

# The Value of Tournament Experience

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Many students of karate are reluctant to enter into tournament competition. They have many reasons, some valid and some not. For example, I've heard students say: "*I'm a peaceable guy; I'm not into beating other people for fun, especially my friends from the dojo.*" Others say: "*I'm not good enough to win...I'd just embarrass myself.*" These objections miss the point of tournament competition.

Deciding to compete in a tournament causes you to take a whole new look at your level of performance, and at how hard you work in class. You may suddenly realize that hitherto you have not really been doing your best. Whereas your performance of kata seemed good enough for classroom practice, you realize that you have not truly refined it to perfection as much as you could have. The consequence of this realization is that you set a new standard for yourself, you work a little harder to do your *very best*, and not just "good enough." This can be exhilarating; practicing and training with tournaments in mind opens up your vision to seeing what you are truly capable of.

This revelation, although inspired by the thought of the tough competition you may encounter, is really more of a personal quest, an internal thing, a deal between you and yourself to see just how good you can get. Whether you actually win or not, or how you end up placing at any particular tournament, is largely a function of who shows up to compete *against* you, and how accurate the judging proves to be, both of which are factors outside of your control. The only question to ask yourself afterwards is, did you really do your best? If the answer is yes, your tournament performance was admirably successful.

And don't worry that your sensei (and the other officials who know you) is judging you personally after-the-fact on how high you placed. He knows you very well, and will be fully satisfied to see you do your best, and to see you improve from one tournament to the next, no matter how you place. By the same token, if you win over weak competition, by giving a performance which is *not* your best, don't expect him to be especially pleased. It is not the medal or the trophy that counts; it is you achieving your full potential.

Well then, what are some *good* reasons not to compete? "*I just can't afford the money.*" Personal financial limitations are what they are. "*I'm recovering from illness (or injury) and don't feel healthy enough at the present time.*" Competing when you are not fit is dangerous. "*I haven't been training and practicing much lately and am not in a position to do my best.*" Competition requires a commitment in time and energy. "*I can't get the time off work/school.*" First things must come first.

What about this excuse, which applies mainly to sparring competition? "*I'm afraid I'll get hurt.*" This is a tough one. Some karate masters have traditionally advised their students to avoid direct combat competition for this reason. Karate skill is for protecting yourself from injury in a possible real-life encounter, so why risk yourself in unnecessary combat? Even in our own system, it is permissible to go all the way to black belt level without ever attending sparring *class*, to say nothing of sparring in tournaments. Others point out, however, that your self-protection skills (and your self-confidence) will be significantly improved by learning to cope with a variety of opponents in a relatively safe

situation. You need to get over the shock and the novelty of being in a fight, if you are to survive a real encounter. Karate is fighting, and fighting requires practice. Kata can take you only so far; it cannot develop your instinct for timing, for distance, and for seizing the critical moment without hesitation. These capabilities are learned in sparring class, and are refined and broadened in open competitions. Even if you still lose in tournaments, you will gain valuable experience that will put you ahead of more and more potential real-life attackers.

With regard to personal safety, competitions are not as rough as they were 25 to 40 years ago. Modern protective equipment is very good, referees are generally very safety-conscious, and serious injuries are rare. Baseball, for example, is certainly much more dangerous, with ten times the level of fatalities (yes! fatalities!) among Little Leaguers relative to all other sports combined. Karate injuries usually consist of harmless bruises and transitory pains of one sort or another which vanish quickly.

Still, karate sparring has its risks, and if these are too disturbing to you, no one can argue with your decision to avoid them. Karate tournament fighters at the advanced belt levels are a hardy lot, and tend to enjoy a fairly high tolerance for contact; which is to say, they like to hit, and don't mind being hit back. To them, good solid contact is part of the fun. If you can't see it that way, stick to kata and weapons competitions as a totally honorable field for yourself in which there is almost no danger of personal injury. At the highest national and international levels of competition, nearly all competitors specialize instead of entering every possible division anyway. Doing so allows you to concentrate on the aspects of karate that you love best.

In summary, tournament competition provides valuable experience as well as inspiration to do your very best. Enter only those events you like, but work hard to learn what you are really capable of. You will have fun while gaining a new perspective on yourself.

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