

# Injury Etiquette

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Occasionally it happens that you accidentally hit your opponent too hard with a punch or kick, and he either goes down or is clearly incapacitated, for the moment at least. What should you do while the referee and paramedic are checking him over? In karate there are three common options, the choice being dependent upon the culture and traditions of the karate federation or organization sponsoring the tournament.

**(Option 1)** In our federation (the USAKF) the preference is to stand at the line in the ready position, fists in front of thighs, facing your opponent. The rationale is that turning your back on him would be a demonstration of disrespect. Naturally you do not make any verbal statements or gestures of any kind.

**(Option 2)** Elsewhere (as in Taekwondo) the tradition is to turn your back and stand facing away from your opponent, with your heels at the line. The rationale here is that you are granting your opponent a few moments of privacy in which to recover and compose himself. Many karate competitors are embarrassed about being injured (they failed to block or made a mistake of some kind, allowing themselves to be hit), and do not want their opponent to see that he was able to cause them pain. Glowering at an injured opponent can be viewed as a dominance posture, which is not good martial arts manners.

**(Option 3)** In some circles the rule is not only to face away from the opponent but to sit kneeling in the *zazen* position. The rationale seems to be that this is a good time to turn within and meditate, perhaps to calm your own self down so that you are mentally ready when the referee concludes that it is time to resume the fight.

In any case, if your opponent is capable of continuing the fight, the referee will signal you both to stand at the line in the ready position. He will then announce his decision about how to deal with your infraction, or indeed about whether you committed a foul at all. It is entirely possible to hurt an opponent without committing a foul. In fact, if the opponent had come in with a technique which left himself dangerously exposed, *he* may be given a warning or penalty for what is called a *mubobi*. Or perhaps he tripped and fell into your technique. Or perhaps you hit him in the midsection where he is expected to be sufficiently hardened to withstand full-force blows.

When the referee announces his decision, whatever it is, you should show humble and courteous acceptance of the referee's judgment by turning toward him and executing a quick bow with hands at sides, then return to the ready position. Or you may simply stand in the ready position while the decision is delivered. But under no circumstances should you indicate displeasure or disagreement in any way; to do so is a gross breach etiquette guaranteed to turn the referee against you. You don't want that, so maintain a calm, dispassionate composure at all times. When the match is declared over you can step forward to shake hands with or embrace your opponent, perhaps adding a quiet apology if you feel it is warranted.

Etiquette is essential in karate because it is a way of expressing courtesy; as Gichin Funakoshi (founder of Shotokan) said, "Karate begins and ends with courtesy." Courtesy toward your opponent and courtesy toward tournament officials is your solemn

responsibility. Be sure to find out what specific etiquette is expected in whatever venue you choose to compete.

Remember that *kumite* (sparring) is intrinsically somewhat dangerous; it is a contact sport. The higher you rise in rank, the more powerful and focused the fighting techniques will be, making accidents more painful.

Finally, competitors should always bear in mind that *kumite* is a cooperative endeavor that both opponents voluntarily engage in because they love the martial arts. Your opponent is your colleague, who is giving you the opportunity to practice your art. Be grateful. And, no matter how rough the bout is on both of you, remember Shihan Linebarger's wise advice: "never take it personal." It is, after all, not a "real" fight; your opponent has nothing against you. So have fun, stay positive, be courteous, and try not to hurt him.

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