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The highlight of the December test was the performance of the school's highest-ranking student, a 35-year-old ODU grad student named Larry Carter. He was testing for his third degree black belt. Because there are so many forms at this level, Carter had taken part of the test the night before. His performance was impressive throughout. But the most spectacular feats came at the end. In preparation, Carter had three students stand on one side of the dojang; each held a pine board at eye level, a few inches apart from the one adjacent to it. Directly across the room, two other students held a single, two-inch concrete patio block at eye level. In between these two stations, he set two cinder-blocks on end, a foot or so apart, and bridged a pile of *three* patio blocks across the divide. After taking a moment to concentrate, he moved swiftly to the first station and promptly sliced through the three boards in one motion with an open hand; next he moved across the room and broke the single patio block with a jumping back kick. Finally, he moved to the center of the room and with one forearm strike smashed the six inches of concrete that had been resting on the cinder-blocks.

Earlier, some of the brown belts had attempted but failed to break single patio blocks; the sound of their flesh smacking against the block underscored the difficulty of this feat and made Carter's performance all the more remarkable.

Perhaps even more noteworthy, however, was the event as a whole. Indeed, two images from that morning have stuck in my mind: the culmination of Carter's test, and Odom standing in front of the group, lined up in rows by rank, with his longtime teacher and mentor behind him. Odom had come a long way, not only from his days as a kid in Thailand, but in just the last 18 months. If anyone needed proof that the Norfolk Karate Academy had hit its stride and was thriving, this particular morning provided it.

Roberts is a stoic individual, but he was clearly proud as he presented Odom with the aforementioned work of calligraphy – a work that had for years hung in the dojang where Odom studied as a teenager.

SIX WEEKS after Roberts' visit, Odom told me I was ready to test for my yellow belt.



Among the many benefits of studying karate: time with my son, Sam.