

The Tournament Experience

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" The tournament experience should be part of every Karate Sensei's work for the benefit of the students. Professionals know that pressure builds diamonds. Tournaments build pressure" - Peter Urban The Karate Sensei

The Karate Tournament - something to be feared or enjoyed? Just like most things in life there are two sides to a Karate Tournament, one positive the other negative. Nevertheless, both are learning experiences that every serious martial artist should experience.

Tournaments are a chance to test yourself and see the effects of pressure. The first tournament I attended was the first time I ever competed as an individual, up until then I was always part of a team. Getting up in front of people, performing on my own, and being judged were all new to me . My performance was being weighed against those of other people. It was one thing to do a kata or spar in class with friends - but this was an opportunity to see how well I would perform under pressure.

Tournaments also provide an opportunity to establish a goal and work towards it. When preparing for my first tournament as a yellow belt I was told not to waste my time or that of the judges by performing a kata because I had no chance of doing well. This provided me with two opportunities. First of all I had to do something that was difficult for me. Fighting was easy and fun for me - but kata presented a challenge. I entered the kata division nonetheless. I came second last but I had done something that was hard for me and survived the experience.

The second was a long term goal of placing in kata and sparring in the same tournament. This was important to me because when I set the goal it seemed almost unattainable, I had a hard time just getting up in front of people to do a kata. I went to several tournaments and kept giving it my best - but it seemed my best was never good enough. Then as a blue belt I learned a kata that I really enjoyed and I worked it every chance I had - working the bunkai and the string of P's (Proper Practice Plus Perfect Planning Prevents Poor Performance). The first tournament I entered where I performed this kata I didn't place but I did receive a big round of applause from everyone. This gave me the push I needed. The next tournament I entered was the Canadian Go-Ju (Okinawan) Championships, and it was the biggest tournament I had ever been in with 28 people in my division. All the preparation finally paid off when I placed second in kata and second in sparring. This tournament and others I've been in gave me a chance to see other schools and styles as well as other martial arts. It allowed me to see how others interpret katas and gave me great new ideas and strategies for fighting.

" A man cannot understand the perfection and imperfections of his chosen art if he cannot see the value in other arts" -The Book of Five Rings

The act of participating in tournaments and supporting your fellow students provides an opportunity to develop comradeship among the members of your dojo and

promotes a team feeling.

Despite all of the benefits there is also a negative side to the tournament scene. It has been said that tournaments are turning the martial arts into a sport where athletic ability are the goals instead of personal development. Kata degenerates to where it looks like modern dance, a series of aesthetically pleasing movements instead of a meaningful form. This reduces the art to the lowest common denominator.

Often a tournament has all the problems that plague Figure Skating or Modern Dance Competitions. Judging is subjective. The officials don't know the rules or if they do they don't follow them. Ring officials are often not paying attention or show favouritism. On the tournament circuit reputation counts as much as the performance on a given day.

Tournaments tend to be about winning not simply doing your best or achieving personal goals. This brings out the worst in people, egos run wild. As one yellow belt who attended her first tournament said winners are often the only ones who get recognised, not those who did their personal best or accomplished something just being there. At one tournament I attended, a green belt performed a kata, but didn't do well and when he came out of the ring his Sensei turned his back on him and did not speak to him for the rest of the day.

Kumite matches can sometimes spark uncontrollable anger. During one kumite match a competitor was hit and winded - the other competitor did as required, he turned his back and kneeled. The winded competitor got up and ran at him wildly, hitting him from behind.

While there are two sides to a tournament, any way you look at it it is a learning experience that can provide valuable insights. The key is to go to tournaments with the right attitude, to go to have fun and not to build a shrine to yourself . Remember what Gichin Funakoshi said. He placed no emphasis on competitions, record breaking and championships. He placed emphasis on the ultimate aim of individual self-perfection. He believed in the common decency and respect that one human being owed to the other.