

USA KARATE has done exceptionally well in junior international competition dominating most of the competitions. Unfortunately in adult international competition, other than Pan-American events, USA Karate does not do nearly as well. Why is this? Who should take the blame? Who is responsible to train and develop this "team" anyway? Actually no one person really. The US coach selected for a particular event, due partly to our geographic dispersion, is not able to get the "team" together to make any long term impact, nor does this coach have the resources to visit with each athlete individually. The coach certainly cannot work with the competitors until they have been chosen for a team. Each athlete needs a coach to help prepare for the nationals and team trials. The national coach is not selected or available months before a selection when the athlete's preparation should begin. Further, most sensei are not willing to release their students to another's control for obvious reasons. This leaves the coach for an event mostly in the position of an advisor and motivator. This article is not to make excuses however, but to consider ideas that may help define the true "coaches" role in USA Karate.

Before we go any further, we need to know exactly what karate competition is all about. We all know that it is not about the referees being the stars of the match. Nor can it be about the infallibility of the coach - they are not the ones in the ring. What is karate? A martial art? What are the mental, physical, and psychological aspects of martial combat that karate competition challenges and tests? Where does the coaches role fit in all this. In the words of Jacques Delcourt, World Union of Karate-do Organizations executive president, "Karate is a Martial Art with a branch "Fighting Sport" which is the competition. When one has to fight for saving his life, by using self-defense in the street, no coach is near the person for giving him instructions. Karate is the fight of oneself, alone against the opponent. If we want to keep karate in its primary spirit, we must take what is mentioned above, into account, and forbid the introduction, in a fight, of the coach, whose instructions present the fight's spirit in a wrong light and misrepresent it."

Whoever heard of fighting for your life with a coach whispering into your ear. The last thing you want in a life and death struggle is a distraction. The karate match is a test of your individual fighting expertise which is both mental and physical and does not depend on the mind of another. This is the real test. The coaches job is to prepare the competitor both mentally and physically for the test of competition. He is not to permit the fighter to have a reliance on some outside strength which is in antithesis with the goals of the martial arts. The goal of success in the drama of single combat is the individual warrior, the last to leave the fighting arena undefeated and invincible demonstrating that he alone has the right stuff. Is it the karate coaches dream that his/her warrior prowess lives through their students vicariously? Your blood, their victory? Karate coaches who want the success of competition should simply compete themselves.

Let us look at one possible explanation why the USA succeeds at junior but not senior events. The junior competitor is very coachable. He is in his young impressionable years. His sensei has taught him his basics and helped explain what to do in the ring, and even "coached" him during the match albeit in the spectator stands during USA Karate events. Now this young competitor grows up and develops a following. Reaching adulthood he will emulate his coaches attitudes, beliefs, and methods. He has students of his own and has taught them the basics and is now providing them "coaching advice" during the fight. This is the role he perceives for the coach. He may have come to a realization that he does not need the coach to tell him how to fight, that he is capable of coaching others, and that he can fight his own fight. What has happened is that

he has been given the wrong impression of the coaches role and looks at it only as an assist for a specific competition or match. Further, as the once youthful competitor becomes a sensei and begins to teach, teaching karate of itself will not permit the type of training program needed to sustain elite international level competition. The coach must not merely teach karate technique and tell one how to fight during a match. If this is the impression the karate coach gives of his role, then the karate coaches role is defined in a very narrow sense.

If our coaches feel their primary job is to coach the fight leaving the impression that if they do not do this they are not coaching, we have a real problem. I have had coaches tell me they do not desire to coach because they can't coach from the side of the ring. By giving the impression that the coaches primary contribution is to help the fighter fight, the competitor who can fight doesn't see a need for such a coach and forgoes having a coach. Thus conditions for a weak team are created because of misunderstanding of the coaches role which prevents receiving the full benefits of what a true coach can contribute. Without properly understanding the coaches role, that valuable asset is lost and the team loses.

What is the coaches true role? What should the coach be doing? The role of the coach goes much deeper than telling a fighter how to fight. The coach must first diagnose an athletes condition and needs and then prescribe a training program to meet the demands. He must consider the energy delivery system, the strength of the body - both muscular and endurance, and match the training to the needs of the particular competitor. Flexibility programs are required to strengthen joints and ligaments, anaerobic recovery time must improve and speed training is essential. The would be fighter must be taught what to do in the off-season, pre-season, season, and post season as well as how to peak for competition. Neuromuscular skill must improve and reflexes honed. Preparations for a competition must include how to fuel the athlete - what to eat and how to keep hydrated as well as how to deliver this energy efficiently. The coach must analyze body fat composition to determine the best fighting weight and provide a nutrition-training program that brings that fighter into the best fighting trim. This is only the start. These things are required and they are being done by other countries. Only if we expand our concept of what the coaches role is and follow through using modern scientific sports principles (I heard somewhere that karate is based on scientific principles) can we begin to develop the athletically fit and highly trained fighting team to put the USA on top internationally.

In passing, a common misunderstanding about the USA Karate team that it is a team in the sense of a team sport. Karate is a highly individualistic athletic endeavor with synchronized kata being the only exception. Team kumite is a series of individual bouts taken as a whole. While we have a "team" in the larger sense of the word, the team exists as a group of competitors competing in individual events. Training must be highly individualistic. For example, kata competition is different from kumite competition and requires a different type of preparation than kumite competition. Any coaching must also take into consideration the demands of the different types of competition found in world competition and adjust accordingly.

The USAKF is making plans to increase the sports knowledge of its coaches and has begun a long range coaching education program to not only redefine the coaches role, but to provide proper technical information to the coaches. To date, the referee program has been the main source of technical information, however, refereeing is a specialty. It is time for the coaches to start to analyze the rules and develop technical training aids and programs to enhance overall

athletic abilities and to disseminate technical training programs targeted towards improving our international standing.

Informational Note: The USAKF is establishing a coaching function at its national championships to provide help and assistance to the competitors in attendance. Karate-ka wishing to participate in this function and help all competitors at the event have a worthwhile and safe competition may apply to assist as a coach at the national championships. We would like to field one or two coaches for each division at all times during the event. If you are interested in coaching at the national championships, please write USA Karate Coaching, 1544 Ritchie Road, Stow, Ohio, 44224, and information about the coaching program and course at the national championships will be forwarded to you.

The opinions expressed in this column are designed to be thought provoking pundits and are not necessarily the opinion of any organization I represent. They are not necessarily my opinions or beliefs either but discussions of ideas and concepts that need to be examined if American Karate is to be successful at the World Level.