

To AJKA-International
AJKA-I of PA
Instructor Trainee's Report #16

Subject: “Uses of Training Equipment in Karate”

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All athletic activities have specific equipment that assists the practitioner in achieving proficiency. In karate, since maximum speed is essential in all techniques we must have resistance from outside sources to achieve and gain muscle coordination and conditioning. If you simply "punch the air" you get no feedback on your technique on whether it is correct or incorrect. Also, you never learn what it is like to strike a hard surface.

Traditionally, there are two pieces of equipment that are used in every dojo: the makiwara and the heavy bag. Both of these are useful in developing techniques. However, there are other types of equipment such as: Shields and hand targets, Resistance bands, dumbbells and weights and stretching aids.

The makiwara ("wrapped straw") or machiwaru, as it is called in Uchinaguchi (the native language of Okinawa) is a traditional hojo undo kigu (supplementary training tool) that is used in Okinawan karate. A makiwara is a wooden post used for striking, and its name comes from the padding that was traditionally used for the striking areas, which was made of bundles of rice straw wrapped with rice rope.

The makiwara, or punching board, is unique to karate dojos. The purpose of the makiwara is to provide instant feedback regarding the effectiveness of your strikes, as well as to strengthen the structure of your strikes. It is designed to aid in the development of power in the punch, strike or kick. The makiwara is a post about four feet high that is tapered near the top. The makiwara must have enough flexibility that it can be punched with maximum power. Only in that way will it be useful in developing the punch, strike or kick.

The most common technique trained on the makiwara is the reverse punch. It is an excellent way to get the feel of karate techniques applied to an actual target, rather than into the empty air. It gives practice in focusing, muscular control and breath control. When you strike it, the makiwara resists, and the harder you hit it, the harder it pushes back. This is different from the reaction you get from a heavy bag, which will swing away from you when you hit it, reducing its resistance as it does so until it reverses its direction and comes back at you.

The makiwara's spring action provides constant pressure, and this will cause you to notice when your structure is weak. Your wrist or elbow may buckle, your shoulder might be pushed back, your torso might lean away, or you may even be rocked back on your heels. These are clues as to what you need to improve in your striking form.

It is important to train both sides of the body – not just the favorite side. Since most karate techniques are practiced by striking an imaginary opponent and punching and kicking air, makiwara training is essential to develop the feeling of impact.

The heavy bag does have a purpose in the dojo. The large bag is used mainly for practicing focusing and for strengthening the various kicks. It gives excellent training in perfecting the most effective angle of impact. A smaller bag is also used for kicking practice. Since it is light and it is hung on an elastic band it will move when struck which provides good practice in timing and in kicking a moving target. Lastly, both a large and a small heavy bag are good for hand techniques as well as hand and foot combinations.

Two other very important equipment for karate training are mirrors in the dojo and video camera. A full view mirror is an extremely useful tool in the dojo. For the instructor, you have the benefit of seeing the entire class. In a group class you can gauge if the students are following along or having difficulty. Also, when you teach children you can monitor their position.

For a student, you can see the instructor no matter where you are in the dojo. You are also able to see what you look like when executing the technique. Lastly, you can see and learn to identify your mistakes and try to correct them on your own.

Finally, one of the best training equipment you can use when you are learning a new kata or getting ready for testing or tournament is the use of a video recorder. Like the makiwara, the video will provide you with instant feedback of your techniques in your kata. You will be able to see whether you are executing the kata with the correct speed and control and how it looks to other people watching. It is a humbling experience watching yourself on video.

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