

To AJKA-International  
AJKA-I of PA  
Instructor Trainee's Report #25

Subject: **Historical Differences Between Martial Arts and Sports**

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I always hated when people asked how long I have "played karate". It made me feel like I was playing with Legos. To me the person asking the question did not truly understand the essence of karate, did not understand that it was a martial art, did not understand the character building that karate had on me and these people looked at karate as just another sport like baseball or soccer. While it always made me angry maybe they were not entirely wrong.

Historically, there was no difference between fighting arts and sport. Despite the legend of Bodhidharma every single civilization started and developed their own combative system (Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, and even African tribes). These civilizations trained their citizens from childhood for combat. They forged their bodies into weapons to protect their societies from invaders. During periods of violence and brutality these combative systems evolve rapidly upward gaining sophistication and effectiveness in order to protect and defend the general population. However, during times of peace and prosperity these skills stagnated and slowly devolve downward. To prevent this stagnation the ancient societies created combat sports such as wrestling and boxing in order to keep their warriors' skills sharp.

In environments where fights are frequent, sudden and often life threatening practitioners did not practice "controlled techniques". Only those methods that were guaranteed to work the first time and every time were practiced, studied and taught. The focus of all teaching was survival. These "fighting arts" were violent, brutal, unforgiving and extremely effective.

"As societies move from periods of conflict to periods of peace the 'fighting arts' development slows and the system of combat evolves into a martial art."<sup>1</sup> "A martial artist is able to devote part of his training to actually understanding the art, analyzing the techniques, discovering why they work and investigating the underlying principles."<sup>2</sup> The focus shifts from providing the practitioner with effective self-defense skills to those that are more socially acceptable.<sup>3</sup>

Master Gichin Funakoshi had said, "There are no contests in karate." He taught that karate should not be used for self-defense even as a last resort-because once karate was used, the conflict became a matter of life or death, and somebody was going to get injured. Funakoshi always remembered the proverb Soken Matsumura taught him: "When two tigers fight, one is bound to be hurt. The other will be dead."

Nowadays, challenges and fights to the death to see whose skills are better went the way of the Old West gunfighter and kung fu movies. The most visible facet of martial arts today is the "martial sport". Techniques and training methods are developed to teach the student how to

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<sup>1</sup> Bob Orlando, Martial Arts America: A Western Approach to Eastern Arts, Frog, Ltd 1997, pg 10

<sup>2</sup> Id.

<sup>3</sup> A perfect example is how Master Funakoshi removed many of the brutal techniques out when he taught at the schools.

score points. It also does not help that you can find a “karate school” on any corner and on any given weekend you can find a karate tournament near you where you compete for medals, trophies and even cash prizes.

In addition, karate is currently making a bid for the 2020 Olympics in which the WKF constantly refers to karate as a sport as if referring to a game. The implication is that karate is a sport for "play" and its effectiveness for self-defense, fighting or combat is being stripped away.

Because of their alleged danger or lethality, many “karate schools” engage in artificial and even counter-productive training which involves "pulling" techniques, modifying the point of contact, and adding in a precautionary element of movement. Other schools require their students to wear full body protective gear so they do not get hurt. This slow, careful, non-contact training is not an effective approach to prepare a person for actual fighting situations that the old fighting arts taught its citizens.

Traditionally, one purpose of competition is to take the place of the older shinken shobu (life-and-death fights) in developing technique, knowledge, and character. “You never see yourself so clearly as when you face your own death.”<sup>4</sup> Today’s competitions provide a safe, controlled glimpse at this kind of defeat.

Fighting spirit can be developed only through fighting. While kumite is not the same as the battlefield it does serve a similar purpose, and in a peaceful society it is the closest thing that the ordinary practitioner can get to a combat situation. Of course the ultimate goal should not be the winning of medals. Matches, along with free practice and sparring, are simply different methods for training the mind and body to deal with the adversity of fighting situations.

Just as non-competitive martial arts training may not provide the benefits of competition, training for sport competition may not provide the full scope of self-defense training. The Karateka should still be concerned about learning self-defense techniques that could not be used with full force in competition. I have always liked a quote from Master Nakayama when discussing tournaments:

[y]ou see, before Master Funakoshi died, I began researching the idea of developing tournament, or sport karate. But when I asked Master Funakoshi for advice, he refused to comment. He worried, you see, that if the tournament concept became too popular, then students would get away from the basic principles and practice only for tournament competition. He knew we would have karate tournaments and that they would be important for internationalizing karate, but he wanted it clearly understood that the most important thing would always be the basic training first

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<sup>4</sup> Neil Ohlenkamp, *Black Belt: Judo Skills and Techniques*, New Holland Publishers Ltd 2006, pg. 26

So, as I indicated in the beginning, maybe the karate that I have learned over my lifetime is a sport. However, I want to believe that I am also a martial artist in that I have devoted my time and training to understanding the art, analyzing the techniques, discovering why they work and investigating the underlying principles. This is the reason why I truly enjoy the Instructor Training course.

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