Avoiding the Dangers of Olympic Karate

by Mark Cramer

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It now becomes prudent to take precautions which will ensure that the traditional essence of karate-do is not overshadowed by the sport of karate. Sport karate is a small part of karate-do. A vast body of knowledge is incorporated into karatedo. In-depth knowledge of kata, various levels of bunkai applications, kumite beyond point sparring, and the development of ki are but a few examples of to this body of knowledge. To acquire this knowledge and these skills takes many years of diligent training in the various aspects of karate-do. Consequently, the "masters" who have acquired this knowledge are usually over fifty years old.

By contrast, in sport karate the vast majority of those who are successful are between the ages of 19 and 29 years old. They are great athletes who are in great physical shape. However, they are not "masters" in the traditional sense. Many of them tend to have a shallow knowledge of karate-do. They train exclusively or nearly exclusively in one aspect of their sport, and they ignore the other aspects of their budo. Frequently, after several years of international competition, they become coaches in sport karate and share their knowledge with others who aspire to follow in their footsteps. This is how most Olympic sports work whether it is gymnastics, diving, or track.

However, karate-do is not just another sport, and we need to ensure that it doesn’t become just another sport. We need to ensure that individuals with a great depth of knowledge in the various aspects of karate-do are appointed to the technical committees, referee councils, and other decision making bodies at the national and international levels of the Olympic movement.

This means that the "masters" of the various styles of karate-do must become involved with their National Governing Body in order to ensure that the essence of karate-do is not lost to the sport of karate. Olympic sport karate is not a passing phase; it is here to stay. Powerful organizations and corporations are backing it. Those who choose not to become involved with the Olympic movement may be ensuring that sport karate will be the only future for our budo.