

Competition and Contribution, the Bigger Picture

What makes a martial artist successful? Is it competition with others for a trophy, a title, a rank, or notoriety, or is it contribution to one's school, one's style or one's art?

If you win a tournament or a series of tournaments, you might just become a person of note in the martial arts. If the tournaments are national, you might become a generally well-known martial artist, respected by your peers and envied by your juniors. But what have you then contributed? Usually only a note in a history of tournaments that says you had a pretty laudable record.

If successful means "envied by others", perhaps competition is the way to go. If it means that you have benefited others, than contribution is the correct path. Contributions deserve praise, but earning praise by personal achievement does not itself constitute a contribution.

I do not want to disparage the value of competition by this example, rather I want to saunter into an old philosophical distinction: the admiral vs. the enviable. One can admire a tournament champion or any other competitor from afar, but would you wish to *be* that champion? Envy, as contrasted to admiration, implies that you would like to identify with the champion's life. Envy is identifying with the person from inside. Admiration is applauding the person from outside. Few of us would want to make the sacrifices that successful competitors make or keep the travel schedules that competitive champions keep. Instead of envying them, we admire them, satisfied with our own less enviable position.

If success in competition is not itself a contribution, what is? Consider two of the greatest karate competitors of the latter half of the 20th century, Joe Lewis and Bill Wallace. Each won numerous championships in both non-contact and full-contact karate probably without any grand plans to develop systems to teach later in life; but their lasting contributions were the development of sparring systems they could teach others. They were successful in converting competition into contribution. To most karate competitors, these contributions are not enviable (most karate competitors do not want to be teachers) but admirable, i.e. we applaud them from the outside whether or not we use their methods.

What about the contributions of other martial artists who were not known as competitors? Jhoon Rhee, founder of TKD in the U.S., was not known as a competitor but he invented foam sparring equipment and taught several well known Texas and Washington, DC area competitors. Stephen Hayes, never known as a competitor, founded modern Ninpo in the West. Wally Jay, certainly not famous for competition, traveled the globe sharing his insights into practical ju-jutsu. Ed Parker, one of the most noted teachers of the 20th century was not a competitor. Which of these gentlemen do we envy and which do we admire?

If we envy them at all, it is the envy of wishing we had whatever it took to get where they are. And here, in my humble opinion, is the true measurement of success in the martial arts. It can be achieved by competition with others, but not at the expense of contribution to others.

I am a strong advocate of people being rationally self-centered. I do not measure success by self-sacrifice. But willingly sharing the wisdom one attained during the achievement of notoriety is a contribution that rounds out the personal success. If you have achieved in such abundance that you wish to share and bring in more abundance in doing so, your success is full and not truly self-sacrificial at all. You are then, I believe, deserving of both admiration and envy.