

Draft #1

Imagine this, you are sitting in a line on the floor with over 50 other adults who all look like they're wearing pajamas. They have different colors wrapped around their waists, and some have white stripes on them. You've been here before, but it has been with at least one other person in front of you... until now.

The world is quiet around you, even though you know the lady in the weird pajamas is saying some pretty awesome things about someone who has "taken a long time to get here because of life, but she has been with me since the beginning and has earned this." Suddenly, you see your husband, parents, brother, his girlfriend, and your best friend that you've known for 20 years walk through the door and your name is called. You stand up, walk over and are handed a certificate in a beautiful frame that has the black belt logo on it. You're now the less than 1% that has made it to a jiu jitsu black belt.

Twelve years ago I never pictured myself with a black belt tied around my waist, let alone by a previous UFC fighter that used to question her own life choices making an all female jiu jitsu class, but here I am. I had times in my life where I wanted to quit and never go back, I had to pick what was most important, and at that time it was making sure my career was on track. I took a two year break as a blue belt, the time when someone usually quits the sport, but I went back and earned my purple belt, then a couple years later my brown, then the next step was black. I know things in life can get hard, but that doesn't mean that you have to quit and never give it another try.

One of the greatest things about jiu jitsu is that anyone can do it. It doesn't matter how old you are, how much you weigh, what you look like, or who you plan to become in the future. Jiu jitsu challenges you to be your best self and see yourself in a different light. So the next time you think that you can never go back to a challenge, remember all the things it took for you to get there and all the support you have. The great Royce Gracie once said, "Jiu-Jitsu is my therapy, my passion, my life." Find your jiu jitsu and never quit.



Revision #1

I'm sitting cross-legged on the mat with over fifty other adults, all of us in what could be mistaken for matching pajamas. The belts around our waists—blue, purple, brown, black—are the only signs of difference. Some have stripes, some don't. My own belt feels suddenly heavier today. *Why am I more nervous now than I was before?*

The instructor starts speaking. "Some of us here have taken a long path to get here," she says, smiling in my direction. "Some of us - " she winks at me "have taken our own path to end up the same destination." *Wait... she's talking about me.* My stomach drops, my hands sweat. I glance toward the door just in time to see my husband, my parents, my brother and his girlfriend, and my best friend of twenty years walk in. My throat tightens.

"You ready?" my instructor whispers.

I give a nervous laugh. "As ready as I'll ever be."

She grins. "Let's make it official."

I stand, legs suddenly unsure if they'll hold me, and walk forward. She hands me a certificate in a beautiful frame, the black belt logo gleaming at the top. *This is it. I'm one of them now—less than 1% of people in jiu jitsu ever get here.*

My instructor ties the black belt around my waist, pulling the knot tight.

In that instant, I understand something I'd never really grasped before: the black belt isn't just an ending—it's a beginning. All those years I thought this moment would be about proving I was "good enough." But it's not that at all. The belt is just a mirror, reflecting every choice I made to keep going.

Twelve years ago, I never imagined this. I remember the blue belt years when I almost walked away for good, my career, my life, pulling me in another direction. I took two years away from this, two years where quitting was seeming like a pretty sweet option, two years where the mat felt like another lifetime. Coming back was terrifying.

But I did.

I fought for purple, then brown, and now... here I stand in Black. I can feel tears threatening, because this isn't just mine—it belongs to every person who stood by me when I didn't believe in myself.

Jiu jitsu has taught me that anyone can do hard things. When you finally push past the hardest days, you see yourself differently. You are different.



Revision #2

On Saturday, January 13, Ashley Ridenour received her Brazilian jiu jitsu black belt during a promotion ceremony attended by more than fifty practitioners. The event took place at her local gym, where participants sat in lines on the mat according to belt rank.

The promotion was conducted by her instructor, a former UFC fighter and founder of the gym's all-female jiu jitsu program. Before awarding the black belt, the instructor stated that the recipient had "taken a long time to get here because of life" but had been present "since the very beginning" and had earned the rank.

Ashley's family members and friends were present for the promotion. She was given a framed certificate featuring the black belt logo and had the new belt tied around her waist by the instructor.

Ashley began training in Brazilian jiu jitsu twelve years ago. She earned her blue belt, then took a two-year break from the sport before returning to achieve her purple belt, followed by her brown belt. The black belt is the next and highest standard rank in Brazilian jiu jitsu, held by fewer than one-percent of practitioners.

She described jiu jitsu as a discipline that is accessible regardless of age, weight, appearance, or future goals. She sees it as a metaphor for all types of other challenges in life.