfect fit. He's now going for his second-grade black belt.

When the program matches its students, the school owner will have a much lower quit ratio.

4. Explain commitment each time the child commits. When a parent is getting ready to enroll a child in a program, a discussion should ensue. Whether it's a brand new program or the child is moving up into a special club, a good instructor will want to



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your character program and your martial arts academy. You have done everything to promote loyalty to the martial arts. But let's say they still want to quit. What should you do?

1. Find out the reason. Get out your checklist and do some digging. What kind of clash are you detecting when it comes to this child or this family? Is there a lack of fit between the child and the curriculum or perhaps between the parents and your staff's teaching style?

attending too many days per week and too many hours per day. When someone

loves something, they need time to miss it a little so that they are fresh and excited every time they get a chance to do it. Encouraging children to attend classes five days per week might seem like a fine idea for your over-achievers, but that kind of schedule isn't for everyone. Feed a child cookies all day long and eventually, even though the cookies are great, he is bound to want something else.

I've often found that, with some digging, the child reveals that s/he is bored or stressed in some way. When you get the answer, you can move forward in solving the problem.

2. Evaluate the problem. Whether we like it or not, there's some truth in every real problem related to quitting. If a child feels like s/he can't keep up, but you think s/he's doing fine, there is still some truth in the problem according to the child. It is, in fact, the truth according to the child.

But I Want to Quit Now!

If a child points out that s/he likes four different activities, s/he really should be advised to choose which one or two that s/he would like to participate in at this time. One of the best things parents can do is tell their child to "pick." Too many activities lead to too much strain on everyone. After all, everyone gets crabby while running from place to place. Summertime, or vacation time, can always be used for extra activities.

By the same token, burnout can occur at your martial arts academy if a child is

Now you have laid the groundwork for commitment. Stick-to-itiveness is an integrated part of



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Are You a Flawless Gem or a Diamond in the Rough?

Like a diamond, there are 4-C's to the highest quality of martial arts program. Those of you who have heard me speak or have read my previous maSUCCESS™ article, "Beyond Kicking and Punching: Transforming your School into a Personal Development Center" (August 2006 edition), already know that we need to offer much more than a physical program to win the loyalty of today's youth and parents.

We all love the martial arts. However, if your school only concentrates on the physical, it is missing some of the most critical components for retention.

#1: Cost vs. Value

You never want the cost of your program to outweigh its value because, when it does, people will have a right to complain about the price of your program. By the same token, you don't want your cost to be dwarfed by the value of the program because, if it does, you'll always feel that your buyers are taking advantage of you.

Like with any agreement, the best deals are the ones in which both parties feel that they are making out with the larger end of the stick. Of course, when you provide more than expected, it will be greatly appreciated.

Do your research on comparable programs in your area and within the industry and make sure that you're offering the very best program for the right price. When you hit the nail on the head, you'll know it. You'll have a waiting list!

#2: Character Development

How can you expect your student families to keep their commitments when you aren't teaching commitment as part of your program?

Make character development and positive choice-making part of your curriculum! A solid, comprehensive, developmentally-appropriate character program is one that will encourage children to use their most powerful sense of character, even when nobody is looking. After all, you cannot be with them all the time.

I tell the school owners with whom I work: "When children have a powerful sense of character, they do not need to be prompted to display it. They will

simply do the right thing when faced with choices and challenges, whether all eyes are on them or all eyes are looking away."

If you teach this message as part of the foundation of your program, how can they quit?

#3: Connection

Fostering a connection is simple, but it isn't easy. Listen. Be curious. Show concern. Praise. Under-promise and over-deliver.

Connection does not mean inviting everyone from the school to your personal barbeque every summer. It means that you provide the opportunity for involvement beyond the typical. Let the families know about the unique gifts your academy provides each and every month. Many schools can provide a laundry list of reasons why their school is "worth it," but find no way to relay these benefits during the course of the year.

Remember, you're creating an experience. An experience is ongoing. Ask yourself, does my academy attract, connect, teach and preserve? A superior martial arts and Personal Development Center should continually connect your academy with the children, parents, school teachers and community that you serve. Don't elect to be an island, be part of the village.

#4: Curriculum

We all teach different arts in different ways. Just like the many languages of the world, all of the martial arts are beautiful in their own unique manner. It doesn't matter what type of art you teach, but it certainly matters how you teach it.

Think about the best teacher that you ever had. Personally, I always hated math-based sciences. But my teacher, Mr. Summers, somehow made experimental psychology enjoyable. On the flip side, I always loved English Literature, but Mrs. Hopkins bored me to tears.

As it applies to us, curriculum is not the art itself. Rather, it is how the art is taught. If you believe that you're losing students because the lessons are too easy or too difficult for your students, don't blame the art. Change the mechanism or the system of delivery.

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September's *maSUCCESS* when he wrote, "I wouldn't keep a bad student and risk losing good ones." Well said.

Of course, if you can make an adjustment to fix the problem, by all means, do so!



If a child feels ignored in class, but you feel that you spend equal time with everyone, there's still some truth in the way the child perceives being ignored. Be understanding of the problem. There may have been some lack of communication or s/he might be reading you wrong.

Acknowledge the child's bravery in coming to you or let the parent know you appreciate their candor. The question here is, is this problem valid and can an adjustment be made to accommodate the issue?

3. Make an adjustment. If the answer is no, then be upfront about it.

For example, I had one school owner tell me that when he became more of a Personal Development Center, everyone was thrilled with the new character curriculum. In fact, it had brought many new people to his school and rekindled interest and excitement among his families in his school. However, one child was unhappy and didn't want to learn about how to strengthen his character. He threatened to quit.

While the problem had truth in it – he altered his curriculum so that character was taught – the school owner was unwavering about changing the curriculum back. This child was respectfully released because no adjustment could be made to accommodate him.

Jon VanCleve hit the nail on the head in his "Employee Insights" column in

Don't take the easy way out just to avoid a little extra work. Small adjustments are appreciated and show you care. They also help the children to stay committed and add value to your program.

If you talk about a reasonable adjustment plan, but the student still wants to quit, you may need to go back to step #1 above. You haven't quite figured it out yet.

4. Re-visit the notion of commitment. Remind the children that when they make a commitment, it's important for them to follow through. This is how people become their very best. Prompt them to recount how commitment is regarded in class and



in life and recount the conversation you had with them when they first joined.

In addition, help these students to understand that it's normal to feel frustrated, stressed and even a little bored at times. Everybody does!

As an instructor, you can help the students to find ways of dealing with these feelings. We often like to focus on the upside of commitment, and rightly so, but there's always an implied sacrifice when we dedicate our time to achievement in one area. It's our job to help children cope with the challenge. This is part of the commitment process too, isn't it?

5. Ask for a verbal or written recommitment. You can both sign the recommitment paper or pledge your recommitment with a handshake and a smile. You might be wondering, "What do I have to recommit to in this scenario?"

Well, that depends. You might be committing to providing the child with a tutor, moving the child into a different class, or personally checking in with the child every few weeks. Your recommitment helps the child and the parents realize that s/he has a partner in success.

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WHAT THEY SAID	TYPE OF CLASH	WHAT THEY ARE REALLY SAYING
She thinks she might be too old for martial arts.	Curriculum-based	This class is too easy for her and she feels like a fish out of water with all of these young kids.
He just doesn't feel like this is his "thing."	Curriculum-based	This class is too hard for him. He feels overwhelmed and not as good as the other children. He's "not getting it" or the curriculum is not stimulating enough to keep his attention.
He's finished with martial arts and now he's going to try something else for a change.	Value-based or Curriculum-based	I don't see that martial arts is any more valuable to my child than any other sport and, frankly, my child doesn't find martial arts exciting.
This is much more expensive than his other activities and we really only have enough money for one activity at a time.	Value-based	You haven't showed me why martial arts should be more expensive than all the other activities available. We gave it a chance, but now we are moving on.
We think we might be moving in a little while so we're going to stop for now.	Personal-based, Value-based or Curriculum-based	Either: I'm angry about something that you or your staff did or said. Or: I can't believe I signed that contract since it clearly isn't worth it. Or: My child is bored.
We don't think you'll ever believe she's ready for her next belt.	Personal-based	We think you are too hard on her and she will never live up to your expectations. We're going to take her out before her self-esteem really gets hurt.
We love your school and want to stay, but her father was laid off and we just can't afford the full tuition.	Situational-based	You know we really want to stay. I wish there was something we could do. Do you have any ideas? Can you help us?

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The child, of course, would be recommitting to sticking with the program.

6. Re-evaluate. This is one area where people often fall down on the job. They might think they have fixed the problem, but they forget to check back in to see if the adjustment is working.

Do not just open the door of communication and expect your student to emphatically walk through! Let the child and family know that you would like to meet or have a call in two weeks to make sure that the adjustment is working. If not, go back to step one.

7. Praise loyalty and effort. Nothing is better than hearing your superhero tell you that you're doing great. Wouldn't you want to stick with a program in which the instructor congratulates you on your efforts and praises you for your stick-to-itiveness? We all would.

Take the time to look each child in the eye and let him know you are proud, especially when that child is overcoming a challenge with commitment. That pride will translate to the way that that child looks at himself in the mirror each time he gets a new stripe, patch, belt or rank.

When he sees himself, he will see a future black belt.

8. Black Belt Excellence. The end result should be that the child follows through with the program without incident. You have set an important precedent, though – you've shown that you care and you have put a retention system in place.

Putting It into Action

Quitting might be a part of life for martial arts academies; however, school owners can improve their retention ratio with a little planning and systemization. Once you take the time to lay the groundwork for commitment, you're conquering half of the retention battle. Knowing what to do when someone utters those dreaded words, "I wanna quit!" takes care of the other half.

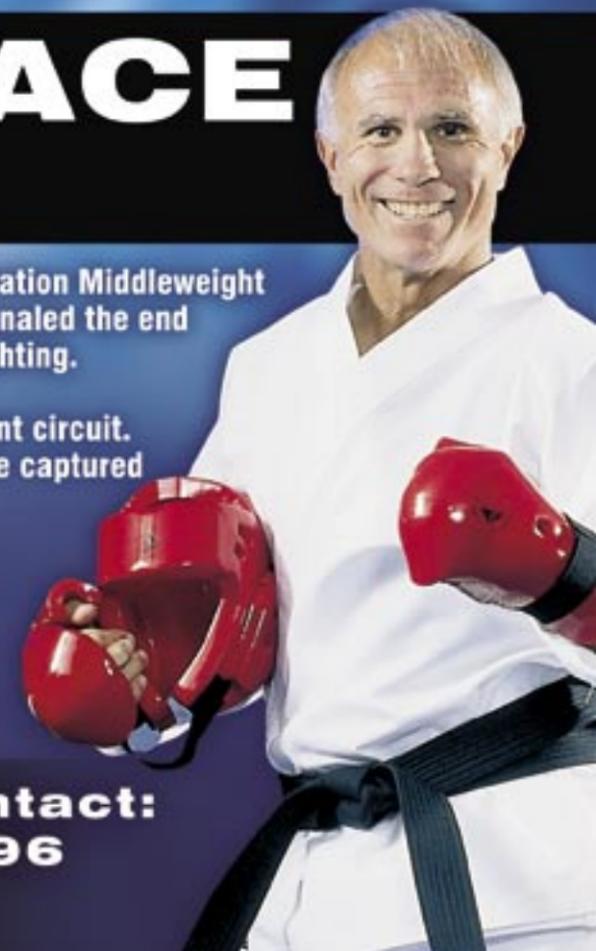
What do you plan to put into

action today to ensure better results? It's up to us to teach our students to refrain from throwing in the proverbial towel and get them to use it for a better purpose – like wiping the sweat off their faces.

Dr Robyn J.A. Silverman is the co-owner and child-development specialist at EEMA Fitness & Martial Arts in Weymouth, Massachusetts. She has developed the POWERful Words Character Toolkit, a systemized, easy-to-use, age-appropriate, character-education program for all martial arts schools. The Toolkit is currently being used in over 300 large and small martial arts academies worldwide. For information or booking Dr. Robyn for a parenting or staff training seminar, contact her at 1-781-718-1640, e-mail jsilverman@powerfulwordsonline.com or visit powerfulwordsonline.com.



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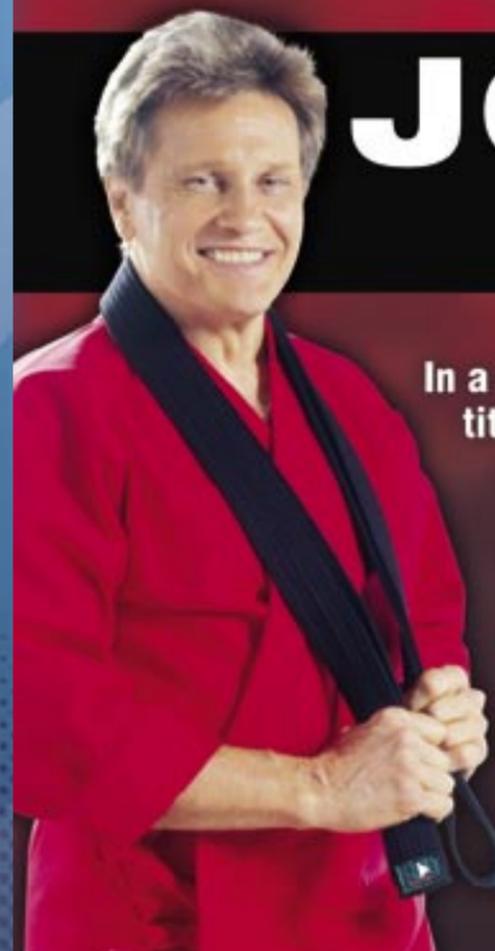
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