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CANADIAN JIUJITSU COUNCIL

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The Three Roles of a Sensei: Instructor, Coach, and Mentor

An effective Sensei fulfills many roles throughout a class and throughout the development of a martial artist. Although the terms *instructor*, *coach*, and *mentor* are often used interchangeably, they each represent a distinct responsibility. Understanding these roles enables a Sensei to provide the right guidance at the right stage of a practitioner's development.

The Instructor

The instructor's primary responsibility is to teach knowledge and technical skills.

At this stage the learner is asking:

"What do I need to know?"

The instructor provides:

- Clear demonstrations.
- Accurate explanations.
- Safe training practices.
- Technical corrections.
- Structured lesson progression.
- Knowledge of dojo etiquette and culture.

Beginners require clear direction, frequent repetition, and patient guidance. The emphasis is on building correct habits and establishing a strong technical foundation. The instructor tells, demonstrates, explains, and guides.

The Coach

As learners gain experience, the Sensei increasingly adopts the role of coach.

The question changes from "*What do I need to know?*" to:

"How can I improve?"

Rather than simply providing answers, the coach observes performance, identifies opportunities for improvement, and guides the practitioner toward discovering better solutions.

An effective coach:

- Observes carefully before correcting.
- Provides specific and constructive feedback.
- Encourages problem-solving.
- Develops timing, efficiency, and adaptability.
- Helps practitioners analyse their own performance.
- Builds confidence through progressive challenges.

The coach gradually transfers responsibility for learning from the instructor to the practitioner. Instead of creating dependence, effective coaching develops independent martial artists who can recognise and correct their own mistakes.

The Mentor

The highest level of teaching is mentoring.

At this stage the martial artist is no longer asking only how to perform a technique. Instead, the question becomes:

"What kind of martial artist—and what kind of person—should I become?"

Technical excellence remains important, but it is no longer the sole objective.

The mentor develops judgement, leadership, professionalism, integrity, humility, and character.

A mentor helps practitioners:

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| • Develop sound judgement. | • Support and encourage junior practitioners. |
| • Lead by example. | • Continue learning throughout life. |
| • Understand the responsibilities of senior rank. | • Preserve and strengthen the traditions of the dojo. |
| • Develop effective teaching skills. | |

Mentoring prepares practitioners not simply to achieve Black Belt, but to become trusted custodians of the art for future generations.

The Martial Artist's Journey

The terminology we use should reflect a person's stage of development within Jiu-Jitsu.

A beginner is primarily a **student**. Their focus is on acquiring knowledge, learning fundamental movements, and developing safe training habits.

As experience grows, they become a **practitioner**. They begin applying principles, analysing techniques, solving problems, and taking increasing responsibility for their own learning.

With maturity comes the role of **martial artist**. At this stage technical competence is expected, but equal importance is placed on judgement, humility, leadership, and continual self-improvement.

Eventually, some martial artists choose to become **instructors**. Their responsibility extends beyond their own development to helping others learn safely and effectively.

The highest responsibility is that of the **mentor**. A mentor develops not only technical ability but also character, leadership, professionalism, and the next generation of instructors.

The progression can be summarised as follows:

- **The Student** asks, *"What do I need to know?"*
- **The Practitioner** asks, *"Why does this work?"*
- **The Martial Artist** asks, *"How can this be improved or adapted?"*
- **The Instructor** asks, *"How can I teach this effectively?"*
- **The Mentor** asks, *"How can I help others become better than I am?"*

Each stage builds upon the previous one. Advancement in Jiu-Jitsu is therefore measured not only by technical skill, but by increasing independence, responsibility, and service to others.

Although a Sensei may perform all of these roles during a single class, recognising the distinction helps ensure that teaching is appropriate to the developmental stage of each individual.

Ultimately, the goal of every Sensei is not to create lifelong students, but to develop capable practitioners, thoughtful martial artists, skilled instructors, and future mentors who will continue to preserve and advance the traditions of Jiu-Jitsu.

Canadian Jiu Jitsu Council Directors



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