



## Tournament Luck

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Tournaments are the most thrilling aspect of karate. They are exciting, they get the adrenalin pumping, they are great experience, and we get to study and enjoy the performances of a wide range of other competitors. But tournaments often leave some disturbing questions in their wake. Sometimes we are not sure why we won, when another competitor's performance seemed better. More often, we're not sure why we *lost*. Or we may have dark suspicions that are not pleasurable to contemplate. There is a very good reason why people have long used the invocation "May the best man win": they know that the best man sometimes doesn't win.

In a perfect world, the results of all tournament competitions would be pure reflections of the precise relative skills of all the competitors, and luck would have nothing to do with it. In the real world, however, this ideal is rarely achieved. Competitors work hard to minimize all of the possible negative influences (mostly having to do with their own physical and mental states) in order to achieve as close to their potential best performance as they can, and even this is difficult or impossible under tournament conditions. In addition there is a daunting range of uncontrollable variables with sometimes severe consequences; the extent to which these affect each individual competitor can be ascribed simply to "tournament luck."

In general, if a competitor is *clearly superior* to the others in his/her division, he/she will most likely win. However, if the competitor is only a little better or (worse yet) about equal to the others in a particular division, the results will be determined in large part by tournament luck.

No one likes to lose a competition because of random, accidental or outside factors (although it must be admitted we're perfectly happy to accept a *win* by the same causes). Nevertheless, it is a fact of life that such factors will intrude on all karate tournament competitions. All of the competitors (and their families) must steel themselves against

these possibilities and try to be philosophical about losses. At the same time, they must also try not to dwell on excuses for why they didn't win, even though those excuses may well be based in fact. For one thing, it's difficult to know precisely all of the factors involved in a particular case, and for another it's just a bad habit to grouse and blame others. The top competitors, the ones we all look up to, take their losses gracefully, with a faint smile, and are always determined to come back and do better next time. This is easier for the competitors themselves to do than it is for their families. We can more easily be philosophical about our own bad luck than we can when some unfair aspect imposes itself upon our child or spouse.

So, what are some of the factors that can be involved in tournament luck? Here are eight of the most common:

(1) **Your condition.** With regard to your own physical and mental state, the range of possible problems seems almost infinite. Common examples include jet lag, travel fatigue, problems with motel or accommodations the night before, problems with food and digestion, flare-ups of chronic medical conditions, failure to get sufficient sleep, viral or bacterial infections, allergies, minor but annoying injuries, relationship problems, etc.

(2) **Opponent's condition.** Each of your opponents is vulnerable to the same long list of potential problems.

(3) **Other competitors.** Aside from the physical and mental states of your opponents, there is luck involved in *who* shows up to compete against you. This factor alone can have profound consequences. Similarly, the *number* of people in your division can range from one or two (in which case all you have to do is stand up and keep breathing in order to take home a medal) to well over 20 (meaning that you can beat several tough opponents and still not place in the top three). Naturally, the larger the division, the greater are the chances that a person or persons better than you will be included in it.

(4) **Tournament stress.** The stresses and difficulties of certain tournaments usually affect all competitors alike but the physical and mental reactions of each person may vary. Tournament arenas can be too hot or too cold. The wait after lining up but before performing can stretch into hours, with no comfortable seating, no food or drink, no bathroom breaks, and no opportunity to stretch and warm up before being called upon to perform at full speed and full power. It is quite a challenge under these conditions to perform as well as one does in the dojo.

(5) **Placement.** The order in which competitors are called up to perform kata, and the placement of competitors on the right or the left of the referee in sparring, can have significant impacts. Because of the difficulty involved in assigning point scores to a long succession of kata performances, it turns out that being about three quarters of the way to the end is optimum. A snappy performance here will overshadow a similar performance by one of the first competitors, as the judge's memory slowly fades; but before the final competitor steps up many judges will already have settled on their favorite. It is also a disadvantage to be next to someone from the same dojo who is performing the same kata as you are, because it becomes repetitive to watch and you lose much of your uniqueness in the memories of the judges.

With regard to sparring, it is easier for a referee to spot scoring techniques on a person whose body is turned toward him. Since most competitors are right-handed they

more often fight with the left foot forward (designating their most powerful punch as a reverse punch). This means that the referee can see scoring techniques better that are made against *shiro* (the fighter on his left) than against *aka* (the fighter on his right). Consequently, 60% to 70% of kumite winners turn out to have been *aka* at the time. Clever fighters will try to reverse stances, float around to the referee's right before attackin, or otherwise "work the referee" to gain an advantage in his visibility even if they have the misfortune to be designated as *shiro*.

Good scorekeepers setting up the chart of competitors will try to reverse positions for each fighter at each level, which also helps to minimize the effect, but you can't always count on it.

(6) **Judging.** Bad tournament luck in the area of judging and refereeing is one of the most contentious, aggravating and disappointing aspects of karate competition because we expect so much of karate officials. In reality, judging karate kata and refereeing matches are extremely difficult to do well, even for advanced black belt officials. And tournament stresses can have an effect on them at least as debilitating as on the competitors. After judging or refereeing for 10 or 12 hours straight, often without a decent lunch break, even the best officials may become bleary-eyed, forgetful and irritable. Kata and, especially, fighting can move at lightning speed, and even the combination of referee and corner judges on a ring can fail to spot mistakes, violations, scoring techniques or who scored first. On the whole, karate officials do remarkably well, but (as with officiating in any sport) they are only human, and perfection is elusive.

Aside from honest mistakes and the effects of fatigue, there are sometimes also problems with inexperienced judges, biased judges, and incompetent judges. Refereeing seminars attempt to head off such problems, but no filtering and training process is 100% effective. Some tournaments simply end up needing more officials than they have on the first string, and must recruit others less qualified. Still, officiating at most of the major tournaments (especially those sponsored by the USANKF and the USAKF) is usually quite good. In my experience, 90% to 95% of these officials are fine people, courteous, gentlemanly, competent, even ingratiating. The other 5% to 10% can sometimes be real jerks, unkind, unfriendly, egotistical and rude, or with unchecked biases in full operation.

The *truly* unbiased, totally competent judge is probably a relative rarity. Each judge naturally knows his own system best, and most easily recognizes correct technique within that context, but he may not be certain of what represents correct technique in other systems. This applies particularly to kata details and choice of weapons. If a judge doesn't feel expert in the use of a certain weapon, he may feel reluctant to give a top score to *any* performance with it, no matter how perfect. Biases regarding the depth of stances, snappy power vs. gracefulness, and the optimum speed of execution (among many other aspects) can influence the scores they give. In kumite refereeing, biases regarding the various possible scoring techniques are common; for example, some judges will score a good lead-hand punch and others will not. Some will score head shots more readily than others, and some give kicks more preference. Some judges will slightly or more blatantly favor students from their own dojo or their own system. Some judges will have clear prejudices *against* certain competitors, styles or schools (one reason why many tournaments discourage the wearing of school or style patches). Protests of judging bias can be filed but are generally useless.

Of course, *any* referee or judge can turn against a competitor who exhibits a bad attitude (discourtesy, belligerence, poor sportsmanship, ignorance of proper protocol, intent to injure, etc.), so the wise competitor remains humble, accepting and courteous at all times. This will help to avoid inspiring bias against one's self which could prove long-lasting and difficult to correct.

(7) **Performance accidents.** One could say that a properly prepared competitor doesn't *have* accidents, but that view is simply not in conformance with reality. Accidents happen to everyone sooner or later, a fact which mathematicians specializing in chaos theory would probably not find surprising. Anything, from losing control of a weapon, to slipping on your own sweat, to experiencing a mental blank-out halfway through a familiar kata, can happen to even the top-level competitors. Fighters have been known to injure *themselves* without ever being touched by their opponent. And in the thick of battle, even a careful fighter trying conscientiously to pull his punches and kicks can accidentally injure an opponent who is ducking, dodging and charging with refined unpredictability.

(8) **Rules, regulations and procedures.** All sorts of problems can arise involving proper registration, lost registrations, misplaced competitors' passes, judging standards, division charting, division scheduling, and the general, frantic, bureaucratic haze that develops when hundreds and hundreds of competitors are straining at the bit. It can be highly frustrating, for example, to fight your way to a gold medal only to be told there was a charting error and half the division must be fought over again.

Interpretations of the rules often come under argument because of the diverse backgrounds of the judges...and that's when they are thinking straight! Crazy things can happen when judges begin to lose their grip. At the 1993 USAKF Nationals in Phoenix, for instance, one official in charge of the weapons divisions suddenly decided that any bo having *tapered ends* was non-regulation and would be disallowed. If the tournament director hadn't overruled him, he would have wiped out half the weapons division at a single stroke!

In conclusion, I can only recommend that competitors and their families develop an even-tempered philosophical attitude toward the capriciousness, inequities, errors and mischances that are sure to occur at karate tournaments. Be grateful for the good luck and take the bad luck in stride, with grace and good sportsmanship. Be careful not to attribute too much significance to tournament results as a measure of success in karate training. We've all seen people win point-sparring matches against opponents who would have crushed them in a real street fight. Winning at tournaments requires some skills (showmanship, for example) that are extraneous to practical self-defense. Perseverance, the pleasures of hard training and hard competition, good sportsmanship, improvement through experience, martial arts camaraderie, and the challenge of doing one's best under the circumstances are the major rewards of tournament competition.

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