The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: an Assessement of Sport Karate-do

by Mr. Mark Cramer

I entered my first sport karatedo tournament during my fourth year (1971/1972) at Kent State University. Since then I have been at and/or have sent students to local, national, and international events. During the past three and a half decades, I have seen the good, the bad, and the ugly of sport karatedo.

The Good

The earliest "good" tournaments that I entered were not called competitions; they were called "shiai" which I believe means something akin to "self-testing". They were conducted by the traditional Japanese styles and the purpose of the event seemed to be focused more on self evaluation than on winning.

The kumite rules were the old ippon kumite rules. A half point was awarded for a technique which would have injured an opponent and caused his/her fighting ability to be significantly decreased. A full point was awarded for a technique which could have totally incapacitated an opponent. The match ended when of the contestants accumulated one point. The techniques that one could use were limited. Throws and "hook kicks" were prohibited; side kicks and back fists were considered to be too weak and were not recognized as legitimate scoring techniques.

Eventually the rules of scoring opened up. First the three point rule was adopted. Instead of fighting to one point, you fought to three points. Consequently, matches became more interesting for both the contestants and the spectators. Presently, contestants fight to an eight point spread. Depending on the effectiveness of the technique one, two, or three points can be scored at a time. All vigorous and controlled techniques to the target areas can score, and throws which are followed by a scoring technique are allowed. In my opinion these changes made good competition even better.

Kata competition was limited to about a dozen or so traditional Japanese katas most of which were Shotokan katas. Today all recognized katas from the Goju, Shoto, Shito, and Wado systems can be used. Today, some traditional Japanese tournaments include the katas of the major Okinawan systems, and most tournaments included kobudo (old style weapons) competition. Again the extended kata lists and the inclusion of kobudo has been an improvement of the traditional Japanese karatedo tournament.

Referees were trained with only the most basic courses on the rules and their applications, and many referees were inclined to favor people from their own styles and systems. As the referee courses have become more involved and intense, a more consistent application of the rules has improved the fairness of traditional tournaments.

Contestants in the traditional Japanese tournaments have generally been respectful to one another in both victory and defeat. They have also been courteous to the referees regardless of the outcome of the match. Competitors often dine and share libations after a tournament, and frequently rivals become close friends. This aspect of sport karatedo may be its strongest point.

The Bad

Within traditional sport karatedo tournaments there are some negative elements. The most noticeable of these is when the desire to win replaces the drive for self improvement. The tournament becomes a contest to be won instead of a vehicle for self-reflection and self-evaluation. This "winning is everything" attitude drives contestants, coaches, parents, and spectators to act with arrogance in victory and contempt in defeat. It is contrary to the spirit of karatedo.

Another problem with sport karatedo is when there in inconsistent application of the rules. The most notorious example of this in the amount of contact which is allowed to the face. When one referee, sports organization, or nation interprets "controlled contact" as a skin touch and another interprets "controlled contact" as something just short of a concussion, it becomes unfair to the contestants. Although this problem is most noticeable in kumite, it also occurs in the application of criteria in kata competition. Only when there is consistency in the application of the rules, is there fairness to the contestants.

Another problem is style prejudice in kata competition. I do not believe that this is always an intentional favoring of one style over another; I believe that it is often an unconscious bent toward one style. There are judges who always show favoritism toward one style or another. This too is one of the problems of sport karatedo.

Another problem which has developed in recent years is that competitors have become one dimensional. People have become good at kata and neglect kumite, or they develop their kumite skills and seldom practice kata.. This also might be a result of a misplaced desire to win. In order to win in one division, they neglect other areas of their karatedo training. A rules change where there is an overall winner is based on the combined results in both kata and kumite might ameliorate this problem. After mentioning this idea to a Pan-American kumite medalist, he enthusiastically stated "If they

did that, I start practicing my kata again."

Most of the really ugly things that I have witnesses in sport karatedo have been in the "open tournaments". To begin with, some of these tournaments have a carnival-like atmosphere which is more reminiscent of "Big Time Wrestling" than it is of karatedo. Contestants use names such as "Nasty Anderson" and "The Terminator". Respect for karatedo, fellow contestants, and referees has been replaced with arrogance and crass behavior. Arguing with officials, other contestants, and the spectators makes some of these events quite ugly.

The Ugly

At some of these events, the rules are inconsistently enforced to the point that some contestants are brutalized and others are outright cheated. There are no referee courses or requirements to ensure the quality of the referees or the consistency with which the rules are applied. Any untrained "black belt" can volunteer to referee. Sometimes these individuals are flagrantly unfair to a contestant or a style.

Unless I know tournament director well and know that these problems will not occur, I will not attend these events, and I advise my students to do the same. A couple of years ago, the father of one of my students wanted his son to compete in one of these open tournaments which was held in the father’s hometown neighborhood. Even though I warned the family that there might be some problems with this venue, the warning was ignored. In the end, the son was injured by excessive contact and the family no longer allows the young man to compete in these events.

My Advice

After more thirty-five years of seeing the good, the bad, and the ugly aspects of sport karatedo, I would advise anyone who is tempted to compete in a sport karatedo event to do several things. First of all, know why you are there. Go there with the purpose of learning more about karatedo, other people, and yourself. Go there to have fun, but do not go with the sole purpose of winning. That will lead to disappointments and may lead to the development of unseemly behavior.

Next, carefully select the events that you attend. Traditional karatedo organizations, which require their referees to take rigorous courses to become certified, are going to offer the most consistent application of the rules and offer the greatest chance of fairness and safety to the contestants.

Finally, I urge all competitors to train in and compete in several events, kata, kumite, and kobudo. Do not become one dimensional in either your training or your competition.