

To AJKA-International
AJKA-I of PA
Instructor Trainee's Report #43

Subject: Differences Between Sports and Karate - Do

To AJKA-International
AJKA-I of PA
Instructor's Trainee Report #43
Subject: Differences Between Sports and Karate - Do

What are the differences between sports and karate-do? In general, the emphasis in modern sports ranges from neighborhood pickup games or community level recreation, with an emphasis on kids and camaraderie, to professional sports, which is highly commercialized and emphasizes highly paid stars and sensational play and action. Likewise, *karate-do*, in America, can range from emphasis on human development, character building, confidence, good health and positive values, as taught by the AJKA-I, to commercialized ventures such as East West Karate or Action Karate that offers themselves as martial arts studios with an emphasis on commercialism/sensationalism and a focus on belt rank – becoming a black belt!

We define *karate-do* as a physical activity in which the participants learn a particular approach to empty-handed combat. We define sport as a physical activity in which, over a defined period, there is a contest between participants resulting in a score. A score has a winner and a loser; although some sports allow exceptions such as a tie, draw, disqualification etc. The objective of a sport is to win a competition, while the objective of *karate-do* is self-improvement.

There are however some obvious problems with these definitions. Many sports are practiced within the context of self-improvement as a primary goal. For example, people who run marathons or who do Spartan Challenges may have no hope of winning the marathon or placing, but they do these events to “get better” – self improvement. Most casual observers would call marathon running a sport, and yet "running" as a physical activity would be more closely grouped with *karate-do* as an activity for self-improvement, improving health, mental discipline, the ability to push through physical pain etc.

A further problem is evident when we consider the obvious sport aspect of karate. Traditional karate as practiced in the JKA explicitly sanctions and includes sport. Nakayama included these sport aspects in his development of the system and they remain with us today. Competitions are held regularly at local, regional, national and international levels in which karate-ka compete in kata and kumite. There are judges who score the competitors and there are in fact winners and losers.

One might say that, like marathon running, for many of us, competition is just another means to the end of self-improvement. For those karate-kas who are not competitors victory in karate competition is unlikely, no matter how hard the training. So, competition is just another exercise or an opportunity to place oneself under a certain kind of stress in order to learn how to overcome that stress and others like it. However, for the talented and hard-working individual, winning is certainly an important aspect of competition.

Further complicating this issue is the fact that sports have long explicitly included personal development as a core value. The word "sportsmanship" is taken to mean a certain honor of playing within the rules of the sport and treating the opponent with respect inside and outside of the competition itself. In many sports, especially the neighborhood "pickup games" played by adults, the primary objectives are exercise and camaraderie, rather than winning. Or we might say that while winning a game is the immediate, proximate goal, the objective in context is much larger than that.

I started practicing Shotokan karate when I was 8 years old. I was small for my age, I was not good at many sports, and I was always picked last in gym or during pickup games in the neighborhood. Growing up with Shotokan has given me goals, sense of purpose and the drive and discipline to go after those goals. I believe there is no sport or program out there that encompasses physical education and character development like Martial Arts and Shotokan Karate. Below are a few reasons I provide to parents as to why Karate-do should be trained by children over or in addition to Team Sports:

1. Self-Defense

This is the number one reason why most people decide to study martial arts or karate-do. *Karate-do* teaches you the techniques to defend yourself, but also the way to think about defending yourself – anticipate and avoid potential dangers. Training also helps build up the reflexes you need if you're ever in a dangerous situation, and give you the confidence to stand up for yourself and fight back if needed.

2. Self-Confidence

As children become more proficient in *karate-do* their confidence gets a big-boost. They become more self-assured and confident. Their Sensei's encouragement goes a long way to help them achieve this goal, but the confidence level will extend far beyond the dojo and into the "real world" such as school and work.

3. Belts and Ranking

Belts and rankings are a public recognition among peers for the student's effort and progress. *Karate-do*'s ranking system helps teach children to set goals and achieve them, to persevere and prioritize. This is very important learning tool for children and adolescent growth that does not exist in other sports.

4. Discipline

Martial Arts training is a physical expression of ‘practice makes perfect’, or “practice makes permanent”. In a class a student may execute a single movement or series of related movements, hundreds of times. This teaches the student that the progress that always happens during small improvements in technique and stamina, flexibility or power – will come through endless repetition. Even during kumite, where the karate-ka shows how creatively he or she can apply their well-honed skills there are still rules and protocols to be followed. All of this teaches children to respect one another, their opponents and colleagues, and how to play games fair and square – lessons that follow them in their non-Martial Arts lives. It also teaches them to commit, to go to practice even when they don’t feel like it.

5. Individual Achievement: No one sits on the Bench

Many kids have the chance to experience the benefits of karate early on, however a large number of children abandon karate training when they reach the teen years in order to participate in school sports. Although there are many lessons to be learned from team and individual varsity sports, the ‘make the team’ model often favors the more physically developed players while alienating the late bloomers.

School Sports have access to an endless supply of players that renews itself each year. The big and the strong players get picked and get to play while the less physically developed watch from the bench. This leads to an even greater disparity in skill development as the season goes by.

Conversely, karate can be practiced by anyone at any point in their lives. Physical weakness does not matter in karate since the practice of the movements allows those that are physically weaker to get stronger. The dojo floors are packed since all kids get equal ‘playing time’. Naturally, some kids develop their skills and physical abilities earlier than others, but karate when practiced properly can bring your physical condition to peak and keep it. Many kids who start out with underdeveloped athletic attributes such as strength, speed and size, end up blooming onto some of the finest karate-ka.

Even if a child is an athletic wonder who is able to stay ahead of the game with his natural talents their full potential may not be unlocked by simply playing soccer, football or baseball. They may need to be nurtured through years of disciplined and diligent training to be the best person and athlete that they can be.

6. Gender Equality

Karate is one of the few sports where both boys and girls train together, compete together and become stronger together. I am sure that while many parents would consider martial arts for their sons, not nearly as many would consider it for their daughters. Martial Artist also gives brothers and sisters an opportunity to practice together and learn from one another as well (not to mention the convenience of having all of your kids in one place at a time).

7. Weight Control

Obesity is a global epidemic and rising trends in overweight and obesity are apparent in both developed and developing countries. The typical karate class will often be comprised of warm-up calisthenics, teaching and practicing of moves and possibly some kumite, as well as some active games. The warm up and practice comprise the bulk of the time, and for that time the karate-ka will be constantly on the go – punching, kicking, blocking and moving around. The workout allows each practitioner to naturally development of his or her muscles and also helps build stronger Cardio-Vascular systems. Even in the most active of team sports such as Basketball or Soccer players don't get that much of a workout simply because they generally don't play the whole game and even if they do, there are still breaks in the action – a great example is baseball.

8. The Never-Ending Season

Many team sports, especially those primarily played outdoors, or in specific weather (think Soccer, Baseball and even wrestling) are seasonal. Karate is a year round sport. This consistency and availability also helps build upon discipline, and allows the karate-ka to progress at a much quicker pace in the Martial Arts than in Team Sports since there is no break in practice.

AJKA-I of PA
Instructor Trainee #E027
Andrew Spivack