

Olympic Karate: At What Price? By Mark Cramer

I started my Karatedo training in 1971 and competed in my first karate tournament in February of 1972. When I joined the Yamaguchi Goju Kai organization in January of 1974, I began to hear discussions about Karatedo becoming an Olympic sport, and those discussions definitely caught my attention. Many years have passed since then, and sport karate will make its debut in the Olympic Games in Tokyo in 2020. I'm excited and will watch with great interest. However, I have some conflicting feelings about this momentous event.

I view traditional Karatedo as a budo, a way of combat which also has a sporting component, and I have some concerns about the direction and influence that this sporting component is having on the larger picture of traditional Karatedo.

In this regard, I am reminded of some thought-provoking words of Eiichi Miyazato. Not only was he a direct student of Chojun Miyagi, he was also a technical advisor to the JKF Goju Kai. Consequently, his words carry a good deal of authority within traditional Karatedo circles. Miyazato Sensei told us: "The techniques we have today have been passed down through the ages by our ancestors who have stood in 'real places of battle', experiencing life and death situations, and have developed and improved techniques to survive. These techniques, with which we are entrusted, stand upon these long traditions."

Recalling these words caused me to stop and re-examine the relationship between Karatedo as a budo and karate as a sport. My feeling is that if we stray too far these long traditions, Karatedo will cease to be a budo and will become just another sport with little or no direct correlation to the real life and death situations mentioned by Miyazato sensei. My fear is that we may be approaching the point where the tail wags the dog, and that karate as an Olympic sport will overshadow karate as a way of combat.

Please do not misinterpret this as an indictment of sport karate or those involved in it. The international karate players of today are superb athletes, and the international referees are extremely competent. Additionally, I have been involved with sport Karatedo for a long time. I competed in the first USA National Championships that was recognized by the US Olympic Committee. That was in Atlanta in 1986, and I have competed and refereed in many more of the US National Championships and Team Trials since then. Consequently, I have seen many changes over the years – changes in the US National Governing Body, changes in leadership, and most significantly, changes in the rules of sport kumite.

I first began competing well prior to the USOC's inclusion of karate as a sport. Back then, Shobu Ippon Kumite rules were used in traditional Karatedo matches. Athletes of all weights and heights fought to a single point, which symbolically represented the incapacitation of an opponent regardless of their body type compared to yours. A waza-ari was worth a half-point and was awarded for a technique which, in theory, could significantly diminish your opponent's ability to continue the fight. An ippon was awarded for a technique which could incapacitate your opponent,

and ippons were rarely awarded. I can count the number of ippons that I saw awarded on my fingers. If no one scored an ippon or two waza-ari, the match went to hantei (judges' decision) even if one person had a half-point lead.

These matches were conservative, and reverse punches, front kicks, and round kicks dominated. This was quite different from the contests of today. The rules did not prohibit all contact to the face that was in excess of a "skin touch." In one such match in 1975, I hit my opponent square in the nose with an ura-ken-uchi (back fist strike) and blood ran down his face and unto his gi. I wasn't awarded a waza-ari, and the match wasn't even stopped to deal with the bloody injury. An ura-ken-uchi was not considered a technique that could diminish your opponent's ability to continue the fight. The bloody nose was viewed as a mere inconvenience in a real battle. Shojiro Sugiyama of the JKA was the referee, and these matches represented the tradition that Miyazato Sensei spoke about.

Along this line of thinking, very little protective equipment was allowed. Cups, mouthguards (gumshields), and small fist pads which covered the knuckles were allowed. Anything else including shin, instep, and foot pads were expressly forbidden.



From the general public's point of view, these symbolic and conservative matches were boring. By the time that the US Olympic Committee recognized karate as a sport, the rules were switched to Shobu Sanban which meant that the match was extended from one to three points.

Scoring was slightly modified to encourage a wider spectrum of scoring techniques such as giving an ippon score for breaking your opponent's balance and scoring immediately, scoring to the unguarded back, scoring at the precise moment an opponent's attack, and jodan kicks. However, a kick to your opponent's body with the instep was considered too ineffective to be awarded a wasa-ari. This made the rules somewhat consistent with the principles of a real fight. However, it also made the rules fairly complex and difficult for the untrained spectator to understand how the same technique could sometimes be scored an ippon and at other times be scored a waza-ari.

Additionally, weight divisions for kumite were added and more protective equipment was required and allowed. Cups, mouthguards (gumshields), and fist pads were required, and eventually shin pads were permitted. However, instep and foot pads were originally forbidden. Nonetheless, this type of sport karate still somewhat symbolized a watered-down situation of life and death with someone of your own weight.

As time went on, there was an attempt to transform sport karate into a more audience-appealing sport making it more likely to be accepted into the Olympic Games. The rules were simplified, but they no longer represented a life and death situation. Any acceptable punch to a scoring area is

worth one point. It no longer matters if the punch was delivered to the unprotected spine of an opponent or if the punch is to the head of an opponent who was moving toward you. Regardless of the dynamics of the match, all punches are worth the same.



Any acceptable kick to the body is awarded two points regardless if the kick is delivered with the ball of the foot or the instep. Certainly, a kick which is delivered with the instep of the foot to the abdomen of a well-conditioned athlete is not as effective in a real fighting situation as a punch to the face of an opponent who is moving toward you. However, in the modern scoring system, the less effective kick is worth twice as many points as the more effective punch.

Acceptable jodan kicks score three points as do certain throws that are followed by a successful scoring technique. This scoring system is

easy for anyone to follow, but these rules no longer represent the dynamics of a life and death situation. In my opinion, the older scoring systems did a better job of that.

The list of required equipment has become more extensive. The required karate mitts, shin/instep and foot protector, body protector, and female chest protector all make it safer for the karate athletes, but it takes sport karate further away from representing the life and death situations described by Miyazato Sensei.



With sport karate in the Olympic Games and with the media attention that it will receive, it is my fear that the sporting component will become more popular and more widely taught than the budo aspect of traditional Karatedo (if it hasn't already).



As time goes on, will karate center around teaching someone techniques and strategies to score points rather than the teaching someone techniques and strategies designed to allow that person to survive a life and death situation?

If it is the former, the price of getting karate into the Olympics will have been too great.

