

The Wrong Arena for One-Punch Victories?

Japanese tournament sparring was influenced by a Shotokan that was spiritually influenced by the one-punch kill mentality, which in turn was influenced by *ken-jutsu*—where kill or be killed during feudal wars encouraged aggression to the point of self-sacrifice, and where one stroke of the blade could end a life.

It is impressive to see a daring athlete lunge to victory, scoring his point just a split second before the opponent splits his lip. I suffered a similar fate early in my karate career. Tom Haberdasher, not known for his control, did not see my controlled groin kick (legal in our dojo). His uncontrolled round kick hit my face. I gained the “victory” and lost a tooth. Our spirits were youthful and aggressive and losing a tooth was the price I paid for being macho. “Vaaary interestink,” Arte Johnson used to say when closing *Laugh-in*, “but schtoopid!”

Martial artists tend not to self-assess any more than children who play Nerf-rifle games pretending to be soldiers. If kids spent one day even watching basic training, they would either reconsider a military career or consider joining the military for more realistic reasons than “I get to shoot the bad guy.” Being a soldier is not a walk in the park with epaulets (unless you are in a military band), and being a traditional martial artist should not be a stroll across the *tatami* to receive a stripe on one’s belt. Sure, the stripe is a motivator and maybe “shooting the bad guy” is too in the right context, but it is precisely the context most martial artists miss.

Do daring and physically talented tournament karate-ka training in Japanese styles really think that their skills in fighting on the street or surviving a sudden single attack will be enhanced with a self-sacrificial *ken-jutsu* mentality? “No,” you may answer, “but the one-punch-kill attitude helps with courage and determination.” Fair enough. But why do so many Japanese style karate-ka *think* they can handle self-defense and thus invest so little time applying their courage and determination to karate skills applicable to the non-tournament, self-defense world?

Step away from the tournament for a moment and consider dojo training. You drill your basics and combinations so you are more facile in performing your kata. You interpret your kata so you can apply its movements for self-defense. You apply the movements in *ippon-kumite* (a.k.a. *enbu-kumite*) so you can react more instantaneously when attacked. Each step links with the next to improve your self-defense. Then you spar, some of you thinking that somehow one-step sparring has led you to free sparring. There seems to be a gap between *ippon-kumite* and tournament freestyle. The former is defense and counter (and escape) against a sudden single attack or occasionally, a multiple person attack. The latter is a sport situation in which you are encouraged to aggress to score; defense itself will not win the match. I call the former SAD ([Sudden Attack Defense](#)) and the latter CAD (Combat Attack Defense). I prefer a training emphasis on the former, but I accept that the latter can occur in some self-defense situations. Having conceded that, what kind of give-and-take do you want to train to be prepared for non-tournament Combat Attack Defense?

Will lunging, powerful, one-point-kill Japanese karate built upon a *ken-jutsu* attitude do the job? Or will a more holistic sparring that allows more targets, and accepts at least momentary takedowns, throws, locks, etc.

fit the bill more accurately? Certainly if you lunge in with a punch that would fold a guy's head back against his spine, you will finish a CAD situation quickly, so learning *kamikaze* skills can come in handy, but if you miss and sail by the target as you might in a tournament (where Johnny Cobra-kai is not allowed to jump on you from behind, slap your groin in passing, or shoulder-check you into traffic), you just might think twice about how your courage and determination built upon one-punch-kill are serving your common sense.