

Snap

One of the critical aspects of most karate katas is what is often referred to as “snap.” This simply means a combination of very high speed followed by a very sudden, crisp stop in the execution of individual techniques. Often this type of execution will actually result in an audible “snap” sound, as the hand or elbow or leg strikes against the inside of the uniform. Thick and stiff material amplifies the effect, which is why heavyweight gis are sometimes known as “poppers.”

Snap is especially vital in tournament competition, and is probably the aspect which judges pass judgment on first. Within the first five or ten moves of a kata it is often possible to guess fairly accurately how the judges will score a particular competitor based solely on the quality of his or her snap.

Good snap does require some significant strength, not only to accelerate the technique to very high speed almost instantaneously, but also to *stop* the technique almost instantaneously. Training and conditioning are essential; weaklings can’t generate snap. Snap is a demonstration of power precisely controlled, which is what makes it so impressive to watch.

Snap in kata performance is closely parallel to essential aspects of actual fighting. Getting a punch or kick to rocket outward unexpectedly, with blurring speed, is sure to be most effective. Stopping the technique is likewise critical for several reasons: (1) for proper control to avoid injuring a sparring partner, (2) to avoid overextension and possible loss of balance, (3) to re-chamber the weapon quickly in preparation for another strike, and (4) to withdraw the weapon quickly from full extension where it is vulnerable to being seized or struck. In tournament fighting an overextended technique (sometimes called “punching through”) can be viewed as dangerously uncontrolled, and even if it misses the target may be given a non-contact warning or penalty.

Launching with sudden speed requires, paradoxically, skill at relaxation. Maximum sudden speed comes from a relaxed muscular state which is suddenly contracted. From a tense state, *some* muscles must first be relaxed before the opposing contracting muscles can move the limb; this takes extra time. It is quicker to suddenly contract a relaxed muscle which is opposing an already relaxed muscle.

Another factor in snap is “fast twitch” muscle vs. “slow twitch” muscle. Rather like the light and dark meat on a chicken, humans have the two types of muscle fiber. Certain exercises can increase the proportion of the faster-twitch muscle fibers over the slower ones.

Snap is something that will develop if you *try* to develop it. Working out in front of a mirror will help. Study videotapes of top-level kata performers from the National Championships to see how far you have to go. It will be inspiring, challenging and frustrating. Remember that, like almost everything else in karate, it just takes time, sweat and perseverance.

©Wendell E. Wilson (2010)

(email: minrecord@comcast.net)

from [Essays on the Martial Arts](#)

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