



KUMITE



Karate free sparring, known as jiyu-kumite, is one of the most important segments of karate training. It teaches you how to apply the basic techniques and elements of the art in a dynamic situation. However, karate sparring is about much more than winning or losing. Sparring aims to develop and improve your karate skills, such as timing, distancing, and control, while at the same time helping your partner improve as well. However, to be successful at kumite you will need more than just good technique. You will need to employ effective strategies and tactics that will enable your techniques to score.

Level I: Blitz Attack

One Green Stripe

Overwhelm your opponent with a quick barrage of powerful punches and kicks.

Level II: Load and Explode

Two Green Stripes

Deceive your opponent with a false retreat before springing back with a surprise attack!

Level III: Rear Leg Charge

Green Belt

Surprise your opponent with a leaping charge and straight blast of vertical punches.

Level IV: High-Low-High

One Brown Stripe

Make your opponent scramble to keep up with your effortless attacks.

Level V: Alley of Opportunity

Two Brown Stripes

Scoring with kicks has never been easier than when you sneak them up the Alley of Opportunity!

Level VI: Broken Rhythm

Brown Belt

Confound your opponent by continuously changing the timing of your techniques.

Level VII: Electric Shock

One Black Stripe

Shock your opponent with blindingly fast, electrifying counterattacks.

Level VIII: Dynamic Blind Spot

Two Back Stripes

When you use the dynamic blind spot, your opponent will never see what hit him!

Free Sparring

In free sparring, there is no set attacker or defender, and you are free to use any legal techniques to score on your opponent. Target areas include the front of the body, the groin, kidneys, and head. You should always wear a mouthpiece and proper hand and foot gear. Males should also wear a groin cup, although this is optional for women. Optional gear includes head gear, body protectors, and shin, knee, or elbow pads. Although thrown with speed and power, you should always maintain enough control to pull your techniques.

General guidelines are light contact to the face, groin, and kidneys, while you can hit to the body a good deal harder without inflicting injury to your opponent. Light contact means that the protective foam gear makes contact with the target, but is not compressed. For safety, elbow and knee strikes are usually prohibited, as are strikes to the opponent's eyes, neck, spine, and knees. At more advanced levels, sweeping, throwing, and even grappling will be incorporated in free sparring activities.

Since the moves are not pre-arranged, you will need to rely on your powers of observation to determine your opponent's next move. Watch for signs of telegraphing such as pulling back to chamber a technique before it is thrown, then quickly block or beat your opponent to the punch. It is imperative that you stay relaxed, alert, and ready for anything. Stay on your toes, and use your footwork and body mobility to both evade incoming attacks as well as to put you in an advantageous position for attack and defense. Be confident and aggressive, but not overly so. Test and analyze your opponent's defense, and then attack with strategic combinations. Fight your fight, taking maximum advantage of your strong points and your opponent's weak points. Practice and use a variety of techniques. Avoid falling into a set pattern or rhythm that your opponent can use against you.

Developing good habits and effective techniques takes a great deal of time and practice. It is very important to do a variety of drills to develop specific skills for free sparring. Train with a partner, taking turns attacking and defending to develop attributes such as strength, flexibility, agility, and endurance. Work on techniques such as side stepping, bobbing and weaving, circling to the dead side, entering, and checking.

You will be expected to spar opponents that vary in size, rank, and ability, but you are not expected to win every match. Keep your eyes open at all times and don't turn your back to your opponent, especially when being strongly attacked. When faced with a larger, faster, or more experienced opponent, it is sometimes enough to exhibit good defensive and offensive skills.

Types of Sparring

Contact

Sparring can be no contact, light contact, or full contact.

No contact sparring indicates free sparring where you pull all of your techniques just short of their targets. Contact between your techniques and an opponent's blocks will occur and is allowed in no contact sparring, but you should still control your techniques so as not to slam into an opponent's block with undue force. No contact sparring requires and develops complete control of your techniques. It allows you the security to try new techniques, combinations, and defenses without the fear of your opponent hitting you excessively hard. To score a point in no contact sparring you must strike cleanly, stopping your technique between 1-3 inches from the target, and pull back quickly. Foot sweeps and takedowns are acceptable provided you can control your opponent's fall. Although no contact sparring is the general rule when not wearing gear, you may spar harder when agreed upon previously by both parties.

Light to medium contact means you can hit to the legal targets on the body and headgear with medium force, hard enough to compress the foam on your gear, but not so hard that your opponent's head snaps or you knock the wind out of him. Strike lightly to the face and groin, touching but not significantly compressing the foam. Standard foam dipped sparring gear is not designed for heavy hitting.

Full contact sparring involves heavy hitting and is reserved for advanced training only. By wearing proper equipment, such as boxing gloves and padded headgear, you can fight much harder without seriously injuring your training partner. Even though it is called full contact, remember that you must still maintain a level of control since you are always responsible for your partner's safety. Even with padded gear and protective equipment, keep strikes to the face and groin to medium contact. It is highly recommended that an experienced third party act as a referee during full contact matches.

Point fighting vs. Continuous fighting

There is also point sparring and continuous fighting. In point sparring the action is stopped every time a combatant lands a legal blow with sufficient force and judges make a call, and points are awarded. The agreed upon point total can vary, and there is often a time limit. This is the type of sparring that is usually done at tournaments. In continuous sparring the competitors do not stop until a time limit has been reached. Continuous free sparring is sometimes preferable to point sparring because it provides a more challenging aerobic activity and more closely resembles how you might have to apply your skills in an actual self-defense situation.

Sparring Stances

When confronting an opponent, be it in sparring or actual self-defense, it is not practical to assume a traditional stance that is intended for training. Rather, you should assume a more relaxed posture, knees bent, and weight evenly distributed. You should remain light on your toes, keeping your weight on the balls of your feet for quick and easy mobility in any direction.

O Sensei's Guard

Ngo Dong, who had a great deal of street fighting experience, preferred to hold both his hands out in front of him, in what looked like a cross between a traditional boxing guard and Wing Chun stance. To assume O Sensei's guard, hold your hands in front of you, with one hand acting as your front line of defense and attack. It is held with your arm nearly straight and relaxed, but resilient to incoming energy; your elbow is down, and your hand is kept open with your fingers held firmly together and tilted towards your opponent's eyes. Your rear hand is held closer to your body,



with your hand held knife edge facing your opponent and about even with the crook of the elbow on your lead arm, preventing it from being easily trapped against your body.

As you practice you will come to realize that every stance has its strengths and weaknesses. The strengths of this guard include a strong centerline, a fast, strong reaction hand, and quick kicks with both legs. The weakness of O Sensei's guard is that it limits your vision, tends to leave your groin open, and your lead hand can be easily grabbed, pulled or trapped by your opponent, creating openings and allowing him to hit you.

Modern Guard

O Sensei's sons were tournament karate fighters, and as such, fought differently than their father. They preferred the modern guard, with the body turned sideways and lead hand down. In this position your lead arm can make use of the shoulder, upper arm, elbow, forearm, or hand to block or strike. Your rear hand is held high with the elbow in to defend your head and upper body. The weakness of the modern guard is the lead arm. If you are fighting from a side stance, it creates a blind spot, blocking your view of the area behind your lead leg, buttocks, and back. This blind spot gets larger the more you turn. Also, the more you turn your body to the side, the weaker your reaction hand will be. Conversely, if you are too square to your opponent, the lead arm tends to leave your midsection exposed.



Good Form

Free sparring is much more than just attempting to land punches and kicks on your opponent, it is the application of the techniques we practice in our katas and in our classes. Just as good form is expected in practice, it is essential to good sparring. Maintain good posture and a good attitude.

Deliver your techniques with speed, focus, and intent, but spar with control and composure. Defeat your opponent using technical skill and do not depend on raw strength. Good form does not refer to technique alone, however. Demonstrate respect for yourself and your art by being honorable and compassionate towards your opponent. Never take cheap shots or give in to anger during a match. When sparring a less skilled fighter, spar "down," keeping the match challenging, but not delivering a crushing defeat that could affect their confidence and impede future progress. Remember that winning isn't everything, it's learning and having fun that are important.

Combinations

Mix it up! Too often when we spar we concentrate on attacking with our hands, then switch to feet or vice versa. Don't just punch or kick, but combine the two. Throw one or two hand techniques to raise or lower your opponent's guard, then throw in a well-placed kick before quickly switching back to hands. Switching back and forth smoothly and often takes practice, but will keep your opponents guessing and score a lot of points!

In the same respect, change your distancing as well. Fight on the outside, kicking and using long range hand techniques, then quickly enter into close-fighting, changing to a boxing guard and scoring with a quick hand combination. Follow up with a well-placed foot sweep or quickly retreat out of range and resume long-range tactics.

You can extend this concept and experiment with varying your speed, level of attack, footwork, and fighting style. These types of unpredictable sparring strategies can take even experienced fighters by surprise, but don't just wing it, practice hard to develop smooth, fluid movements.

Sparring Strategies

Level I: Blitz Attack

The Blitz Attack was developed by tournament champion and martial arts legend Chuck Norris who dedicated the first 50 pages of his book, *Winning Tournament Karate*, to development of the technique.

In the Blitz Attack, the concept is to move forward quickly, crossing the gap to engage your opponent with an overwhelming barrage of kicks and punches. Beginners are taught the Blitz Attack at the same time that they are learning the Taikyoku kata because the concept can be seen throughout the form.

The Blitz Attack is a quick, explosive charge designed to catch your opponent by surprise and start driving him backwards. At the simplest level, use the combinations that we learn in our kata, specifically the punching series down the center. Block your opponent attack, then quickly step in with a series of three punches accompanied by a loud kiai. At first, step forward once with each punch, but as you become more proficient, add techniques to the series.

At the next level, initiate the movement with a lunge punch (jab), followed by a reverse punch. When the opponent retreats, keep the pressure on him by following up with a rear leg front snap kick/reverse punch combination, landing with another combination of punches.

Level II: Load and Explode

At two green the technique is Load and Explode, a flying backfist strike which parallels the backfist move that appears in the kata for that rank, Pinan 2. Load and Explode is a deceiving motion that begins with a backward movement as though you were retreating, stepping away from your opponent and causing him to relax his guard, only to suddenly spring directly at him, attacking with a quick backfist to the head.

When you take your first step (in the direction opposite your intended movement) bend your knees, coiling your legs beneath you. Then, spring back, pushing off of your rear foot first, followed by a straightening of your lead leg. This allows you to cover a large area quickly and unexpectedly. Be careful not to leap or jump, as you cannot stop or change your direction quickly when you are not in contact with the ground.

Level III: Rear Leg Charge

The rear leg charge is an explosive leap across the gap towards your opponent. Drive your rear leg forward, raising your knee high to protect your body as you shoot yourself forward. Keep your hands high and elbows tight against your body. While the charge itself can serve the purpose of covering your advance, you can also add a straight blast of vertical punches. Be careful not to leap too high as you cannot stop or change your direction quickly while you are in the air.



Level IV: High-Low--High

This technique involves programming your opponent. Get him to expect one thing then attack him with a different technique coming from an unexpected angle. When you do this twice in quick succession, even experienced fighters can be fooled.

Begin the basic combination by striking your opponent high, with a backfist to the head. It does not matter if you score or not, it only matters that the opponent believes that your high backfist is now a threat. Next, fake the high backfist, and when your opponent moves to block your attack, kick him in the ribs instead. Finally, fake the high backfist then fake the kick. As soon as the opponent's guard starts to drop to counter your kick, hit him in the head with your backfist.

You can apply the high low high concept to other combinations as well. Try programming the opponent to expect a low attack, but then attack him high instead. Next, fake low, then fake high, only to attack low again. Adapt the concept to build a number of different but equally effective combinations.

Level V: Alley of Opportunity

Roundhouse and heel kicks that attack on a horizontally angle above the belt are fairly easy to block. However, kicks that attack on a steeper angle of approximately 35 degrees from the ground to your opponent's midsection are more difficult to block and have a greater chance of scoring. This is the Alley of Opportunity. When attacking up the alley, bring your foot in a straight line directly from the ground to the target without excessive chambering. This reduces the power of your strike, but greatly increases your odds of scoring.

Level VI: Broken Rhythm

Understanding Rhythm

Rhythm is the key to good timing and successful sparring. Rhythm involves the speed and tempo with which you breathe, move, attack, and defend. When you move around during sparring, observe your opponent's movements and watch for patterns that will help you predict when and where he will move, when he will attack, and when he is most vulnerable. Maintain an irregular rhythm to prevent your opponent from being able to analyze you. Change your speed and direction often and keep your opponent guessing. Sometimes move quickly, sometimes more slowly, and change often. Switch your movements by circling to the left and right, moving forward and backward in an unpredictable manner. Use rhythm to your advantage by lulling your opponent into a rhythm, then breaking that rhythm, then attack on a half-beat when your opponent is in a fixed stance or not expecting it.

The Bounce

When a person kicks, they usually put their foot down between kicks. The bounce describes a motion in which you kick and then let your kicking foot just barely touch the ground, only to have it suddenly bounce back up into a second kick. The second kick can be aimed at the same target, or a different target depending on how the opponent reacted to your first kick.

The Pause

Strike your opponent with a full speed technique, such as a backfist. It does not matter if you score, so long as your opponent has gained an idea of how fast you normally strike. Next, initiate the motion of the backfist, only to pause it ever so briefly halfway to its target before following through with the strike. The unpredictable change in speed will make your attack very difficult to block.

Level VII: Electric Shock

The concept of electric shock is based on speed. It is a strategy by which you block an attack and strike your opponent very quickly, as though his body were electrified. For example, your opponent throws a punch or kick. As you turn your body and step sideways slightly to evade the attack, slap the attacking limb sharply to redirect it and distract your opponent. Immediately bounce your blocking hand into a quick attack such as a backfist strike before your opponent has had time to retract his attacking limb. The electric shock principle increases the effectiveness of your techniques and minimizes the amount of time you are exposed to a counter attack.

Level VIII: Dynamic Blind Spot

The dynamic blind spot prevents your opponent from seeing your attack until it is too late for him to block or avoid it. Your opponent has natural blind spots, such as below his lead hand and arm, or behind his back when facing you in a side stance. Take advantage of these blind spots by throwing your techniques along paths that hide their approach from your opponent. You can make your own dynamic blind spots by hiding techniques with your front hand and arm. For example, you can hide a cross behind a quick jab, or hide a reverse punch behind an open lead hand. Whatever you do, use timing and deception to help you set up your technique, then launch it quickly when your opponent can't see it approach. Experiment with different types of blind spots and develop your own deceptive techniques and strategies until you can score at will with them upon any opponent.