

THOUGHTS FROM JAPAN

The Olympics and Other Competitions:

By Dave Hooper

Serious karate-ka must seem a rather odd bunch of individuals to the rest of the world. They constantly put themselves under pressure, subject themselves to all manner of masochistic activities, endure extreme physical stress and pain quite happily (it would seem), and voluntarily submit to the kinds of training regimes that were quite justifiably outlawed under the terms of the Geneva Convention – and for what? At least sportsmen who drive themselves to extremes have some discernable goal towards which they are aiming: a higher place in the league, a more prominent position in the world rankings, a competitive triumph, an increase in the number of adoring fans, fame and fortune, the list is endless. But these strange karate-ka – the ones who traipse down to the dojo week in week out, come rain or shine, and then, with their sweat-soaked karate-gi's stuffed into their bags, traipse back home again – why on earth do they do it?

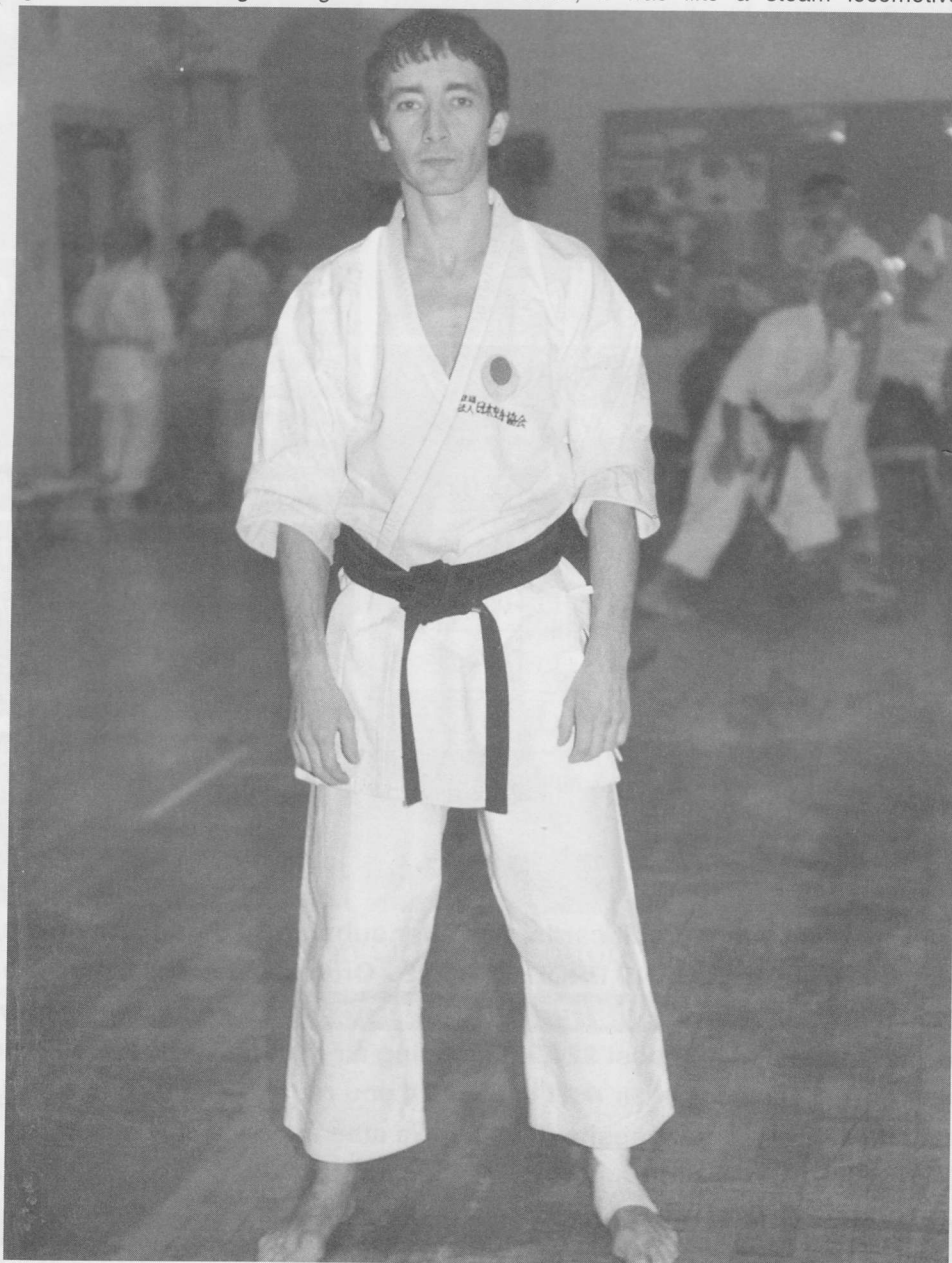
When I first arrived at the JKA in Tokyo, it was a similarly odd bunch of serious individuals with whom I aligned myself. Training was six days per week, and six days per week was what we did. Foreign friends who saw me limping along with muscular aches and pains or sporting newly-acquired battle scars from training (most of which, I should add, were very much of a temporary nature and not life-threatening), would shake their heads in bewilderment. It wasn't as if anyone was forcing me to go. Perhaps, some of them no doubt wondered, the pleasure derived from training was akin to the pleasure derived from banging your head against a brick wall: the real satisfaction, of course, coming when you eventually stop. My father certainly supported this as a viable theory.

I have to confess that there were days when I too wondered what on earth possessed me to turn up each morning. It wasn't just that the training was physically demanding – and it certainly was but there was often a great deal of mental pressure with which you had to cope. That mental pressure took various forms. One which immediately springs to mind weighed nearly 200lbs, sported a shaven head and a mean little moustache, and exuded the kind of warmth and generosity of spirit that I had always associated with disgruntled inmates at one of Her Majesty's prisons. In fact, if Nakamura Sempai (as good a name as any to substitute for the sake of this article)

hadn't already got a record for GBH or Assault and Battery, I felt sure that one was on the cards sooner or later. Facing Nakamura in a line up I always felt some empathy for David facing Goliath, but without the confidence that the God of Israel was there to back me up. Nakamura was strong, hard and fast, and didn't strike me as the kind of person who would take prisoners – especially wimpy, English-speaking brown-belts.

George was another character who put me under pressure. He had arrived in Japan from somewhere in North America in the 1960's to do judo, and had never got around to leaving. George was not so

tall, but what he lacked in height he more than made up for in girth. George was the kind of person who, had he been just a little fonder of Japanese food, might have taken up sumo. As it was, he joined the JKA. I can remember once, in a moment of pure lunacy, trying to foot-sweep George. I might as well have been trying to evaporate clouds on a wet Sunday afternoon in Wales by mind-control. It had about as much effect as a determined mosquito head-butting a rhinoceros. George may not have been the fastest person in the dojo, but he was strong. When George stepped forward with *oizuki*, it was like a steam locomotive



Dave Hooper says, "I have the utmost respect for serious sportsmen who push themselves and train seriously to achieve success. However, for me, karate will never be just a sport."

careering towards you: easy to spot, but nigh on impossible to block.

These were the kinds of characters that put you under pressure. It was no good trying to avoid such people. Sooner or later you would have to face them. There were occasions when I would sit on the Yamanote line, heading towards Ebisu station and the JKA *Honbu* dojo, fantasising that George had given up karate and reverted back to judo, and that Nakamura had emigrated to Bolivia. George, of course, would be already outside the dojo when I arrived, waiting for it to open, and Nakamura would be there a few minutes later, whacking the *makiwara* with such force it made you wonder how many he had gone through in his karate career.

This pressure was perhaps no more extreme than that when I first went to Takushoku University. There, there were forty or more Nakamuras in the making – forty of whom, I was sure, were doing their utmost to knock my head off. So why, then, do we do it? Here we are, as karate-ka, in the relative civility and peacefulness of the twenty-first century, and we still train as though our lives depended upon it. Surely there must be some rational explanation? In my early days of training I felt compelled on many occasions to try and tell people exactly what karate was all about. To explain why the JKA was so important. To try and articulate what it was about the training and the instructors that inspired such a sense of awe and respect. Why, in fact, karate was a matter of life and death, and not merely another way of keeping fit or a clever form of self-defence or just a sport. Such attempts, of course, were in the main, futile. For people who have never trained seriously, it is very hard to appreciate what it is that motivates the rest of us. And the longer I train, the less compelled I feel to explain or justify what I do. In any event, it is all going to seem rather pointless to someone who can't see any end in view. And this, perhaps, is one of the reasons that competition in karate has become such a contentious issue.

Competition, of course, is the superficial karate-ka's lifeline. With competition as the aim, and medals and trophies as the evidence of attainment, karate at last has a justifiable and tangible goal. All that oriental mysticism can be debunked, and training can be geared towards something concrete. After all, we aren't Okinawan rice farmers training to be able to punch through Japanese body armour in case some wayward samurai decides on a moment's whim to lop off our heads. So why don't we up-date the whole caboodle and bring it into the twenty-first century? Give karate a long-overdue *raison d'être*. Make karate a

respectable sport and, who knows, before long, an Olympic event.

I can think of many reasons why not. While I can understand the arguments for pushing karate to become a recognised event at the Olympics, my own personal feeling is that in the long run it will do more harm than good. However, before I go on and upset too many people, I should stress that I have nothing against competition *per se*. Karate competition has always been viewed at the JKA as an important part of training, although not, in my experience and understanding, the important part. There is clearly an environment and atmosphere created in competition that puts competitors under a kind of pressure that might sometimes be more difficult to replicate in the dojo. The JKA certainly regards competition as having some value. However, there seems to be no escaping the fact that as soon as competition becomes the focus of training, it is only a matter of time before any pretense at real karate goes out of the window. What is left is a superficial imitation masquerading as the genuine article, and yet unfortunately, still capable of fooling a lot of people.

Serious karate-ka (those strange individuals I referred to in the opening paragraph) are, undoubtedly, sometimes very defensive about what they do. Of course, it is only natural that one is loyal to one's own style of karate and favours the familiar over the unfamiliar. But those karate-ka that have progressed to a certain level and have achieved some understanding, usually, in my experience, have a healthy respect for other similar practitioners from other schools of karate. However, when these sports-orientated, competition-focused *pseudo-karate-ka* come along, opening dojos, awarding grades and trying to *modernise* karate, it is hardly surprising that feelings run high.

I remember the first competition I attended in the UK after my first year's stint of training at the JKA in Tokyo. Although arranged and run by one of the major associations in the country, there was little that resembled karate at all. Competitors of all grades were battling it out, most of whom had too little experience and ability to either focus techniques or control them. The St. John's Ambulance Brigade hadn't been so stretched since the Blitz in London, and looked to be in imminent danger of running out of medical supplies. In fact, some of the more successful competitors conducted themselves as though they might have done most of their training on the terraces of Manchester United Football Stadium rather than in a dojo dedicated to the honourable study of Japanese Martial Arts. The *kata* was equally *progressive* with the criteria for success being the very opposite to

everything I had been taught for the previous twelve months in Japan.

Of course, none of this would have mattered in the slightest if it hadn't been for the fact that the name of the JKA was being used indirectly to help promote the whole fiasco (some competitors even had 'JKA' embroidered on their belts). I remember desperately hoping that none of the spectators had come for the first time to witness Shotokan at its finest. I would have hated for them to have left with the idea that this was in any way related to what I had been doing in Japan.

This is not to say that *all* competitions are necessarily poor examples of genuine karate. However, the emphasis on scoring points and beating your opponent to the mark almost demands a change in the traditional ways of training. It is precisely because karate is so notoriously difficult to judge – unlike judo where one of the competitors usually lands flat on their back to conveniently assist the judges – that some kind of compromise has become almost inevitable. One technique may be discernably faster than another, but it takes a very knowledgeable and experienced karate-ka to say with certainty that this technique was more effective than another, or that a technique lacked *kime*. It is far easier to say that one of two techniques landed first, and since they both sufficiently resembled karate, then speed should be the deciding factor. With speed gradually becoming the major element in competition-style kumite, almost any fit young person with sufficient speed and natural timing is a potential competition winner. In fact, who needs karate? Sadly, this is precisely the direction in which karate seems to be heading in many clubs. Forget all that nonsense about basics and stances – don't waste all that time on pointless five-step kumite drills and other pre-arranged sparring. Get on with the fun stuff. Give the club a bit of credibility – win a few competitions.

To my mind, pushing for karate to become an officially recognised sport at the Olympics only further encourages this trend. By giving competition even more prominence, and promoting karate as a sport, what is currently a fairly dismal state of affairs will deteriorate even further. I'm not implying here that, for want of a better phrase, *traditional karate* and *Olympic karate* need necessarily be mutually exclusive – indeed, there are many JKA instructors for whom I have the highest regard, who are actively supporting the move towards full Olympic recognition. My own personal view, however, is that karate is far too important to risk it becoming just another sport. Maybe in Japan the JKA would be able to keep the Olympics in perspective, but generally, I don't believe this would be the



Yoshiharu Osaka 7th Dan JKA. Born 8th Sept 1947 in Fukuoka, Kyushu. A student at Takushoku. He was the 22nd and 23rd All Japan Kata and Kumite Champion. He won the JKA Kata World Title nine times. World Champion in both Kata and Kumite. (Photo By Des McGuinn).

case. I remember a few years ago when the then European Champion arrived at the JKA to train. (This was back in the days when more Europeans felt that the Japanese still had something to teach them). Osaka Sensei corrected basic errors in his fundamental techniques and then went to work on his kata. "European Champion" meant very little at the JKA Honbu dojo, and the five or six *kenshusei* (junior instructors) who trained behind us each morning in the class, were far more formidable opponents than anyone who might join the class. On another occasion, also during Osaka Sensei's class,

Yamamoto Sensei walked through the dojo sporting two black eyes. He had just won the All Japan or the World Championships (I can no longer recall which) and had clearly been put back in his place at the following day's training in the instructors class. Osaka Sensei, with his usual wit, made some innocuous remark about pandas, which Yamamoto Sensei wisely ignored. The Europeans, the All Japan, the World Championships – none of it really mattered. That was just competition. The real stuff was back on the dojo floor. That was where you were really tested, and that was where a

person's ability and real level of karate became apparent. (I wonder whether a future Olympic Gold Medallist will arrive at the JKA to have their basics corrected). Some people tell me that *progress* in karate is inevitable, and I should move with the times or risk being sidelined. Well, maybe in the future, being sidelined won't be such a bad thing. Whilst karate sports clubs proliferate, and karate coaches gain recognition, and karate sports wear becomes more colourful as sponsorship increases, and the long-awaited dollars start rolling in as karate, like all respectable sports, becomes even bigger business, there will still be those rather odd bunches of individuals, still wearing their sweat-stained white karate-gi's, trying to perfect, would you believe, basic stepping punches. They'll originate from a number of styles – Shotokan, Goju-ryu, Wado-ryu etc. – but all training towards a similar end.

And the JKA? The JKA, and the late Nakayama Sensei, have left a great legacy to karate. JKA and ex-JKA instructors make up the best of the world's karate-ka (and, in my opinion, karate competitors) – an achievement reached through a philosophy of teaching and training that has, so far, kept competition in perspective. When I last saw the late Nakayama Sensei taking part in the World Championships in, what must have been, his late fifties, he was making twenty-five year-olds look slow. This was the culmination of years of solid, hard training – the epitome of JKA karate.

I have the utmost respect for serious sportsmen who push themselves and train seriously to achieve success. However, for me, karate will never be just a sport. I don't plan to retire from training, and karate practice will always be *serious*. The next time I am in a line-up, in a life and death situation with someone like Nakamura sempai, it will not be difficult to put the Olympics and other competitions in perspective – it will all, somehow, seem incredibly trivial.

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