

Report 25: Kumite

The main purpose of *kumite*, or sparring, is to learn to fight and defend oneself against an opponent, no matter what the size or skill level of that opponent. Because free sparring is potentially dangerous, it is important for students to build up to it so they develop control, both physical and emotional. To do this, the ISKF has five levels of *kumite*, which take the student from the most beginning level to advanced free-sparring:

1. *Go-ban kumite*: five step sparring. The attacker announces the target, then takes five attack steps, each time to the designated target. The blocker steps back and blocks each attack, then after the last attack, counters with an attack technique of his own. The main purpose is to develop the students' breathing and rhythm control.
2. *Sanbon kumite*: three step sparring: The attacker announces the target, then takes three attack steps, each time to the designated target. The blocker steps back and blocks each attack, then after the last attack, counters with an attack technique of his own. The main purpose of *sanbon* kumite is to practice making correct distance, as well as to develop balance control.
3. *Ippon kumite*: one step sparring: The attacker announces the target, then steps forward once, attacking to the designated target. The blocker steps back or to the side/diagonal and blocks and counters immediately. The main purpose of *ippon* kumite is to practice and develop strong attacks, blocks, and counter-attacks.
4. *Jiyu-ippon kumite*: semi-free one step sparring: Both participants begin in sparring stance, with fists raised in *kamai*. The main purpose of *jiyu-ippon* kumite is to practice "make-chance", and to develop the sense and timing of free sparring, while there is still one participant designated as attacker and one designated as defender. You can increase the difficulty by changing the rules. For example, have the students practice fakes, or have them *not* announce the next attack.

5. *Jiyu kumite*: freestyle sparring: The main purpose of jiyu kumite is to apply one's knowledge gained while training in kata and the basic sparring practices, including timing, distance, *tai sabaki* (shifting),

The JKA/ISKF promotes the graduated learning of kumite so students develop a basic foundation and correct sense of timing, distance, and control. Beginners first learn go-ban kumite (five step sparring) and san-ban kumite (three step sparring). Beginner/intermediate students learn ippon kumite (one step sparring) and jiyu-ippon kumite (semi-free sparring).

Students should start jiyu kumite (free sparring) by sparring against an advanced Karate-ka. The advanced student should keep control of the situation, ensuring there are no injuries. The advanced student should attack strongly, although not full speed at first, but also open himself up to allow the student to practice defending and attacking when there is opportunity. The advanced student is responsible for controlling the speed and intensity.

Kumite is an area where the student must often face his/her own fears and perceived limitations. With women and children especially, you may be dealing with fears or issues arising from past abuse or other problems. Children are small; they will often feel vulnerable and unprotected at first. Women may have been abused in the past by a partner, spouse, or stranger. The sight of a fist or foot coming at them could trigger emotions and fears, and the instructor needs to be aware and sensitive, but not coddle them. The instructor must be able to push the students to move past their own issues and learn to spar. By starting students slowly, building their ability and confidence, and ensuring correct posture, techniques and timing, you will help them develop their kumite skills.

The Basis of Kumite

Sensei Nakayama's Best Karate book, Kumite 1, clearly states the basis of kumite is kata:

The importance of kata to kumite cannot be overemphasized...if the kata techniques become confused when applied, no improvement in kumite can be expected. In other words, improvement in kumite depends directly on improvement in kata; the two go together like hand in glove.ⁱ

It is also important for students to build their *kihon*—basic stances and techniques—correctly before trying to free spar. Also according to Sensei Nakayama, students become impatient and want to begin free sparring before they understand the basic points of attack, defense, timing, distance, and so on.

The tendency recently is to advance to jiyu kumite prematurely, and the result of this—kime lacking intense, strong power, is seen far too often, because the participants in contests lack sufficient training in fundamentals and kata.ⁱⁱ

Training Points

Techniques should be executed with good body position and upright posture. The student should step through correctly, using inside leg tension to contract and expand through the step. Punching techniques should be on target, and the punch should come straight from the hiki-te position without throwing the elbow out. Kicks should be executed correctly according to basic standards, and should be aimed forcefully at the target.

All techniques should be thrown with purpose. It is easy for students, especially beginning students, to be “nice” and to punch too high or outside the target area. This approach does not teach anyone Karate; the defender does not have to block properly in order to avoid the technique. The technique should be thrown so the defender must block or shift to keep from getting hit. Without “skinship,”—the contact of skin-to-skin block/attacks—students will never grow up, and will never build a strong feeling of attack and defense during kumite.

Methods of Teaching Kumite

When teaching kumite to a beginning student, you must begin with basics: start with gohon kumite, then sambon kumite. When the student can perform these and has become a little more advanced, work with them on ippon kumite.

However, even the most dedicated of students can become bored and distracted when going back and forth across the floor endlessly. Once distracted, the student stops learning and injuries can result. To alleviate this and continue to make the trainings interesting, you can modify the exercises to keep them fresh and challenging.

- When practicing gohon kumite, change the target so it's face-stomach-face-stomach-face, instead of all jodan or all chudan attacks.
- During gohon or sambon kumite, have the blocker try a counter-attack after every attack.
- During gohon or sambon kumite, have the blocker shift diagonally instead of straight back each attack.
- For ippon kumite, work with different timing ideas. Try go no sen timing first, then sen no sen timing. For example, have the blocker try to jam the attack with a mai-ashi kekomi (front leg thrust) to the attacker's hip area. This will work if the attacker is still in the beginning stages of the attack. Alternatively, have the blocker shift in and kizami zuki jodan, catching the attacker mid-stride.
- For ippon kumite, try different shifting strategies. Have the blocker shift in, shift to the side, and shift diagonally back. Work with different counter attacks.
- For jiyu ippon kumite, allow more and more advanced sparring strategies. Once the students understand and can perform basic semi-free sparring, make some changes. Allow them to fake. Have the attacker *not* announce the next technique, which could be any of four or five allowed.

Allow the blocker to respond with two counter techniques instead of one. The variations are limitless.

Jiyu Kumite

Jiyu kumite, or free sparring, has many aspects. Sensei Nakayama's two books about kumite in his Best Karate series address timing, and show many examples of different types of timing. By learning the basic concepts of timing, one can structure many different strategies for sparring.

Go No Sen

In its simplest form, *go no sen* timing is the timing we teach for basic ippon, sambon, and gohon kumite. The attacker attacks, and the blocker reacts with a block/counter, shift and counter, etc. However, there are masters of *go no sen* timing who are able to lure the attacker into making the attack, and finishing them off at their own pace.

Go no sen, taking the initiative later, is not the same thing as counterattacking or engaging in defensive karate, nor is it simply inducing the opponent to action. It means to lead the opponent into movements advantageous to one's own self and then finishing off according to one's own pace.ⁱⁱⁱ

Sen No Sen

Sen no sen timing is more advanced than *go no sen* timing. With *sen no sen*, you watch for the attacker to move, and beat him to the attack. This requires full commitment by the defender, as late or hesitant movement will result in failure.

Timing is so critical that to be off by as little as one-thousandth of a second can reverse the situation and make one the victim rather than the victor.^{iv}

ⁱ M. Nakayama, Best Karate series, Kumite 1. Page 14.

ⁱⁱ M. Nakayama, Best Karate series, Kumite 1. Page 15.

ⁱⁱⁱ M. Nakayama, Best Karate, Kumite 1. Page 40

^{iv} M. Nakayama, Best Karate, Kumite 1. Page 26