

The value of competition

Why compete?

People train in karate for many different reasons, as a club instructor I take pride in the fact that I can accommodate any person who wishes to train for whatever reason they choose. Whether that be simply as a hobby, completely immersing themselves in the do of karate, keeping fit or achieving the highest competition success. Whatever reason is chosen they all seem to share a common desire, to become yudansha, and although I fully accept some will have no desire to compete I still make it a rule that in order to gain permission to attempt their shodan grading they must first have competed. For the vast majority of club members this is not an issue as they already compete, however I have found myself, on occasions, needing to explain the benefits of competition to all karate-ka, not just to those who seek trophies.

My first response to this questioning is one of preparation towards dan gradings. Whereas we can, in club, prepare a students technique, speed, power, we can even prepare them in performing karate to the point of physical exhaustion. It is impossible to replicate the impact nerves can have on their karate. It's only by stepping out onto the tatami at a competition, full of nerves, ready to have your karate judged or test your ability against an unknown opponent will you find out what nerves can do to you. The reason for this is not a lack of ability in training or instruction, but all to do with the function and physiology of the brain. The brain can be thought of as three layers, each with its own function. Although all three layers work together simultaneously which layer is dominant depends upon the situation and environment an individual is in. The neo-cortex is the most recent part of the brain to evolve, also called the cerebral cortex or cerebrum. It is where most mental activity takes place (thought, memory and spatial awareness). Anything new to be learnt is processed here. The limbic system is really several 'bits' of the brain, including the hypothalamus. It controls the autonomic nervous system, is concerned with self preservation and defence responses (fight or flight). The oldest and most primitive of the three layers is the R-complex or basal brain. It is very closely linked to the limbic system and controls functions related to survival and body maintenance; automatic behaviours, reactions and stress responses. Learning new techniques, new kata, kumite set ups etc all takes place in the neo-cortex. For these to become part of our reactions we need to shift their use into the R-complex, this is commonly done by repetition over months/years.

During times of stress or anxiety the R-complex becomes dominant over the neo-cortex. This is the reason many students perform brilliantly during training sessions but seem to fall apart under pressure. The stress of the situation shows how the student still needs to transfer aspects of their karate from the neo-cortex to the R-complex. It is important to compete in order to perform karate under stress and anxiety to find out which aspects still need to be worked on before a karate-ka faces the stress and anxiety of gradings.

Of course, preparation for gradings is not the only reason people compete. The vast majority of entrants in every competition are there with the knowledge that a spot in the final is unlikely and yet year after year the same karate-ka pay their fees, don their gis and get beaten. Half of them in the first round.

So if most enter competition with the knowledge that a medal is highly unlikely, why do they keep coming back each year?

I propose that losing is more valuable to karate than winning, only through losing can you discover what aspects of your karate need to be improved.

To really 'win' from competing you have to learn and improve training methods, technique and spirit.

Those that learn nothing and therefore make no changes to their karate are the real losers, unfortunately the more rounds you get through and the more points you score the harder it is to recognise what changes you need to make.

for younger and inexperienced competitors it is the responsibility of their instructors, coaches and senior members of their club to ensure each competition generates a genuine learning experience for their karate development, no matter what the result. It is inappropriate for a club to only celebrate success in terms of medals won on the day. real club success can be seen from improvement from members in terms of commitment, sprit and technique.

True champions are the medalists that don't accept achieving a medal as the final result but still analyse their performance to recognise weaknesses, make changes and continue to improve. This analysis has to take place after the competition when stress levels are reduced and the neo-cortex becomes the dominant part of the brain.

This process is evident from studying past finals and how the trend for 'favourite' techniques or preferred kata have changed. For example a few years ago the favoured successful kumite technique was ashi barri followed by kizami zuki, the following years saw a preference for attacking from the corner of the tatami with mawashi geri, and most recently the successful technique seemed to be moving off the line of attack to explode with a jodan gyakuzuki from unexpected angles.

It is also evident in the trend for finalists chosen kata. While some repeatedly churn out the same, albeit superb, kata year after year others have studied their kata performance and have matched their current physicality or preference for technique to their chosen kata. For example, unsu was the kata most finalists would choose, then came a trend for sochin, following this saw the majority of competitors opting for gojushiho sho. Only recently have we seen different kata being performed (2011 men's final - unsu, gankaku, gojushiho dai and gojushiho sho)

I have always been proud to compete and now take pride in members of my club that also compete. The greatest moments however do not usually come from the number of rounds won or amount of points scored, it comes from witnessing the respect and etiquette displayed at competitions that we as club instructors try to instil in members on a weekly basis. This is easily shown in the simple way that karate-ka remain at an area until the eliminations are over, sometimes after suffering an early defeat and having to fight the urge to disappear and lick their wounds. Respect for the individual and the art can also be seen in the level of support given to a competitor by other club members, I rarely see anyone (young, old, high grade, low grade, first competition or seasoned competitor) lining up to compete without someone nearby to give encouragement and most importantly to give constructive critique.

I have noticed over the years that this support not only comes from other club members but more and more from fellow karate-ka, who are in direct competition with each other,

again demonstrating the real value to competing is in improvement of karate not winning medals.

It is important to realise these benefits in order to maintain karate-do as a martial art and not allow it to become a sport.

I believe the fundamental difference can be explained using the following Dictionary definition of a sport

"an activity involving physical exertion and skill in which an individual or team competes against another or others for entertainment"

Karate is obviously an activity involving physical exertion and skill and karate-ka most definitely compete against each other. However this competition should not be for entertainment but to improve our karate training.

It is well known that sports athletes will tailor their training and adapt their diet in order to be at a peak for a certain competition, after which they will rest before planning their training in order to peak for the next comp. this system works perfectly if the ultimate aim is competition success. Karate however has a very different aim where peaks and troughs are not desirable. Instead the karate-ka seeks continuous improvement and therefore should not peak at competitions but maintain a high level of performance throughout their time training.

This is aided by the fact that karate has no competition season, instead karate-ka are able to attend competitions throughout the year. This makes it difficult to plan sessions that allow karate-ka to peak for a competition. I see this as a huge advantage in the battle to keep members steadily improving in technique, spirit and commitment.

Regular competitions are a great way to measure the improvements made and assess what work still needs to be done. Competitions are essential for training but will only be effective when karate-ka and instructors place less emphasis on results and spend time analysing each individual's performance.

In summary, karate should provide the opportunity for continual development and improvement, competitions are an excellent tool for diagnosing areas of strength and weakness in all aspects of karate; technique, speed, power, focus, character, etiquette etc. If karate-ka are not using competitors to adjust and improve their training then they are not utilising one of the most powerful tools for continued development.

Don't train to compete, compete to train.