

“Karate art and sport competition” Jadwiga Skurska

Practising Far East styles of fighting became a very common phenomenon. One of them is karate that arose as a mixture of traditional fighting coming from Okinawa and Japanese traditions of budo. Karate is being practised by thousands of people round the world. People at different age practise it. There are children, youngsters, adults and older people among them. Karate became a tool to create and maintain fitness and strong character. It became the way to lead the life.

The great karate masters always stressed that you cannot be an expert in fighting if you do not strive for perfection not only in a physical sense but also in psychical and mental ones. When, in the twenties of the 20th century, the master Gichin Funakoshi was introducing the Okinawa style of fighting on Japanese islands it was to be a tool to shape characters and fitness of young Japanese people. Modelling such features of character as persistence, humility, kindness, modesty and creating stable emotions were an integral part of the process of training. The main idea of karate is achieving skills, which enable to prevent situations of direct physical confrontations with other people.

Part of people who practise it, young people in particular, can find a lot of pleasure in sport competition. It is a new field of activity in karate in comparison with the ancient fighting coming from Okinawa and China. Kumite is one of the forms of competitions in which competitors fight according to strict rules. Kumite came to existence after karate had been introduced to Japan. It was influenced by a traditional Japanese way of fighting known as kendo. Most of later karate masters previously had been kendo masters. Samurai's swords gave place to bamboo ones in kendo.

In karate arms and legs took the role of swords. Mastery in using karate techniques is being measured by the technique, which is able to put the opponent out of action definitely in the shortest time. It is the idea of a finishing blow. Such a technique has to be directed at a definite point with maximum force both in physical and psychical meaning. Such explosive concentration of all physical, psychical and mental powers at one point is called kime. Masatoshi Nakayama, Gichin Funakoshi's disciple, writes in his book "Best karate" that: "Kime is the essence of the karate techniques. You can achieve kime while blowing, kicking or blocking. Techniques that lack kime cannot, in any case, be treated as true karate, does not matter how similar they may look. Sport competition cannot be an exception." This idea has to be obligatory if sport competition is to have the spirit of true karate. Kendo fighters have defenders, while karate fighters are not protected that way, so no contact is possible. The question is how to cope with the idea of the finishing blow and the rules of safety? Everything depends on establishing definite rules.

Victory in kumite

It is easy to imagine how both training and fighting could look like if the rules made us award each blow or each kick and announce a fighter with the highest score a winner. Practising kicks or blows or having some sessions with a boxer would be enough to make people ready for a fight in a competition. However, it would have nothing in common with true karate. What is more it would have nothing in common with the idea of keeping oneself fit and healthy.

Judging rules referring to kumite in traditional karate must, on one hand guarantee fighters' safety, on the other hand help them to achieve fighting skills in agreement with the established rules. They should also create conditions for a long lasting development of techniques and tactics.

Masterly blows in a sport fights should remind a sword push. They should be delivered with kime but without any contact. It demands high skills and a very good training to work out or exploit a situation to execute the technique of the finishing blow and still controlling it, in order not to injure the opponent. This imposes incredibly difficult demands on competitors. To imagine how difficult it is you should try to strike a ball hanging on a rope with all your power. Of course, it is easy! But try to strike a certain point in space close to the wall in your room with the same power and speed.

Sport fights in traditional karate are played according to the rules established by the International Traditional Karate Federation (" Judging rules ITKF", H. Nishiyama, 1995). A winner of traditional karate fighting is a competitor who, as the first, at the proper moment, from the proper distance uses a technique fulfilling the criteria of the finishing blow towards certain defined zones of his opponent's body. He gets one point (ippon) and becomes the winner. The right moment means that his technique reaches its aim at the moment when the opponent lost his ability to defend (he is in kyo) so karate fights are played to one point score (ippon). Such a point can be achieved as a sum of two smaller points waza-ari, which are awarded for the successful technique that however, does not fulfil all ippon's criteria.

If a fight does not finish before the established time a sum of achieved points decides who a winner is. If scores are the same there is an additional fight. When it is also a drawn game, judges take a decision taking the level of fighting presented by both competitors into consideration.

All contact blows, which make any injury are punished. Valuation of a contact is the task of a medical judge who is asked to come to the competition area in such a situation. A competitor who looses does not suffer any loss on his health and this is the advantage of establishing such rules. He gets new experience, knows weaknesses of his defence and knows how to work on. He can still develop his skills.

Although kumite reminds a real fighting it is not a brawl. Bravery does not mean brutality. Competitors are not enemies. On the master level kumite is a confrontation of psychical powers, technical and tactical skills. Both competitors and judges have to present stable emotions and good manners.

Sensei Hidetaka Nishiyama, a traditional karate teacher, has been learning how to use our own body to make it work according to its features, not to injure our health during a training and to enclose the mastery in karate fighting. Learning to use all rules, which are taught by Sensei Hidetaka Nishiyama needs a long time. Kumite fighters also have to use the rules in sport competition.

What fascinates a traditional karate connoisseur when he watches fights?

Traditional karate fights on the master level remind kendo fighting. There are two competitors. One of them is sashed with a red sash. We call him aka- that means red. The second is called shiro- white. They take their positions 3 meters away. They make a bound

towards a judge and towards each other. They take a ready position. Watching their fight can be a very exciting experience. Here are two examples.

A judge on the competition area gives a sign to start fighting to one point with a command: shobu ippon hajime! (start fighting to one point!). And here one of competitors jumps towards the other with a lightning speed decreasing their distance and delivers a kick into his trunk. What a fantastic kick! It is powerful, dynamic, maintaining full body balance. It is delivered with full control precisely at the permitted point. The kick touched slightly the body of the opponent but it is clear that it was a complete surprise for him. He is completely confused. He lost the game before he even took a defending position. He shows approval for his partner. It is a new experience for him and he understands that he still has to learn how to keep his mind and body in continuous alert to defend himself and to act(it is zanshin). The fighter gets ippon for this technique. It fulfilled all criteria of the finishing blow. If it were directed into the point inside the opponent's body the fight could end up with a serious contusion. The fighter won the game in a great style in the first second.

The judge announces the result of the fight. Such fights has already taken place. They are a fascinating example of high skills that can be achieved by the competitors.

Here is the next fighting. The judge gives a sign to start. The competitors, ready to fight at any moment, jump to each other. They both take very similar positions, their left legs in front, their right legs at the back, strongly supporting their trunks. Their elbows and arm are on the central line connecting both of them. If you watched it from overhead they would look like two slim boats or two swords. Their feet are active all the time moving their bodies, although they do not leave the ground. They fight for every inch. Their breaths make their own rhythm. It all emanates a great tension. Who is stronger? Who will give up? They both keep their emotions stable. At the first sight they represent a similar level of mastery. How do they intend to fight this game? Each trial to use any technique can be exploited by the opponent. He is too good. There is no place for risky movements. He must be provoked to move first. There are many ways to do this. Here we can see that the shiro uncovers himself, breaking physical and psychical pressure on his opponent. The aka exploits the situation and delivers a gyakuzuki technique, that is, with his right arm next to his left leg in front. But the shiro was waiting for this technique, so he blocks it and at the same time delivers a counter-attack towards aka's head. The aka fighter manages to block it and jump back. The shiro does not chase him. They are psychically too tired with the action. After two seconds they again reach full zanshin. The game starts again. This time the aka tries to hit shiro's front leg and make him fall down. Each time the shiro jumps back it is vivid that this fighter has a tendency to withdraw. When he jumps back there is a chance to attack, because it is very difficult to defend yourself when you are withdrawing. Does the aka notice this chance? Yes, the first trials to hit shiro's leg gave him information about probable behaviour of the opponent. After the next trial he continues the action with the series of techniques. The shiro defends himself against first two techniques but he loses balance and the safe distance and the third technique gets him when he loses his ability of defence or counter-attack. The judge stops the fight. The competitors come back to their places. Two corner judges show that the attack of the aka was on the waza -ari level. Two other judges show that they have not seen the finishing technique so they cannot take any decision. The competition area judge awards the aka with waza-ari and gives a sign to continue fighting. Will the shiro undo a loss?...

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