

# GKR KARATE JOURNEY

## KUMITE TIPS

### 1. You Don't Have To Prove Yourself

Some students reach Black belt and constantly feel the need to prove they are worthy of their Black belt every time they spar. They endeavour to dominate every student and leave them feeling that they are impossible to defeat.

» The problem with this overly competitive is that they fail to develop new tools. If they can't use a technique or principle to win they don't want to know about it.

*"In order to take two steps forward you must first be prepared to take one step backward."*

Understand that the Black belt's journey is no different from any other grade, which is, in order to take two steps forward you must first be prepared to take one step backward. Each new technique or principle will have to go through a period of trial and error before you make it your own.

» The only thing stopping you from understanding this is 'ego'. If you feel you need to win all the time, then your ego is controlling your karate journey; and you have a problem because martial arts is about learning to control our ego.

### 2. Kumite Is The Physical Expression Of All Your Knowledge

It's an interesting point to ponder, "Your kumite is the physical expression of all your knowledge." Many karateka around the world are full of book knowledge, and can demonstrate this against a partner who does exactly what they ask. But when it comes to an opponent in kumite (who has free reign over what attacks they throw and when they throw them), suddenly their book knowledge is nowhere to be seen.

» Ultimately, the way we act in a 'free' situation is the real indicator of our knowledge, because it illustrates what surface knowledge has become instinctive.

If you were to look at your kumite, what would it say about your knowledge? I.e:

- Your knowledge of strategies and tactics?
- Your knowledge of reading an opponent?
- Your knowledge of responding and adapting to a live situation?
- Your knowledge of attacking (timing, distance, feinting,

## Black Belt (Shodan Ho)



rallying etc)?

- Your knowledge of zanshin (a continued state of awareness)?
- Your knowledge of punching or kicking?
- Your knowledge of defending (economy of movement, stance, weight distribution etc)?
- Your knowledge of taking control of your emotions (self-belief, controlling anger, frustration etc)?

As a Black belt, now more than ever it's time to really take a close look at your kumite and ask yourself, "Is my knowledge coming out in physical form?" As the saying goes, 'to know but not do is to not really know'.

» There is no point continuously building layer upon layer to your surface knowledge (eg book knowledge) if this knowledge is not taking root.

» Having reached your Black belt, go over the kumite tips from each previous belt grade and rate yourself on each. Ask yourself: 1. Do I know this? 2. Does this knowledge come out in physical form during kumite?

» Remember Black belt is like coming full circle. We arrive back at the start of our journey, only with fresh eyes and an all new, more mature perspective.

### 3. Develop Sanseru's Iron Shirt Senjutsu

#### A Brief History

One of karate's earliest kata is known as Sanchin. The term Sanchin translates are 'San' (three) and 'Chin' (battles). The term three battles alluded to the battle of mind, body and spirit. Over the years, a number of other kata were developed that used that opening sequence of Sanchin kata. Three of these are found in GKR's kata curriculum (Sanseru, Shisochin and Seisan). The reasons for this were not only to pay homage to the original kata, but to demonstrate the importance of Sanchin kata and its fighting principles.

» While Sanseru (and all other kata that adopted Sanchin's opening sequence) are very different kata to Sanchin, they still follow its most apparent senjutsu (combat strategy); Iron Shirt.

#### What Is Iron Shirt?

Unlike every kata practiced to date, most of Sanseru involves facing an opponent with the hips square. This means one is exposing their vulnerable areas found down the centre line (groin, solar plexus, throat etc). So why would a kata take on this square posture while other kata seek to minimise an opponent's exposure to these vulnerable areas of the body? The answer is that Sanchin kata promoted 'Iron Shirt'. First and foremost, Iron Shirt is a physical principle that involves conditioning the body to received blows (something that may easily occur in self-defence). The techniques of the kata are practised while maintaining full tension in every muscle in the body. Over time, extensive kata practise serves to condition the body (creating what could be considered an iron shirt). You have likely witnessed karate-ka demonstrate one of the iron shirt principles by having someone strike them as hard as possible only to stand there unperturbed.

» But the principle of iron shirt does not solely exist to condition the physical body. It extends well beyond this. As explained already, Sanchin involves the battle of the body, mind and spirit. Iron shirt is therefore - and just as importantly - a mental and spiritual battle.

» The idea was that by conditioning one's physical body, the mental confidence and courageous spirit to stand in the face of adversity would develop. Where these three forces (body, mind and spirit) had developed, a karate-ka would have the attitude and mindset to drive right through an opponent.

#### Avoiding Toe-to-Toe Combat Through Iron Shirt

Toe-to-toe combat should be avoided at all costs because the longer we stand in front of an opponent, the more opportunity they have to land a lucky and telling strike. Previous kata teach us to avoid toe-to-toe combat by:

- a) Moving ourselves back.
- b) Moving ourselves to the side of an opponent.
- c) Turning ourselves side on to the opponent.
- d) Stepping in behind an opponent.
- e) Turning our opponent side on.
- f) Turning our opponent rear on.

Iron shirt avoids toe-to-toe combat by marching right over the top of an opponent. In essence, we move ourselves and our opponent.

#### Developing The Principle Of Iron Shirt In Kumite

Sanseru's Iron Shirt senjutsu can be developed by anyone, although it's ideally suited to people who have a solid body and are unable to launch a fast attack. For many karate-ka, weak legs, old bodies, injuries or heavy-set frames destroy both their confidence and ability to bridge the distance quickly and strike successfully. They often find that every time they attempt to attack they are picked-off by faster, more agile bodies. Because of this, they often (subconsciously) become counter-strikers.

» Becoming a counter-striker however generally leaves these people with an all new set of challenges; they become nervous having to stand and wait for that faster, more agile opponent to attack. And in many cases, they are unsuccessful in their block as their opponent gets to choose exactly when and how they will attack. In essence, their opponent (with little fear of being attacked) will wait until the conditions are perfect (eg perfect distance, perfect balance, perfect mindset etc) before launching their attack. But it does not end here. The fact that the defender is standing relatively still means their opponent's attack is able to reach full momentum, making it harder to defend against.

» It's an uphill battle! By adopting Sanseru's Iron Shirt senjutsu, one might not always enjoy success (especially at first) but they can take the control of the fight away from their opponent.

#### Taking Control Of The Situation

Sanseru's Iron Shirt senjutsu still works with a counter-attacking ideology, only it aims to take the control away from the attacker. A karate-ka (although still committed to blocking and counter-attacking) will take the initiative and march forward towards their opponent giving them but two options; strike or retreat. Should the opponent strike, the goal is to block and counter this strike while continuing to march right through the opponent's space, pushing them onto the back foot (thus pushing them back onto their heels and taking away their power to strike or grapple).

» This may seem a strange tactic to march towards an opponent without striking. Granted, the student must still react to his or her opponent's strike, the difference however is that the opponent is unable to wait until conditions are perfect before striking. They are forced to strike at the counter-attacker's choice of timing. In this case, it is now the counter attacker who chooses to march forward and block when they feel conditions are perfect.

» And what's more, as the striker is not coming forward to strike, they are unable to develop full momentum in their strike (making it easier to block). Over time a person who lacks speed in their legs can learn to dominate faster opponents by taking the initiative and developing fast hands.

### Keys to making Sanseru's Iron Shirt senjutsu work:

Very often bunkai appears very different to the actual kata technique. In this case, the technique is performed close to identical to the kata, only the timing changes dramatically.

#### Stance

Quickly take your Sanchin dachi, ensuring your posture is straight. As with the kata, ensure your core is at full tension. This tension serves to protect your body from a blow (Iron Shirt) and helps to keep your body from collapsing out of stance should you receive a blow.

- » Be sure that when you step forward your feet still move in an arc, coming closer together before going back out to one shoulder width.
- » Keep the hips square to your opponent at all times. The stance will keep the groin protected, the tension will protect the body and the hands (to be discussed) will endeavour to ensure we do not receive a strike.
- » The main difference is the speed at which we move in stance. Where the kata has us take slow steps with a pause between each, in combat, move through very quickly in stance without any stopping whatsoever. The key is to develop momentum in the short steps of the stance.
- » The final key is to keep marching forwards. Don't stop when they throw their attack (else it will develop full momentum and push us out of stance if it scores). By marching right over the top of them it puts them on the back foot, taking away their power.

#### Guard

Once again, do it exactly like the kata. Quickly create your morote uchi uke (double inside hooking block) and march forward holding this position until your opponent actually strikes.

- » We opt for the morote uchi uke guard instead of our regular fighting stance guard for two reasons:
- » Firstly, the position is quite protective. The elbows protect our floating ribs and our forearms or hands can quickly move to block an incoming strike without having to move more than a few inches.
- » Secondly, it sets an ambush. The position of the arms encourages your opponent to strike down the middle (the area that is open). Yes we are actually, purposely, exposing our vulnerable centre line. It might seem ludicrous but remember, we are in control this time. By marching forwards quickly, our opponent will have to retreat or strike once you step inside their distance. Therefore, the moment they even begin to strike you can quickly cover and defend.
- » Remember the ultimate goal is to march right over the top of the opponent. You keep marching forwards in sanchin dachi. At some point your opponent will strike. When this occurs you have to block and counter as quickly as possible. The fact that you are moving forwards waiting to block means you are in control of when they strike so you will be ready for it.

### 4. Catch A Tiger With A Net

We have already discussed how a Black belt's goal is to go full circle; to revisit or re-read over every principle learned, every habit acquired and see it with fresh eyes. With fresh eyes comes a deeper understanding and perspective, like peeling another layer off an onion and getting closer to the core.

- » One such principle and habit to revisit is the idea of softness. As a lower grade, a common error you likely made when practicing basics was you were too tense. A common error you likely made when practicing kata was you were too tense. And a common error you likely made when sparring was, you guessed it... you were too tense.
- » But over time you developed an understanding of the concept of 'relax, tense, relax'. In other words, to start relaxed and only tense up at the end of a technique. And finally, immediately afterwards, relaxing once more.
- » The question is, have you really softened up? The likely answer is 'there is much room for more'.
- » This is because people associate karate with strength and they subconsciously associate strength with stiffness. But real strength comes from softness and real-defence (such as blocking) comes from softness. Think about it, does a hunter walking through the jungle on their quest to catch a tiger drag a six-foot steel cage (something stiff) with them? Or do they carry a net (something soft)? The answer is they catch a tiger with a net! The net has been used as a weapon for thousands of years. Even in the Colosseum in Rome, gladiators used a net to get the advantage over their enemy.
- » When practicing your blocks kumite, aim to relax yourself more than you ever have in the past. Don't just feel the relaxation in your arms, allow it to extend to the rest of your body (but do not achieve this via standing up higher in stance). When you choose to attack it will actually add more speed and weight to your strikes. And when defending, you will be able to move more freely and with more weight in your arms.
- » Completely relaxing your wrists may also find that you start to block with your forearm and immediately after blocking, seize your opponent's striking arm with your fist. This will allow you to seize, control and destabilise your opponent.
- » Finally, relaxing your body will allow your mind to relax. When the body is tense the mind follows suit and is unable to think on the go. Relaxing the body will allow the mind and body to work fluently in synch with little or not thought at all.

### 5. Elegance, Not Elephants!

The previous point involved revisiting your relaxed blocking. This point asks you to look more closely at your footwork and movement. Beyond being relaxed, fluency counts. While you likely have a good grasp of numerous kumite movements (attacking combinations etc), you must ask yourself, "Am I moving with fluency?"

- » This principle equally applies to kihon, kata and kumite. An individual technique practised flawlessly is but one part of the equation; we must also seek to move flawlessly

between those techniques.

» Having reached Black belt, maintain your focus on developing yourself rather than just winning in the dojo. Winning is great but you want to look like someone who has mastered their body in the process.

» Your goal when moving in your karate is to be silent. You should move fast but equally, swiftly, lightly, quietly. As a master once said to a class, "I want elegance, not elephants!"

## 6. Avoid Sport Kumite

If you go back and read the Yellow Belt Kumite tips you will find we discussed that kumite is about developing self-defence habits, not sporting ones.

» Reiterating this point at Black belt is by no means meant to be condescending. Ultimately it really comes back to things going full circle once more. You will note an underlying theme of going full-circle throughout your Shodan-ho journey; and for good reason.

» Having achieved your Black belt you have spent hours upon hours in the dojo sparring. And while this important for self-defence, over time it is also easy to develop certain habits - after all human beings are creatures of habit! The more we spar the more we direct our focus on becoming better at sparring. And this does not always translate to better kumite.

» When we use the term 'Avoid Sport Kumite' we are not referring to tournaments, we are referring to sparring where you create habits that 'play within the rules'. A sport is any game that is dictated by a set of rules players abide by. Therefore, any type of kumite; be it dojo sparring, tournament sparring, full-contact karate, even cage fighting is a sport.

» The key is that while we must abide by the rules, our habits should be dictated by what could happen. For example, our opponent is not permitted to tackle us to the ground like a footballer. As such we may stand up in our stance. Should we find ourselves in a real life confrontation however, the habit to stand up in stance will likely find us being tackled to the ground.

» So it's time to review your favourite techniques (for both attack and defence) and ask yourself, "Are my habits following effective self-defence principles or am I compromising these in the interest of sport?"

## 7. Develop Your Ashi Barai (Foot Sweeps)

At Black belt level (Shodan-ho) you are introduced to the foot sweep (ashi barai).

The ashi barai has the ability to the following:

- Put your opponent on the ground.
- Leave your opponent completely unbalanced.
- Leave your opponent slightly off balance yet too distracted to protect themselves from a forth coming devastating attack.

In either of the above circumstances, it leaves the person

who executed the sweep with a massive advantage, and for real life combat, in a position to end the confrontation quickly.

» While it has many perks – one of which being an impressive technique – it also comes with many risks if you aren't well versed in what you are doing. Therefore, before you begin practising foot sweeps in kumite, you should be well aware of what you are doing.

### Key Aspects To Developing An Effective Ashi Barai (Foot Sweep)

The three most common errors people make when trying to sweep are:

- i) Looking down at the opponent's feet: This telegraphs your intentions so your opponent can easily avoid it. What's more, by looking down, you won't see the punch they have in store for you.
- ii) Moving forward into your opponent's personal space: When you move forward into your opponent's personal space, their natural reaction will be to either step back (causing your sweep to miss) or to put their weight back onto their rear leg. When their weight is on their back leg, sweeping their front leg will not have the desired result, as they will be able to maintain their balance.
- iii) Failing to use the body. If you are sparring someone half your weight you don't need to use your body. But how often will someone half your weight attack you in real life? Many karate-ka attempt to sweep using only their leg. Not only is this ineffective, it can leave the 'sweeper' unbalanced.

The following are two basic foot sweeps:

#### 1. Defensive Sweep: The Inside Front Foot Sweep

When most people attempt to score with a hand technique during kumite, to gain correct distance for their strike, they slide their front foot forward just before executing their strike. This not only brings them close enough to strike, it brings their weight forward, adding more power to their technique.

» During the small amount of time their front foot is moving, they are completely vulnerable to a sweep.

» For the practised karate-ka, this is an opportune time to attempt a sweep. To find success with this technique, study the following:

- a) **Be sure to block.** Don't be so focused on the sweep that you forget to defend the technique your opponent has attacked with. During the process of your sweep, still commit to blocking.
- b) **Don't lift your foot too high.** The time to start your sweep is the moment they lunge out with their front foot. You will likely make contact just before they land their front foot. Don't lift your foot up off the ground, allow it to slide along the ground (like when moving through in stances).
- c) **Make contact at the correct point.** As you move your front foot across to meet their moving front foot, be

sure the inside arch of your foot meets the just above their inside heel.

**d) Bring your weight back.** If you try to sweep solely using your leg muscles, you will unlikely be strong enough (unless your timing is perfect). Be sure to move your weight back onto your back leg at the same time you sweep.

**e) Practise against an imaginary opponent.** Sweeping is difficult to learn with a real opponent. Practise your sweeps during shadow sparring. 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.

**f) Do not attempt a sweep on any student below Black belt.** It is common sense that you would not sweep a lower grade student who does not have the ability to handle the technique, nor has been trained to defend against a sweep.

## 2. Attacking Sweep: The Rear To Front Outside Foot Sweep

Have you ever felt nervous to attack an opponent because every time you move forward they remained in their strong stance and threw a strong punch your way?

No matter what you try, they just stand there and punch you?

» Two techniques are highly effective in dealing with these types of fighters. Firstly, the side kick (as it has more reach than their pick off punch and is a strong technique), and secondly, the rear to front outside foot sweep.

» This basically means your rear leg moves through and sweeps the outside of your opponent's front foot.

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

**a) Be prepared to get hit.** Just because you're moving through with a sweep doesn't mean they won't stick to their guns and throw a punch the moment you enter their range. Don't be so focused on the sweep that you forget to defend their pick off as you sweep. Come in shielding yourself and preparing to block. And don't be hesitant in sweeping just because they might punch, as if you are hesitant you will surely fail.

**b) Distract them first.** Distract their focus by moving through with a fake 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.

**c) Make contact at the correct point.** A common error is to bring the back foot through and make contact with the opponent's upper shin. As you move through, keep your foot sliding just above the ground (just like when moving through in stances). Be sure the inside of your arch hits just above your opponent's outside heel.

**d) Use your hips.** If you try to sweep solely using your leg muscles, you will not be strong enough. Be sure that as you swing your foot around to sweep that you also use your hips. Your hips should swing into gear just as your foot is about to make contact with their foot.

**e) 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. You can practise on trees, a soccer ball, a partner in slow motion, anything!

**f) Don't move into your opponent's personal space.**

When you move forward into your opponent's personal space, their natural reaction will be to either step back (causing your sweep to miss) or to put their weight back onto their rear leg. When their weight is on their back leg, sweeping their front leg will not have the desired result, as they will be able to maintain their balance. As you move forward, stay just outside their arm's reach – your leg should be able to reach.

**g) Speed counts.** If you are too slow, or offer a poor distraction, your opponent will see it coming and either move away or lift their front leg up so you miss completely. You need to practise often so that you develop speed. Stay low throughout as raising up your height will slow you down.

**h) Be prepared to miss.** It's common to miss completely when attempting this sweep, especially if you are known for it. It's important to maintain zanshin (a continued state of awareness) otherwise you might find yourself in a vulnerable position after missing.

**i) 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.

## 7. Follow Up Sweeps With Kicks

When we first start sweeping, we generally follow up with a hand strike. As you develop your sweeps, it can be an exciting challenge to follow these up with a kick. Be mindful your kicks are more powerful than your punches and can end a self-defence situation quickly. Not only this, following sweeps up with kicks displays advanced levels of coordination and distance.

» Use your back leg to hook in behind and sweep the outside ankle of your opponent's front foot. Done properly and your opponent with either:

- Fall to the ground.
- Be unbalanced for a brief time.
- Be turned around (exposing their side or back).
- Shift their weight onto their back leg in retreat.

Regardless of the outcome, quickly follow up your sweep by executing a kick off the opposite leg. A Round Kick is highly effective; as the motion of sweeping will see your hips turn towards your back leg. This puts them in prime position to swing back towards the opponent with a fast and powerful round kick.

» When an opponent is taken off balance, in an attempt to re-stabilise, human nature dictates that they thrust both arms out to the side (like a tight-rope walker). This will open their kidneys and floating ribs right up, making a round kick a highly effective.