

# Sport or Martial Art

Ms Christine Young

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Do we see Taekwon-Do as a sport or a martial art? Is it more of a sport or a martial art? What defines a sport and what a martial art? To me, these are not mutually exclusive nor are they different in its philosophical base. My view is that sport and competition is necessary for the training of a student if they are to become a complete and well rounded martial artist.

For someone to be a good martial artist, they must be able to apply their techniques in a dynamic and un-rehearsed situation. We are training ultimately to be competent at self-defence, but we cannot, and indeed do not, want to be facing life threatening situations on a daily basis.

Therefore competition against worthy opponents is one safe way to test the skills that we are learning in Taekwon-Do. To some instructors, competition means sport. This is a dismissive way to look at a forum that really allows a student to hone and improve their skills.

To do patterns well, or having good form in your basic techniques does not complete one's study of Taekwon-Do. We all know that a pattern is the execution of techniques against an imaginary opponent. If a student wants to be a true martial artist they cannot stop at being good at patterns. A student must go beyond punching and kicking in front of a mirror. They must move onto the next step which is punching and kicking a real target, a moving target, one which thinks and reacts. The student must learn to apply one's techniques in free-sparring.

To be able to spar well is an ultimate goal, but a martial artist must not begin their study by free-sparring. All through the centuries, from all styles of Kung Fu and Karate, you see the master teaching the new protégé through fundamental movements, stances and patterns. In my opinion, we can not be accomplished free-sparrers if we cannot do fundamental movements well. General Choi teaches the natural progression, fundamental movements, proper execution of technique, patterns, then step sparring and then free-sparring. We see this progression apply not only in Taekwon-Do but in virtually all the martial arts.

Sparring is the culmination of all the skills that are being learnt in Taekwon-Do. It is the ultimate application of all the abilities of the whole martial artist. In all the martial arts movies we see, we do not see the good guy and bad guy challenge each other to a patterns play off! They challenge each other to a fight! Free sparring.

There are some who are naturally gifted at sparring, but are not very good with patterns or in their fundamental techniques at the beginning of their learning. I have seen many good fighters through the years who are talented with speed, agility, fantastic instinctive movements and reflexes. These fighters would compete in sparring initially, and as they rose to the top of their sparring game, so they improved their fundamental techniques and patterns. This is the reverse way to learn the skills of a martial art but nevertheless the completion of the training is there.

So to me, to be a martial artist you must be able to use your techniques effectively against a live and thinking target. Competition sparring is one of the few safe environments in which we can

practice these skills. Competition to some means we do a sport and have a focus on scoring points. It would be wrong if a coach for competition only teaches point scoring. This is the important distinction we must make, that we use sport as a means to an end, and we must not mould our teaching by the rules of the sport. The rules of sport may change but the standard for our martial art is a universal standard and this is what the instructor must teach.

The anti-sport supporters will also argue that sport does not teach a student the spiritual side of the martial art. My experience is different. I believe through high level competition we learn and experience the spiritual side of the martial art. In competition we face ourselves first and foremost, we develop mental toughness, we understand our own weaknesses, which we train to overcome, and then we face our opponent.

Those instructors who do not promote healthy competition as part of the syllabus of learning are not allowing their students to fully develop their skills. Competition is a necessary and a fundamental part of a martial artist's training.