

The Impact of Competition on Modern Shotokan Karate

4th Dan Lesson Thesis – Adam Cockfield

There are many reasons given by Karateka as to why they started training, the ability to learn how to defend oneself is high on the list, along with general physical fitness, discipline and also the fun aspect. The draw of the competitive side of Karate isn't generally very high on the list, yet very quickly we find ourselves thrust into the competition environment, especially younger Karateka, to 'test' our newly developed Karate skills. Competition then very quickly becomes the focus for the majority of Karateka, it gives us a goal to focus our training around, it provides us with a challenge both with ourselves and our peers and the competitive aspect allows talented Karateka to shine providing that boost to the ego that keeps us always striving to get better.

Sport Karate also provides us with many valuable lessons firstly it teaches something that is almost impossible to teach in any other manner, courage, which is a hugely important characteristic in any Martial Artist. It trains a Karateka's ability to react to being attacked, rather than rely on pre-rehearsed Kumite routines, Funokoshi understood this point when he said "composure during tumultuous circumstance allows for spontaneous action and reaction". Sport Karate also helps us develop fast, accurate and decisive techniques, which separates what we do as a Martial Art from just fighting.

In my role as SSKI squad coach, I take this part of my Karate training very seriously both for myself as an active competitor and for my squad who are a young and talented group. However I do view this side very much as a minor part of my Karate training, and not the sole focus of it as I personally feel there are many other areas within my Karate that are equally if not more beneficial to train in like bag work, Kata Bunkai and more realistic dojo Kumite. However in many clubs the training is either geared directly towards competition or heavily influenced by it, shifting the focus away from Karate's martial roots. The emergence and the evolution of the WKF rules of competition has further served to disassociate Karate from its traditional self defence roots as many of these fighters are now full time athletes concentrating their training solely on Shiai Kumite. It is said that the legendary French fighter Christophe Pinna although quoted as being trained and graded in Shotokan, was

virtually self taught and never did any kata training. Whilst I will not criticise these fantastic athletes, I do not feel that they are actually doing Karate and as the popularity of their brand of Karate increases we will see a degeneration of a dynamic and powerful Martial Art. Indeed legendary English Karate Coach Ticky Donovan has been quoted as saying “Competition Karate is killing the art... there are blackbelts who can’t even punch their way out of a paper bag, or when they do they are missing the target...I feel Karate has to become more physical, it has become all too mamby-pamby. Today Competitors are getting points for punching and falling on the floor. Before, we would never have got a point for such a technique, as there is no stance or form”

I believe that whilst Sport Karate has a place within Shotokan, it is important to remember that it is only one part and its influence cannot and should not overshadow the rest of the art. I feel that as instructors it is our responsibility attempt to maintain Shotokan as a dynamic and powerful art, and one that has genuine self-defence implications. I will attempt to outline how Sport Karate has influenced our training and how I feel our training can be adapted to ensure that this influence doesn’t affect the effectiveness of the art.

History

To fully appreciate the impact of competition I feel we have to look at the history of Karate and how sport Karate came into being. It has often been quoted that Okinawan karate contained no sparring, only kata and their self defence applications yet Karate has historically been the art trained in by Japan/Okinawa’s best known fighters such as Soken “Bushi” Matsumura, Anko Itosu and Anko Azato, all of whom acted as royal body guards. These fighters also used to receive challenges from other fighters in the area to test their skills, indeed this continued into Modern times with Kase Sensei dealing with challenges to The JKA in the 50’s and 60’s.

When Funokoshi became established in mainland Japan he needed an avenue to develop and promote his style of Karate, therefore he targeted the Universities, which contained the best scholars and athletes in Japan who would go on to be leaders in commerce and politics. Karate quickly adopted Judos uniform and belt system, and the structure of kihon was altered along militaristic lines to cope with the change of teaching mass classes. Also with the sporting side of Japan’s other major Martial Arts such as Judo and Kendo being firmly

established, students wanted a competitive outlet for their Karate training, therefore in 1936 Nakayama Sensei, Abe Sensei and Nishiyama Sensei amongst others held a demonstration in Tokyo to outlining the rules of competitive Karate. These rules were used unofficially when rival university clubs conducted Kokangeiko (exchange of courtesies and practice), where they tested their skills against one another in a freestyle manner. It is said that Funakoshi Sensei was very much against the idea of sport Karate, and it is worth noting that the first actual competition did not take place until 1957, the year Funokoshi Sensei died. This difference of opinion on the focus of competitive Karate caused a huge split in the JKA and many of the 'old boys' Funokoshi's original students left in protest, leaving the JKA to be run in the main by members of the university clubs including Nakayama Sensei who was an employee at Takushoku, who became the JKA's chief instructor.

Waza

Shobu Ippon Competition Karate is built on one of Shotokan's founding principles of Ikken Hizatsu (Stopping/Killing blow), but due to the safety aspect of the sport many of the techniques within the Shotokan arsenal such as empi-uchi, hiza-geri, open handed techniques, attacks to joints and vulnerable parts of the body and some dangerous throws are forbidden in competition as they have the capability to incapacitate an opponent. As Malcolm Sensei regularly states "if it's not allowed in competition, then it actually works".

As a result greater emphasis has been placed on the training of techniques such as gyaku-zuki and different variants of mawashi-geri. Therefore the techniques found in our (Shotokan's) grading syllabus almost exclusively centre around techniques which can be used in a competitive environment, to the exclusion of the more dangerous striking and locking techniques. Indeed in SSKI's grading syllabus, from 9th Kyu to 2nd Dan the only techniques which appear which would not be allowed in a competition Karate match are 3 variants of Empi Uchi (Yoko, Tate & Mawashi) and three open handed techniques (Shuto-uke, Shuto-uchi and Nukite), which is a tiny percentage of the vast array of techniques practiced for grading purposes. Please do not misunderstand my point here, we (SSKI & other good Shotokan groups) practice a vast array of techniques within our training, but the influence of sport orientated "University Karate" has been so great that it has limited the amount of techniques that are required to demonstrate our technical skill and ability.

This influence has continued into the Yakusoku Kumite that we practice, quite rightly basic kumite (Ippon, Sanbon & Gohon) revolves around the use of basic technique, however once we move to Juyi-Ippon (semi-free one step sparring) the use of sport-orientated techniques continues. It is my belief that by the time a student reaches 1st Kyu level attempting the exam for their Shodan they should be demonstrating a mastery of an array of techniques from within the Shotokan arsenal, and not be reliant on the 3 or 4 techniques that they use for success on the competition mat.

This type of competition orientated training, also leads us to learn how to defend against linear Karate-style attacks rather than how we would need to defend in the street. In 2004 using Home Office statistics, CCTV footage and witness/victim interviews Jeff Nash published a paper outlining the most common forms of attack in the UK, he found that following were the most Habitual Acts of Violence;

1. One person pushes, hands to chest, which is normally followed by the pushee striking first, to the head.
2. A swinging punch to the head.
3. A front clothing grab, one handed, followed by punch to the head.
4. A front clothing grab, two hands, followed by a head butt.
5. A front clothing grab, two hands, followed by a knee to the groin.
6. A bottle, glass, or ashtray to the head.
7. A lashing kick to groin/lower legs.
8. A broken bottle/glass jabbed to face.
9. A slash with knife, most commonly a 3 to 4"lockblade knife or kitchen utility knife.
10. A grappling style head lock.

Whilst the skills developed from defences against Karate style attacks may have some cross over in allowing us to defend against the attacks listed above, for the art to become, or more accurately return to, an effective form of self defence training, it is important that our kumite training includes defences against attacks such as these.

Maai (Distancing)

Maai only important when you have a partner in front of you and Sport karate provides this

stimulus in a 'live' environment however it teaches an unrealistic fighting distance. WKF competition rules will score a Jodan Zuki if it completes between skin contact and 2-5 cm's of the target, but once a technique has reached its completion i.e. full extension then the power is essentially lost as the fist is slowing to a stop, hence why it's used in sport karate. Studies have shown that techniques reach their peak velocity (7.5 m/s) at between 70 to 80% of completion; therefore we should aim for and train to hit the target at this optimum point. Indeed Kanazawa Sensei is quoted as saying "each execution of tsuki, geri or uchi should go beyond the target approximately 10cm". This is easier to achieve when you are actually hitting a target such as a focus pad or bag, however things change when facing a partner due to safety concerns but also sometimes due to the association with hitting someone as a "lack of control". Constant training of not hitting something only serves to teach you how to be good at not hitting something, but rather than making this type of training dangerous Kanazawa states it is "only after thorough training of what the real feeling of 'giving a blow' is, that we realise the importance of the control or sundome". It is the concept of sundome that I believe has been potentially misunderstood; I feel that sundome should not be arresting a fully locked technique just short of the target, but arresting the technique just *short of completion* whilst *hitting* the target. I explain this to my students as Dr Jekyll & Mr Hyde karate, it should look the same but the ability to cause damage is controlled by the distance employed and how your attack is controlled.

Another factor that alters the distance employed is the use of hikite, and again due to the rules of Sport Karate its use has become less utilised in Shotokan training. Harry Cook likens the use of hikite in Karate, to a Blacksmith using tongs to stop the hot metal from moving whilst it is hit by the hammer, hikite also allows us to control the maai and body movement of the opponent, as well as being able to pull the opponent onto an attack increasing the force of the blow you are able to deliver. This practice cannot be used in Sport Karate due to the safety implications, and the rules of both Shobu-Ippon and WKF ensure that the opponent cannot be held and hit, and any grabs can only be for a maximum of a few seconds.

Targeting

To truly understand the concept of Ikken Hizatsu, the concept of targeting must be explored and understood completely. As previously discussed the rules of Sport Karate are geared

towards maintaining the safety of the competitors, therefore the areas of the body that you are prohibited from attacking whilst competing are probably the areas that we should focus on training to hit during the rest of our Karate practice such as the throat, neck, joints etc.

I would guess that around 75% of all points scored in competition are chudan gyaku-zuki, and indeed I spend a lot of my time with the SSKI squad focusing on exactly that technique, therefore it is unsurprising to see many students base their counter attacks in Jiyu-Ippon around this technique. I feel that with each attack in Jiyu Ippon, the counter should be such that the attacker is “stopped” completely by the counter, and a single chudan gyaku-zuki would not do that. However I feel that sometimes we have misinterpreted and over emphasised the concept of Ikken Hizatsu, in that we have become conditioned to look for the one shot “point” rather than looking for the opportunity to finish an opponent with the technique or techniques we throw. In Lawrence and Klein’s book “The Way of Kata”, one of their rules of Kata Bunkai is “disrupt to strike, strike to disrupt”, and I see this as the use of multiple strikes in Jiyu Ippon to set an opponent up for that clean “one shot finish” to a vulnerable point that Shotokan Karateka should strive to achieve. This idea of setting an opponent up for a finishing blow or technique is very relevant when considering locks and throws in Karate, as in ‘live’ situations an opponent will not stand there and allow you to sweep, throw and restrain them without resistance, therefore you have to look to “create time” as Dave Hazard Sensei describes, by throwing a technique that will disrupt the opponent enough to allow you to complete the next technique.

The Kumite of Kata

It can be said that Kata are time capsules of fighting, used to physically express the techniques, ideas and tactics of Karate masters of the past, allowing ideas to be passed from generation to generation. It essentially provides a framework or syllabus for us to work from, like an encyclopaedia of techniques and tactics which define what we do. Indeed Hazard Sensei during a recent course described what he taught as “Karate-do based on the template of Shotokan”, and the only thing that defines Shotokan from other styles of Karate and other arts is the kata which we practice. The practice of kata performance works on many levels, firstly it acts as a physical training exercise stressing the body to improve strength, speed, agility balance etc. It also provides an avenue for solo training, as once the application of certain portions of the kata are understood they can be practiced at full speed

and power without the fear of injuring a partner, whilst also training specific motor patterns which will reinforce the practical application of the moves whilst working with a partner.

Despite being regarded by many as “The Heart of Karate”, Sport Karate has turned Kata into nothing more than a gymnastic exercise, with the aesthetics of the form being considered more important than the underlying function. It has separated a holistic art, which uses kata as its blueprint into two distinct almost unrelated activities, kata and kumite. This has been further re-enforced with the changes that have been made to kata for the purposes of competition for example Asai Sensei added Jodan Kekomi to Nijushiho and modern day kata competitors such as current World Kata Champion Luca Valadesi have completely abandoned Keage for Kekomi., these and other more subtle changes over decades of training have altered the way we view the Bunkai found within these Kata.

The practical application of kata with the Shotokan world have often been criticised for being unrealistic, and based mainly on Karate style techniques, such as the Bunkai shown in Nakayama Sensei’s “*Best Karate*” series, however I feel that people are missing the point of what this kind of application is trying to achieve. I believe that this is the basic or kihon Bunkai aimed at providing people with an understanding of what each technique means, essentially labelling each technique for ease of understanding allowing the Karateka to express the correct intent on each move.. When I teach kata to students I will always use the “WYSIWYG” (What You See Is What You Get) approach i.e. if it looks like a block then it’s a block, so that they can better understand what I am asking them to do. Once the outward physical movements are understood, I then move to what I refer to as Oyo, the practical implications of certain techniques or certain portions of that kata against real life Habitual Acts of Violence, I also encourage students to look at variations of the theme and try and use these within their own Kumite, whether that be Jiyu-Ippon or Jiyu Kumite.

The Future

“To search for the old is to understand the new. The old, the new, this is a matter of time” (Gichin Funokoshi)

In terms of the progression of the competitive side of Karate in many ways I feel we should look back rather than forward, as I feel the progression forward has only ever been towards a

safer art in line with Olympic recognition rather than as an aid to our Karate training. In recent years in the UK we have seen a re-emergence in popularity of Shobu-Ippon Kumite rules, I feel that this is because Shobu-Ippon competition far more like real budo than the new WKF rules which I feel have degenerated into a game of tag, albeit a very impressive and athletic game of tag. Yahara Sensei's KWF has experimented with mixing Kyokushin style knock down with Shobu-Ippon to move the emphasis onto knock-outs rather than semi contact inline with Yahara Sensei's budo philosophy on Karate. Other Karate groups have looked at full contact sparring, Daido-Juku or Kudo Karate have run events for the last 20 years with just fist and head protectors and they have managed to keep the essence of Karate attitude and technique in their events. The emergence of Mixed Martial Arts has also highlighted the deficiencies in Sport Karate, however I feel that watching MMA fighters fight should be no different to how we spar the dojo, albeit with controlled techniques. We are now beginning to see fighters emerge in MMA organisations with a Shotokan background, most notably Lyoto Machida the son of the JKA representative in Brazil who is challenging for the UFC light heavy weight title in the summer, and I feel that this is an avenue more Shotokan Karateka will look to go down. Indeed traditional Karateka and successful Karate athletes such as Paul Newby (Boxing) and Leon Anderson (K-1 Kickboxing) have already begun to look at other combat sports.

Shotokan has often received a bad reputation amongst the Martial Arts community due to its perception as a rigid long-range art, however I feel that this is only true when people do not break away from the shackles of competition orientated kihon, and begin to explore other areas of their Karate. Hazard Sensei on a recent course reinforced this point saying that fundamentals are extremely important however if you keep digging the foundations but not building on them you will go nowhere. The techniques employed in Shotokan vary very little from those found in Goju-Ryu, Muay Thai, Krav Maga etc yet Shotokan is still referred to as a poor relation to these other Arts in terms of self defence, therefore it is how we train these techniques rather than the techniques themselves that we should potentially focus on as our own Karate develops.

As I referred to at the start of this report, Sport Karate teaches us some incredibly valuable lessons, and without it I do not think that many of today's great Sensei would be the same Karateka with the same level of ability. However I do feel that Sport Karate has to an extent dominated our view-point of Karate, and heavily influenced how we train sometimes with a

negative effect in terms of our self defence effectiveness. As we progress as Karateka we should look to forge our own “way” in Shotokan, and from my perspective I want to look at how I can address the balance of the influence competition has had on my Karate. As a Kyu grade and junior Dan grade I viewed competition as part of my Karate, now as a more senior Dan grade I almost view the competitive side and the training employed to get better at it, as distinctly different from the Karate I practice in the dojo and on my own. I want to practice Karate based on a syllabus of techniques derived from the Kata we practice, and my kumite to become as realistic as possible working in the main on the points I’ve described above distancing, targeting and the realism of the types of attacks used both attack and counter attack. Luckily for me SSKI is very open minded and allows myself and other Yudansha to look to develop a Karate of our own, however many groups are more blinkered and simply produce polished Kyu grades with a blackbelt on who are tricked into believing that by doing Oi-zuki up and down the dojo and practicing pre rehearsed long range kumite they are prepared for defending themselves in a real confrontation.

LESSON PLAN

- 0 – 10 minutes – Dynamic Warm Up.
- 10-20 mins – Basic Juyi-Ippon Kumite
 - Jodan – Tate Shuto (kokutsu), Chudan Gyaku-zuki
 - Chudan – Slide back Gedan Barai, Osoto-guruma (outer reaping sweep)
- 20-30 mins – Emphasis on Targeting – Ikken Hizatsu
 - Jodan - Tate Shuto (kokutsu), Jodan Gyaku-zuki.
 - Chudan – Slide back Gedan Barai, Chudan Gyaku-zuki, Osoto-guruma (outer reaping sweep).
- 30-40 mins – Gyaku-zuki pad work.
 - Emphasis on distancing – Competition v Impact
 - Sundome
 - Hikite – “Vice for your Hammer”.
- 40 – 50 mins – Juyi Ippon Kumite
 - Focus on the previous points, plus utilising hikite.
- 50 – 60 mins – Juyi-Ippon Kumite
 - Alter the attacking distance
 - Both Tori (attacker) & uke (receiver) both from yoi/natural position.
- 60-90 mins – Defences against Habitual Acts of Violence from Kata
 - A swinging punch to the head. Meikyo
 - A single front clothing grab, followed by punch to the head. – Heian Yondan
 - A double front clothing grab, followed by a head butt. – Nijushiho.
 - One handed wrist grab followed by a punch to the head – Heian Godan.
- Warm Down.