

GKR KARATE JOURNEY

KUMITE TIPS

1. Make The Decision To Be Great

Too many students take on an attitude of 'commitment to technical excellence' in their kihon and kata, but when it comes to kumite, they have the old attitudes of, "I'll put my hand mitts on and see how I go," or "I will get better with practise." These attitudes will not make someone great in kumite.

Take note of the following:

- The attitudes of commitment to the details in kata should come out in kumite.
- We don't settle for poor stances in kata, so why do we accept them in kumite.
- We don't settle for excess movement in kata, so why do we accept it in kumite.

If you want to become great in kumite, it starts with making a committed decision. We all understand that you can't just practise kata over and over. You need constant reminders of the finer technical components and must focus on being vigilant in your attention to detail. This habit should come across into your kumite (and every other aspect of your life if you are a true karate-ka).

» When you make a decision, a true decision, you no longer accept poor technical performances. You hone your skills at home, in the dojo, even visualising from time-to-time to ensure you develop a technical excellence. You set goals to develop various components of your kumite and develop a resolve to no longer tolerate various bad habits such as:

- "I will no longer turn my head when my opponent strikes."
- "I will no longer accept negative self-talk from before attacking."
- "I will no longer accept poor stances from myself." etc.

Making the decision to become great in kumite is not solely for our own fulfillment and satisfaction. It can save your life. Bad kumite habits (such as turning your head when an opponent strikes) can greatly hinder your chances of protecting yourself in real life self-defence.

2. Set Traps And Ambush Your Opponents

The longer you train in karate, the more time you seem

Black Belt (1st Dan)



to have, when defending during kumite. This is for one of four main reasons:

- You learn to read your opponents; giving you forward insight.
- Your blocks become more streamlined; making them faster.
- You learn to control your emotions; allowing your mind to relax.
- You develop fast twitch muscles.
- You have honed your reflexes.

Beyond your defense, you also develop better instincts to counter strike - often without thinking (a state of mushin). At this point, it can become wise to start setting traps during kumite. Before we go into these, do note that as a general rule a karate-ka's kumite should entail:

- A guard that covers as much surface area as possible.
- A low, strong stance that sits on a 45 degree angle, thus hiding most of your vulnerable areas (eg groin, solar plexus, throat chin etc).

When one starts to set traps during kumite however, they ignore one or more of these basic fundamentals. Instead

they open up, choosing to offer their opponent a chosen target/s. The ideology behind this is that the opponent will be unable to resist the urge to attack the open target. You however have planned for this and have an ambush in mind.

Why We Set Traps

Often in kumite we are unaware of what our opponent will attack with. Setting a trap virtually ensures an opponent will attack one particular area, thus giving you foresight into what block and counter can be affected. This foresight means you can respond quickly, the moment your opponent initiates their attack.

» Kumite is a game of physical chess. It is enjoyable to set traps and see how well you can manipulate your opponent's strategies. If you do this poorly (by being too obvious) it can work against you.

» The more you set traps the more your opponent's will become aware of your plans. That said, to bait them with a target, even to press forward slightly in distance making it easier for them is still inviting a challenge. They will often be aware you have set a trap but try their chances at succeeding regardless. There are countless traps people set up in kumite. The following are just a few examples:

Example 1. A Counter-attacking Trap:

Setting The Trap: Raise your front guard, lifting the elbow high enough that your floating ribs become clearly open. Meanwhile, ensure no other targets are readily available to ensure your opponent singles in on this target.

Effecting The Ambush: The moment your opponent launches their attack towards your exposed ribs (eg with a reverse punch, front kick etc), bring the front guard down sharply to affect the block and offer a simultaneous counter-strike with your own reverse punch.

Example 2. An Anticipation (Pick Off) Trap

Setting The Trap: Lower your guard, ensuring you expose your head, yet maintain quality cover of your torso. This will bait your opponent to attacking head-level.

Effecting The Ambush: The moment your opponent launches their attack towards your head, drop in your fighting stance as you simultaneously thrust your front foot forwards and execute a body-level reverse punch. Knowing your opponent will aim head-level, you can feel confident in dropping and moving forward to pick off (allowing their strike to zoom over your head).

Example 3. An Evasion Trap:

Setting The Trap: Lower your guard, ensuring you expose your head, yet maintain quality cover of your torso. Equally, lean your weight forward in your stance and offer your chin to your opponent. This will bring you forward and closer to your opponent. They will hardly have to move forward to score to your head.

Effecting The Ambush: The moment your opponent launches their attack towards your head, shift your weight back into your stance (without moving your feet) and lean your head back (or to the side if you are confident). This will result in your opponent falling short with their attack. Before they can throw a follow up technique, thrust your weight forwards again with a counter strike (such as a jab or back fist). This technique operates like a rocking horse - where you move forward to bait, then rock back quickly to leave them short, then rock forwards again and quickly counter strike.

Example 4. A Sweep or Takedown Trap

Setting The Trap: Come well up in stance, enough so that your back foot can hold much of your weight. Open your guard by allowing both arms to be held out to the side slightly. This will offer both your head and body and have you look to be in a vulnerable stance, which will give your opponent the confidence to commit to an attack.

Effecting The Ambush: The moment your opponent launches their attack, bring your guard back in to block any techniques and allow your front foot to sweep their incoming front foot. You may also chose to block and grab your opponent, then use your front foot to take them down.

3. Develop Your Mushin

The Japanese term, mushin translates as 'no-mindedness'. Common terms that also depict mushin are, 'unconscious competence', or 'instinctive competence'. The term is shortened from 'mushin no shin', a Zen expression meaning 'mind of no mind'.

» It is most likely that you have already been developing a sense of mushin. Mushin would likely show up in many of your kihon techniques, and even in many of the techniques within your kata. Your goal now, like all other principles of kihon and kata, is to have this transcend into your kumite.

» You may be thinking that your kumite has already, to some degree, developed an instinctive competence. But mushin extends beyond the ability to perform a technique/s exactly as you desire without conscious thought. It also encompasses a mind free of emotion. In laymen's terms, mushin could be described as a mind not fixed or occupied by thought or emotion and thus open to everything. During kumite, while our techniques may operate instinctively, our minds are generally still racing; entertaining images of strategy, fear, ego, anticipating an opponent's future actions etc.

» True kumite mushin is achieved when a person's mind is free of all these images and emotions. The absence of discursive thought and judgment allows a person to be totally free to act and react towards an opponent without hesitation and without disturbance from such thoughts. At this point, a person relies not on what they think should be the next move, but what is their trained natural reaction. The mind becomes like a still pond, which is able to clearly reflect the moon and trees. But just as waves in the pond

will distort the picture of reality, so will the thoughts we hold onto disrupt the true perception of reality.

Offensive And Defensive Minded

True mushin means that one is both offensive and defensive minded at all times. From an offensive perspective, most karate-ka in the midst of an attacking flurry are unable to react to their opponent's counter strike. This is because the attacker's mind is consumed by attacking thoughts. A practitioner who has developed mushin can attack with a flurry and yet still respond accordingly should their opponent let fly with a counter strike.

» From a defensive perspective, most karate-ka under a barrage of attacks is unable to block effectively and yet still all the while subconsciously be aware of their opponent's exposed targets, and strike at these with clean, precise techniques. A practitioner who has developed mushin, no matter the grave environment they find themselves in, are always dangerous because they have the ability to strike with a devastating blow.

What Stops Us:

When we become overly focused on competing during dojo kumite, we become too fearful of taking one step backward in order to take two steps forwards. We must let go of the idea of winning in the dojo and see dojo kumite as our science laboratory. This allows us the freedom to experiment with various principles, including mushin.

How To Get Started:

It's simple in the fact that it merely means letting go of thought and emotion. But equally, it's extremely difficult because we have to let go of thought and emotion. It's tough to start against top exponents because they will inspire emotions of fear, ego etc. Therefore is wise to start with opponent's whom you trust.

» The key is to stand guard at the door of your mind. When you find yourself strategising ahead (like a game of chess), let the thoughts go. When you find yourself anticipating what your opponent might do (especially when you know their style of kumite) let these thoughts go.

» Hold a good fighting stance and completely let your mind go. Allow your opponent to attack you with whatever they may and let your body respond accordingly without thought. It will take practise; much practise. But it is the beginning of true mastery.

4. Start To Develop Your Hikite

Hikite For Novice Students

A general rule of karate is that whenever we execute a strike or block with one arm, the opposite arm pulls back to its chamber position with equal force. The Japanese term for this chambering, or pulling back of the returning arm is hikite. Hikite comes from two terms, 'hikeru' means to draw toward you and 'te' means hand.

Hikite occurs in nearly every strike or block practised in both kihon and kata. As such, upon commencing our kumite journey we are encouraged to strike using hikite

(our blocking however often avoids the use of hikite). We are encouraged to spar with hikite for a number of reasons. Some of these are:

- Pulling the returning hand back adds power to the striking arm.
- Pulling the returning hand back often allows us to better use our hips in a strike (adding more power and reach).
- Pulling the returning hand back to the floating ribs serves to protect this vulnerable area from a counter strike.
- Pulling the returning hand back to the chamber position means you are prepared to deliver a follow up technique.

As we progress through our journey, we can start to minimise the use of hikite in kumite. In fact, we may often strike without bringing our returning hand back at all; choosing to leave it out to protect us. At this stage in your journey, you should be comfortable to both strike and block without using hikite at all, and without compromising any of its benefits.

» The karate masters of Okinawa generally promoted that 'in karate, the returning hand NEVER comes back empty'. In other words, in the process of pulling our returning hand back, the hand should have some part of our opponent in its grasp (the forearm, sleeve, lapel, hair, clothes, an ear, the neck, etc). In essence, you pull with one hand and strike with the other. This makes it more difficult for the attacker to escape or dodge your strike.

» The bunkai behind hikite are many. Be sure to go to our 'Articles' archive and click on 'Self-Defence' in our 'Training' articles. There you will find an article titled 'Hikite: The Many Uses Of The Returning Hand'

Hikite For Advanced Kumite Defence

To kick start your hikite during kumite, you will need to develop your kake-uke. However this does not imply you must use the full block as it is in kihon, but rather the practise of being able to quickly seize with the hand. This can be developed as an offensive or defensive technique.

» As a defensive technique, practise blocking with your forearm making contact up towards the wrist. Immediately after, almost simultaneously, use your hand to seize your opponent's forearm or gi sleeve (when blocking a strike), or ankle or gi pants (when blocking a kick). Developing this skill is but the first component. The second part is to develop the instinctive ability to know where to pull once you have control. The direction of your pull depends on how you aim to take advantage. Examples are:

Note: *The following examples contain some counter strikes that are legal in kumite while others strikes are suggested more for self-defence.*

- a) Pulling directly to your chamber position (like kihon). This will pull your opponent towards you creating a head-on-collision style force when you counter-strike.
- b) Pulling in and downwards (so you chamber your hand by your thigh). This will cause them to over-balance forwards, giving you control of their centre of gravity

and exposing targets such as the nose, back of the neck, collar bone, hair etc.

- c) Pulling in and either left or right. This will cause your opponent to turn, exposing their temples, ears, floating ribs, kidneys, knees etc. It will also enable you to position yourself for an arresting technique (such as a choke etc).
- d) Pulling in and lifting. This is more common when defending kicks as it causes your opponent to overbalance or stumble backwards.

Hikite For Advanced Kumite Offense

The various grab and pull directions we offered above when blocking a strike or kick can be executed as an offensive technique also. The only difference being that rather than waiting for your opponent to strike and seizing their arm, you take the initiative and seize the front hand of their guard and pull.

» The same principle of kake-uke applies in this attacking application, only we alter the technique to put it on the end of a jab or lunge punch. By executing a fast jab towards the front wrist of your opponent's guard, and then simultaneously seizing the wrist you have the ability to use hikite from an offensive standpoint. This will see you gain control of your opponent making it harder for them to avoid, retreat or block your strike. Furthermore you can destabilise their centre of gravity or enable you to expose various targets by controlling their direction.

- The use of hikite in attack can be done while moving forwards, seizing and controlling an opponent's wrist can actually help you pull yourself forward with greater speed and power (like a sling shot).
- It can also be done on the spot. For example, grabbing an opponent's front wrist and pulling it forward while executing a front kick off the front leg. This ideology is to prevent an opponent from escaping (retreating) your technique and gives you control for a follow up technique.

Final Note: *While there is no specific rules in kumite for when a student may or may not start using hikite (or any number of techniques), we have not suggested it until now because if practised by someone ill-prepared, it will actually cause more harm than good. To make hikite a success, one requires excellent defence, precision timing and control. When a student attempts it before they are ready, their kumite often looks like they are constantly trying to grab and wrestle.*

5. Start To Develop Your Toe-to-Toe Kumite

You might think that this is a little strange, as you have been standing toe-to-toe with opponents for many years. If you have, understand that first and foremost karate's goal is and always will be to strike with precision to an anatomical weak point and then move away to distance.

Standing toe-to-toe (like boxers) and trading blows (blocking and counter-striking) should not be the ambition

of any karate-ka. One might argue, "But I do it well in kumite." Sure you might, but remember that kumite is a sport (following a set of rules). In real life, the longer you stand in front of an attacker the more likely they are to:

- a) Hit you with a lucky strike and gain the upper hand.
- b) Tackle you to the ground.

Anyone who has watched UFC fighting on television will notice that a toe-to-toe engagement generally ends up with one person on the ground, from either a lucky strike or tackle. So we reiterate, your goal in karate is to ideally strike fast, strike hard, strike accurate and then move away to distance. Ask yourself, how often do we stand on one spot during kata? Never! We are forever moving in and out of distance (forwards, backwards, sideways and on angles).

» So if we have just convinced you against the ideology of toe-to-toe combat, why are we now suggesting you start? This tip is not suggesting you change tactics and start to stand toe-to-toe, but rather add it to your arsenal.

So Why Suggest It Now?

There are a number of reasons why we are suggesting this at 1st dan. Some of these are:

- i) You have developed an instinctive ability to get in, strike effectively and then escape to distance again. Therefore you will be able to adopt a new strategy without compromising the primary goal of combat.
- ii) You will have developed quality stances in kumite. You may have heard the saying, "most fights end up on the ground." While this is a massive exaggeration, one cannot deny that some fights will go to the ground. But in these fights, it is generally between two (often intoxicated) people who have no understanding or ability with quality stances. Hence they do not have the ability to stabilise themselves under pressure and fight while a person is trying to wrestle or tackle them.
- iii) Practising toe-to-toe occasionally will develop your ability to react in close quarters combat. While you may not stand toe-to-toe in combat for 2 minutes straight, it's not unlikely that at some point you will be required to defend an opponent inside of arms reach.

6. Continue To Develop Your Ashi Barai (Foot Sweeps)

You were introduced to foot sweeps in the previous (shodan-ho) section. Hopefully you have started practising these and are feeling quite comfortable. The following are two more ashi barai techniques to give you a new challenge.

» Remember for safety reasons, to practise your sweeps until you feel comfortable before introducing them to free sparring.

Attacking Sweep: The Front To Front Inside Foot Sweep.

The previous attacking sweep required us to bring our rear foot through to the outside of our opponent's front foot. The front to front inside foot sweep has us using our front foot, and making contact with the inside of our opponent's front foot.

» We achieve this by bringing our rear foot up behind our front foot. Don't step up too far as you will give your opponent too much reaction time to strike or retreat. Stepping up about half way is ideal although it will depend on the distance between you and your opponent.

» This step up will give you balance to manoeuvre your front foot for the sweep. As soon as the rear foot has assumed its position, shoot the front foot forward behind the inside of your opponent's heel and pull it back towards you.

» This technique rarely puts an opponent on the ground, but it is very successful at putting them off balance and in a vulnerable position.

To find success with this technique, be sure to study the following:

- a) **Be prepared to get hit.** Considering you are moving in towards your opponent, you can expect them to react with a pick off. So be sure to move in being mindful of having to block as you sweep. Don't let a pick off deter you from sweeping, you can block and still sweep.
- b) **Distract them first.** Distract their focus by moving through with a fake head level lunge or reverse punch. This not only distracts their eyes (hiding your sweeping foot) it can deter them from picking off, or at least deter them from moving their weight forward as they pick off. That said, don't make your fake too scary as you don't want them to back away; you want them to be confident that they can stand their ground and defend.
- c) **Stay the same height.** A common error people make when bringing their rear foot up behind the front is to come up in height. Coming up in height will slow you down and detract from your reach when you shoot your front foot out. It also makes you a bigger target to pick off. When you practise this, your goal is to glide. Be sure to stay the same height and move swiftly.
- d) **Keep your eyes forward.** Don't look down or you will give your intention away. Use your peripheral vision to know where their foot is.
- e) **Stay on a 45 degree angle.** If you stand front-on in sparring, not only are you an easy target to hit, you will be unable to try this sweep. Staying on a 45 degree angle as you step up and out will allow you to pull your opponent's front foot out with the your inside leg muscles.
- f) **Practise against an imaginary opponent.** Sweeping is difficult to learn with a real opponent. Practise your sweeps during shadow sparring often. This is where you will fine-tune your technique, weight distribution and speed. Once you have this down pat, practicing on opponents will develop your timing.

Attacking Sweep: The Front To Front Outside Foot Sweep.

This sweep is identical to the Attacking Sweep Two (above) only it involves you standing with your front foot directly in front of your opponent's front foot and then executing the sweep to the outside of their front foot.

7. Develop Your Kicks

Prior to Black belt a student can develop his or her own style of kumite. This does not mean they can disregard important principles in favour of their 'own liking'. For example, a student cannot disregard a sound fighting stance simply because they feel they spar better when standing tall. Their style should adhere to all the important principles of combat, yet have their own flavour in terms of techniques (eg mostly hand attacks etc) and strategies (eg attacking or counter-attacking etc). They can then apply the techniques, strategies and principles offered in the Kumite Tips Journey towards their particular style.

» Assuming by Shodan you have become highly competent in your favoured style, it's time to start expanding on this. A question any Shodan should answer is, has your style of kumite varied over the past year or are you sparring the same way - only a little better? Expanding on your style achieves a number of things. It breaks you out of your comfort zone challenging you both physically and mentally. It eliminates boredom by adding new challenges and techniques. And it better equips you for self-defence. While we have offered you a number of exciting challenges such as scissor take-down sweeps etc, one very basic aspect many Black belts have yet to develop is their kicks.

» Some students are good at kicking and love to do it. Others are not, and rarely do it. We have not suggested that you develop your kicks until Shodan because, for those who don't feel they have this skill down, it would not be the first to develop on your list of priorities. For self-defence purposes, the ability to counter, evade etc, would be more beneficial. But at some point in your kumite journey, in your years of training, you should come to a decision to start to develop your kicks.

Why kicking development should become a priority development at some point:

Considering karate is about self-defence, you have to remember that your legs are longer and stronger than your arms. Furthermore, your kicks are weapons that can fire in any direction, whereas your arms are restricted to the front and sides. And finally, if you are wearing shoes, then your kicks become even more lethal.

» It doesn't matter if you don't spar well with kicks. Some people don't like kicking because they rarely score with them during kumite. Going back to our self-defence priority, during kumite people are ready for and expecting anything. In self-defence, your opponent will not be trained to defend against kicks and furthermore will not be expecting kicks. In any case, the more you practise the more you will start to score in kumite. But even if you don't, kicks in kumite can still work to keep an opponent on the back foot, to keep them at distance, and to divide their attention and focus.