

The Thrill of Tournaments

Tournament-style competition in the martial arts has probably been going on since the pre-history of man; the ancient Greeks and Romans certainly enjoyed it. Medieval Europeans made tournaments famous, and invented heraldry (coats of arms) just to be able to tell the heavily armored competitors apart at a distance. Similar competitions in Japan are probably as old as the samurai culture itself. None of these early competitive events were safe, and fatalities were common among the entrants. A *bokken* (wooden sword) can kill almost as easily as a real sword in the hands of an expert. The sports of kendo and judo were later specifically developed to remove some of the dangers from such competitions.

Oddly enough, tournament competition was rather late to develop in the art of karate (and has never developed in arts such as aikido). Japanese instructors were long of the opinion that karate was intrinsically too dangerous and could not be made safe for friendly competition. The first known tournament of sorts is thought to have occurred in 1949 in the old Japanese Imperial city of Kyoto. It was apparently an organizational disaster, but Masutatsu Oyama (later founder of the Kyokushinkai style, an offshoot of Goju-ryu) proclaimed himself the winner most loudly. After that, individuals and small organizations sponsored local tournaments in Japan during the 1950's, but it was a while before truly national, rules-driven karate tournaments were held there.

In the late 1950's, Masutatsu Oyama issued a challenge to all other karate styles in Japan, to meet in a competitive tournament to decide which style was most effective. There were no takers. Undaunted, he began conducting his own full-contact, no-protective-equipment tournaments in the late 1960's, and these continue up to the present time as some of the most brutal competitions in existence.

The first karate tournament of record in the United States was the 1955 Arizona Karate Championships, sponsored by Shuri-ryu founder Robert Trias. It was held at the Butler Boys Club in Phoenix, and the competitors consisted largely of members of the Arizona Highway Patrol. Trias had opened the first dojo in America in 1946, teaching just a few students, most of whom were Highway Patrolmen.

Six years later, in 1961, the All-American Karate Championship was held at the Olympic Auditorium in Los Angeles, sponsored by Hidetaka Nishiyama, concurrent with his formulation of the All-American Karate Federation; participants were mostly Shotokan stylists.

The North American Karate Championship was held in 1962 at Madison Square Garden in New York City. It qualified as the first truly "open" tournament in the country. Mas Oyama gave a spectacular demonstration of breaking bricks and boards, and crushing rocks with his bare hands. Gary Alexander won the black belt sparring championship, then went on to open his own dojo in 1963 and sponsor his own tournaments.

In 1963 Robert Trias and John Keehan hosted the first World Karate Tournament at the University of Chicago Fieldhouse. This was the first "national" karate tournament,

and the forerunner of many subsequent events. It attracted the most prominent American karate competitors and set the precedent for large-scale national-caliber tournaments which continue today. Trias renamed it the USKA Nationals in 1966, and elevated it to the USKA Grand Nationals in 1968.

In 1964 Trias staged another World Karate Championship in Chicago. That same year two new tournaments burst onto the scene: Ed Parker's International Karate Championships in Long Beach, California, and Jhoon Rhee's U.S. National Karate Championships in Washington, D.C. Parker's tournament boasted a memorable demonstration by a then-unknown Chinese stylist named Bruce Lee. By 1974, Parker's tournament was drawing a record-setting 6,000 registered competitors.

Also in 1964, Mahn Suh Park sponsored the first open tournament in Philadelphia, the Globe Tae Gyun Championships. The following year, Jhoon Rhee persuaded *Wide World of Sports* to film and broadcast segments of his U.S. National Karate Championships; unfortunately, the finals were so brutal and bloody that the show's producers ended up broadcasting only a few clips, and then avoided karate entirely for the next nine years.

Historians have called the period from 1963 to 1970 the "blood and guts" era in American karate. It was a time of relatively unrestrained brutality, brought to an end when a segment of the sport split off to become kick-boxing.

Today the rules regarding "light contact" are enforced at tournaments, but usually only with regard to the head. Punches and kicks to the body are often executed with full force, especially at the brown and black belt levels, even though they usually do not need to be in order to score. At the highest levels, however, the referees like to hear a solid "thump" on a point scored to the chest. Fighters are expected to be in sufficiently good condition to tolerate such impacts.

Many different karate schools, styles and federations sponsor tournaments today. Kempo, Shotokan, Wado-ryu, Shuri-ryu, Isshin-ryu and others offer relatively traditional competitions that are open to other traditional styles. American Freestyle and other taekwondo-oriented organizations offer tournaments putting more emphasis on kicking techniques, showmanship and personal creative expression (usually under UTK rules). Kyokushin-ryu tournaments are still brutal and full-contact, as always. The big national championships, of which there are several, offer high excitement and magnificent exhibitions of talent that will inspire any martial artist. Big karate tournaments are almost never televised; they must be experienced in person. Regardless of your specialties, there will usually be much of interest for the spectator as well as the competitor.

©Wendell E. Wilson (2010)

(email: minrecord@comcast.net)

from Essays on the Martial Arts

Home: <http://www.mineralogicalrecord.com/wilson/karate.asp>