

Bias in Refereeing. Is it really there?

Does bias really exist. Bias is defined as something that turns the mind and sways the judgment. Competition rules are designed to create an athletic test from which the winner is determined. Each competition rule system defines for itself the athletic test from which the winner is determined. In this sense, any competition rule system has what we call an inherent bias -- an inseparable quality of part of a thing or person -- that defines what the judges are to consider.

In the Rules of Karate Competition for the World Union of Karate-do Organizations (WUKO), a certain standard of technique exists. This standard requires kime in the performance of the karate technique. Thus techniques such as wheel kicks which do not have kime, are not rewarded in the competition. This is not to say that such techniques are ineffective, just that the style of competition does not encourage this type of technique by not rewarding its performance.

We see more inherent bias in the WUKO kata competition. The forms of competition must be from the styles of karate-do recognized in Japan, i.e. by the Japan Karate Federation (JKF)¹. Thus the Gojuryu, Shitoryu, Wadoryu, and Japan Karate Association (Shotokan) styles are the predominant styles of karate kata found in the WUKO competitions. Although Okinawa is a prefecture of Japan, the Okinawan styles are not very active in the JKF and thus their styles are not well reflected in what the JKF promotes to the WUKO. If you consider that WUKO was originally founded by members of the four major styles, it is obvious the opinions of these styles were greatly reflected in the initial organization and thinking of WUKO as a world governing body.

Inherent bias is necessary to make a rule system work. Inherent bias is an acceptable and important part of the interpretation and implementation of the rules for karate competition. Inherent bias is not the only form of bias found. Another form of bias is unintentional bias. Unintentional bias can come about from ignorance and can be corrected by proper training and experience. Unintentional bias can work both for or against a competitor. Anything other than inherent bias or unintentional bias is cheating and cannot be permitted in any form under the rules.

Untrained, inexperienced referees are often biased toward what they know within their own style. This can cause bias in regard to favored techniques, beliefs about karate technique and being uninformed about the techniques and beliefs of other valid karate styles. We see this problem in both kata and kumite judging with referees not being adequately familiar with style kihon in determining good form and correct maai between the different styles. A referee must have an understanding of the kihon of other styles and systems to adequately judge not only kata, but kumite competition. This is why The USA Karate Federation (USAKF) takes great care in training its referees. If an official is only aware of one way to punch or kick, he/she cannot adequately judge other styles or systems not based on their own understanding. One of the major differences between styles of karate is found in their maai which reflects on the distancing and movement of the hara. What could be considered an over extension of technique in one style, may not be an over extension in another style. Proper information eliminates unintentional bias by improving the technical understanding of the referee -- a lifelong endeavor. Referees should actively study and learn the application of the rules, understand different style kihon, so

¹From the WUKO explanation of the kata rules, " Both shitei and tokui katas must be performed according to the schools of karatedo recognized in Japan. No variations will be permitted."

that they can be a better kata and kumite judge or referee. To avoid unintentional bias referees must diligently study other style requirements and consciously practice to reduce bias. Proper education and training helps minimize these problems and the USA Karatesm referee training program addresses these issues.

Unintentional bias can also occur in kumite where a referee finds it easier to recognize what he is familiar with -- that is, he can read fighters that use a style of fighting he is use to seeing. This is found when competitors from great distances meet and is not as common in regional meets. It is easier to recognize familiar patters of action. Often because of this a fighter catches the referee's eye during the competition and when fatigued, a referee will unintentionally find himself watching such a fighter more closely than his opponent. The problem of referee fatigue is slowly being overcome as more and more qualified officials are developed reducing the burden on individual referees to operate during the entire tournament. A final problem that comes about when referees get tired or lulled by non-variety of technique in a match or simply by a slow match. Because of this, a competitor who suddenly becomes very active or begins attacking with different techniques or to other targets can catch the referee unawares and the effort can be overlooked. Care should be taken by the competitor to introduce the referee to his actions and not to introduce the action without preparing the referee to notice it. While this is not really a problem of bias, it is something a competitor should be prepared to deal with during competition. Referees must form good ring habits to avoid this type of problem.

Unintentional bias in kata can backfire. Some referees judge their own style more harshly than other styles. This style bias can work both for and against a competitor. If you compete with Shotokan kata in a ring of Shotokan judges, they clearly understand the kata and can correctly see the faults. They know what to look for and may tend to judge that performance more closely than they would a Shitoryu competitor performing a kata with which they are unfamiliar. They may in the interest of fairness give a reasonable doubt to the unknown kata when in reality the Shotokan kata could be better. In this example, the Shotokan kata is judged against a tougher standard.

So far we have considered only the referee and bias. What can the competitor do. He can do a lot. His coach rather than complaining about biased officiating, should do his job and teach his competitors how to deal with inherent and unintentional bias. How to make such bias work in his competitor's favor rather than being an immature example with improper and non karate-like behavior.

Competitors, or probably more likely coaches, complain that the referees are biased beyond that inherent bias found in the rule system itself. What do they really mean? I once had a competitor tell me that she never lost, the referees were always wrong. The first thing to remember as a competitor is that the referees are biased in favor of the rules, not in favor of what they or their coach would like the rules to be or in favor their great technique. Referees are to make sure that the correct fighter wins under the rules. This is not the best fighter. To eliminate bias against yourself, the first step is to know the rules and understand how the referee has been taught to administer the rules. The next step in eliminating any bias that may exist against you is to comply or conform with the rules of competition. Simply spoken, get it out of your head that you are the exception to the rule.

There are other more affirmative actions that competitors and their coaches can do. Competitors and their coaches should insist in all competitions that only the red and white obi be worn (that is, no belt rank be worn) and that no identifying mark or patch be worn by any competitor. This way the referee is not prejudiced inadvertently in favor of the higher belt (or will this take away a bias in your favor?) or being swayed by the school or club reputation. An interesting question to consider is whether rank belts should also be eliminated in under advanced kata competition. The referee could better judge the kata and without being tempted or influenced by the belt rank of the competitor. This will help equalize all competitors avoiding this form of unintentional bias.

Competitors need to cooperate with the uniform (karate-gi) regulations. If the rules say do not roll sleeve up -- then don't. Do not take a chance of standing out as a trouble maker.. Circumventing the rules to gain an advantage is against the prestige and honor of karate-do -- a shikkaku offense. If you need to, get two karate-gis -- one for kata and one for kumite. Do not do anything that would leave a bad taste in a referees' mouth. This could come back to haunt you. If you think a rule or regulation is stupid, during the competition is not the time to display your like or dislike of a rule or regulation. It is the time to follow the rules.

While waiting for your turn to compete in kumite, study the referee. See what he calls -- his unintentional bias. Does he call the body over the face, a kick over punch, the front hand over backhand techniques? Does he overlook the face completely? Then fight to his bias. If you cannot fight to his bias, prepare him for seeing your techniques. Fake to the different target areas or use them in a set-up. Once you have awakened him up to your techniques, then vigorously attack these new targets area or use your new techniques. It is also a good idea with inexperienced referees to keep them in such a position that they can see your line of attack.

Kiai. What! Yes, kiai. Actually do it. This is something too many fighters forget to do or do incorrectly. Actively call the referee's attention to your actions. Kiai with intent. Do not overdo it. A lousy or inappropriate kiai can have the reverse effect from what you intended. Do not rely on the referee to be able to read your every intention. Help him see it.

Wear red or black gloves -- the same with foot gear if allowed. This makes it easier for the referee to see your techniques against a white karate-gi. Unfortunately, such colors allow the opponent to more easily read your actions so make sure this is something you want to do.

In kata, select your karate-gi carefully. An ill fitting karate-gi makes your performance sloppy. For women, it is not necessary to look feminine, but you should look crisp and alive. Wear makeup that sets your features off from the white karate-gi. If you are too pale, your features blend into the karate-gi making everything wash together. Further, selective use of makeup can be used to accentuate the gaze and expression required in the kata performance. Finally, pick a kata that compliments your kihon. Not all kata fit the kihon that you were trained in. In a competition with experienced judges, you will find that you do not get very far confusing the kihon of the kata with the kihon style kihon.

If you get anything out of this article, it should be that certain types of bias will always occur. New officials will lack the experience and training of the senior officials. Referees will get tired. The competitor who plans for dealing with these problems in the ring will be able to turn these disadvantages into advantages under the rules of the competition increasing his chances for

victory. The process is one of continuing education for both the official and the competitor. Karate is reflective of the fighting art -- the single stroke victory. In a battle for life and death, everything that can be used is considered. In the quest for victory, do not overlook the obvious things or expect that the ones who judge such victories will be sympathetic to your opinion.