

What the Olympics Will Bring to Karate

by Akihiro Omi

Karate has been a candidate sport for the Games of Olympiad since June 19, 1999, when the 109th General Session (Congress) of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) ratified the definitive recognition of the World Karate Federation (WKF) as the International Governing Body (IGB) for the sport of karate. As it stands now, the estimated 50 million karate practitioners around the world might see their long awaited chances to have their Olympic dreams fulfilled in as early as 2016 if the next IOC General Session scheduled in 2009 approves of it.

Participation in the Olympics will certainly transform karate. Our next mission is to make sure that karate maintains its honor, technical integrity and traditional values so that our ancient art will be accepted and respected as a constructive member within the greater family of sports. Karate is a sport cultivated by the Eastern culture and tradition, and has much to offer the youth of the world in building strong bodies, minds and spirits, as well as developing character, compassion and humanity.

Joining the Olympic family means that karate accepts Olympism as its guiding philosophy. Such thought might upset some "traditionalists." However, believe it or not, this had already occurred in the early 1900s. Let me explain...

The Origin of Karate as a Sport

Soon after the revival of the Modern Olympic Games in 1896, Baron Pierre de Coubertin extended his invitation to Japan. The Japanese government chose Dr. Jigoro Kano, best known as the founder of judo, to represent the country. Dr. Kano, a life-long educator and university president as well as renowned martial artist, became the first Japanese representative to the IOC in 1909; he also participated in the 5th Olympics held in Stockholm, Sweden in 1912 as the head of the first-ever Japanese delegation. This was 10 years prior to the famous demonstration of karate by Gichin Funakoshi and Shinkin Gima that took place at Dr. Kano's Kodokan Dojo in 1922.

Dr. Kano became the Baron Pierre de Coubertin of Japan. He founded the Japan Athletic Union, which still governs all sports in Japan to this day, and dedicated his life to promoting sports and physical education among Japanese youth. Judo, which he created, was without doubt a combination of the traditional Japanese martial art of jujitsu and the ideal of Olympism outlined by Coubertin. It was Dr. Kano's effort to support the Olympic movement as a proud citizen of Japan in response to Coubertin's call for support: "Every act of support for the Olympic movement promotes peace, friendship and solidarity throughout the world."

When Dr. Kano invited Funakoshi from Okinawa and encouraged him to teach karate in Tokyo, Dr. Kano envisioned a universal sport that could be practiced by the youth of the world. The transformation of karate-jitsu to karate-do signified karate's acceptance as a sport, rather than as a tool of war. Funakoshi's dojo kun (motto) includes "Seek perfection of character!" This philosophy actually originated in ancient Greece and was handed down to him by Dr. Kano, a life-long mentor to Funakoshi and a friend of Baron Pierre de Coubertin.

Olympism and Budo

Ancient Greece and Japan may seem a world away. However, these two countries share somewhat similar philosophies and religions. For example, the Kojiki, Japan's first book on history (written in 712 AD), describes the day-to-day interactions among mortals and immortals, and resembles the work of Homer. And a Zen master, instead of Socrates, might easily have said "His chief and proper concern: knowledge of himself and the right way to live."

The Olympic Charter states that "Olympism is a philosophy of life, exalting and combining in a balanced whole the qualities of body, will and mind. Blending sport with culture and education, Olympism seeks to create a way of life based on the joy found in effort, the educational value of good example and respect for universal fundamental ethical principles. The goal of Olympism is to place everywhere sport at the service of the harmonious development of man, with a view to encouraging the establishment of a peaceful society concerned with the preservation of human dignity."

I believe that these goals are consistent with the objectives of Budo as defined by the Budo Charter: "to cultivate character, enrich the ability to make value judgments, and foster a well-disciplined and capable individual through participation in physical and mental training utilizing martial techniques." Students of Budo are required to "constantly follow decorum, adhere to the fundamentals, and resist the temptation to pursue mere technical skill rather than the unity of mind and technique." Instructors must also "always strive to cultivate his or her character, and further his or her own skill and discipline of mind and body."

This is where the East meets the West. The global culture lies upon the universal truth and understanding. Olympic Karate must represent both Olympism and the Budo Spirit.

Rules of Karate Competition

With these in mind, our next task is to shape the future of karate-do as a sport. This is an important but also a risky job. Much as the mighty Roman Empire caused the decline of the ancient Olympic Games, narrow visions can lead karate into ruin.

The Romans lost sight of the ancient Greek ideals. Athletes were replaced by gladiators, and the interest in striving for perfection was ignored in favor of spectacular actions which pleased the Emperor and the Coliseum audience. As the original purpose of the Games was forgotten, Olympism itself began to decline. Karate must not follow that path.

Baron Pierre de Coubertin wrote, "First of all, it is necessary to maintain in sport the noble and chivalrous character which distinguished it in the past, so that it shall continue to be part of the education of present day peoples in the same way that sport served so wonderfully in the times of ancient Greece. The public has a tendency to transform the Olympic athlete into the paid gladiator. These two attitudes are not compatible."

In the recent years, karate has enjoyed a rapid growth in popularity, thanks to the current WKF Kumite and Kata Rules which made karate competition fair, fun, exciting and, above all, safe. Although drastic changes in these rules have been proposed by some, we must be very careful when attempting to modify the rules that have brought karate such success, including IOC recognition. Temptations are always there to make the sport more spectacular, appealing and exciting; this, however, would result in fundamentally altering the nature of the sport and losing sight of its original purposes, thus causing the sport to decline due to a smaller number of participants, and the audience to lose respect for the sport.

There are many sports that have successfully avoided such a trap: golf, tennis and fencing (European), among others, enjoy their popularity without having had to modify their rules to be more appealing to the mass audience. They accomplished this by educating the public about their sports, rules and traditions, and by inviting the public to join.

Karate must remain a participation sport and therefore, the rules must first consider the safety of the athletes: not only of those who compete in the World Championships or the Olympic Games, but also of athletes of all ages and skill levels in local, regional and national competitions, and even of those who do not compete at all. I oppose any attempt to make gladiators out of karate athletes, sacrificing their safety. Professional wrestling and kick boxing may be fun to watch but they do not belong in the Olympics.

Promoting karate the right way will take many years of work. We need to provide better training for the referees and judges so that the competition will be fair. We must improve the rules to make it even safer so that more people (including younger children) can participate. And we must educate the general public through a better public relations effort. The stories about the history, tradition, honor, dignity and indomitable spirit of the sport and its athletes must be told so that everyone can understand and share the virtues that karate provides and the traditional wisdom it represents.

Traditional karate is like classical music or ballet. The music of Mozart, Beethoven or Bach may be arranged to some degree, depending on the individual musician's interpretation of the music. However, if it changes the basic nature of the music, it is no longer "classical." It is tradition that provides the depth in art. Such tradition must remain and stay alive in the sport of karate.

Karate must also maintain its own identity as an independent sport. Changing the rules to render karate more similar to tae kwon do, judo or boxing would have a negative effect on karate for many years to come, and will eventually kill it.

Conclusion

The Olympic Karate Movement has already brought us a democratic structure that governs the international and national federations. As in any other democratic entity, all members must actively participate in the decision-making process. If we fail to act promptly, we all must share the responsibility of failure. I ask the world karate community to resist the temptation to make radical rule changes, and to choose the right way to promote the sport while preserving its traditional honor, spirit and ideals.

Baron Pierre de Coubertin also said, "Olympism is not a system, it is a state of mind. It can permeate a wide variety of modes of expression and no single race or era can claim to have a monopoly on it." It is my sincere hope that karate will become a productive member of the world sport community, and that future generations of the world's youth will be able to share in its virtues, developed throughout ancient India, China, Okinawa and Japan, uniting the communities of the world in peace.