

Quo Vadis, karate?

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Abstract

Background & Study Aim:

Sport competition in karate is constantly changing and trying to adapt to the modern age, where an escalation of neo gladiatorism has been recently noted. Therefore, the objective of this article is the most general conclusion (knowledge) resulting from synthetic reflection on the effects of transformation of competition formula in karate in the 21st century.

Material & Methods:

The desk research method was used. Resources concerning contemporary competition formula in karate were queried, and the analysed resources were related to the existing division of kumite systems. Because the text presents the results of theoretical research, it was published in the form of an original work.

Results:

The World Karate Federation (WKF) semi contact competition is the most popular. There has been no change (in relation to the 20th century) in knockdown competition, which still occurs only within kyokushin karate. In contrast, the karate combat (KC) organisation dominates the full contact formula. Furthermore, it is noticed that the mix fighting formula has been abandoned in karate to favour performances by karatekas in neo gladiatorial organisations.

Conclusions:

Trends of karate are evident nowadays. The semi contact formula is accepted as an Olympic sport, so it meets the criteria of development in line with the humanistic assumptions of the creator of these martial arts. The knockdown formula, on the other hand, is stabilised in kyokushin karate. And the full contact formula dominates through KC. The mix fighting formula in karate, by contrast, has been abandoned in favour of neo gladiator organisations.

Keywords:

combat sports • full contact • knockdown • mix fighting • semi contact

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Quo Vadis – *in Latin* where are you going? The title of our work refers to the novel by the Polish Nobel Prize winner Henryk Sienkiewicz [87], for which he received this award, and in which he also takes up the topic of gladiator fights in the times of Rome's splendour (see more [88]).

Martial arts – *plural noun* any of various systems of combat and self-defence, e.g., judo or karate, developed especially in Japan and Korea and now usually practised as a sport [89].

Budo (Budō) – originally a term denoting the "Way of the warrior", it is now used as a collective appellation for modern martial arts of *kendō, jūdō, kyūdo* and so on. The primary objective of these "martial ways" is self-perfection (*ningen – kesei*) [13].

Self-defence – *noun* fighting techniques used for defending oneself against physical attack, especially unarmed combat techniques such as those used in many of the martial arts [89].

Neo gladiator – a person who trains mix martial arts (MMA) and similar forms of hand-to-hand fighting that do not meet the definition of sport according to the Olympic Charter [39].

Daidojuku karate (the Daido Juku school) – Daido Juku is an organization founded by Azuma Takashi in 1981. The relationship between the Daido Juku school and kudo is similar to that between the *kodokan* school and *judo* [90].

Kudo (kūdō) – is a Japanese hybrid martial art [90].

Kumite – is a semi-contact karate competitive competition, where two athletes perform various kicking, punching, and blocking techniques towards each other with maximum control in order to gain points and win the match. Destruction is fictive.

Technique – *noun* a way of performing an action [89].

Tactics – *plural noun* the art of finding and implementing means to achieve immediate or short-term aims [89].

INTRODUCTION

The year 1993 is considered to be the beginning of legitimate neo gladiatorism. It was then that the two leading organisations began their activities: K1 Grand Prix (K1; 30 April 1993, Japan) [1] and Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC; 12 November 1993, USA) [2]. Competition in K1 took place without ground fighting [3], while confrontations in the UFC already allowed it [4]. Subsequently, a number of parallel organisations promoting neo gladiatorism emerged [5]. At this point one should point out why the widely used term 'mixed martial arts' (MMA) is incorrect. It is obvious that the appropriate name for *No holds barred sport fighting* [5] is 'slugfest' or equally explicit synonyms (that's what they're talking about – see glossary).

The purpose of practising martial arts is to maintain physical and mental health [6]. Therefore, martial arts are neither combat sports nor self defence systems [7] – it is not contrary to the truth that specific techniques such as martial arts or combat sports can be used in self-defence. Moreover, the theory of combat sports clearly explains the relationship that 'every combat sport is martial arts but not vice versa' [6, p. 18]. Consequently, the term MMA contradicts the philosophy of confrontation recommended by creators of the humanistic vision of martial arts (starting with Jigoro Kano [8, 9]). These recommendations were recognized as the heritage of budo in Japanese culture [10-13] and assimilated into other cultural circles or inspired the promotion of national martial arts systems [14-19] until the era of neo gladiatorship began.

Although the author of *The theory of combat sports* [6] uses the term 'non-sports confrontations' but apparently did not connect it with the vision of the inevitable arrival of the era of neo gladiatorism. Unfortunately, this theory is published in Polish. The same applies to 'agonology' (general theory of struggle, published in 1938 [20]) and four detailed theories of agonology, before Russian soldiers left Poland [21-23], and the last one (2000) is theory of combat sports [6]. The language barrier (Polish is not a conference language) is the main reason for calling agonology and these four detailed theories an esoteric science [24-26]. In the sense of the perception of this new science, 'innovative agonology' (acronym INNOAGON [27]), the effects of publishing in a comprehensive approach several of the most

important issues in the *Proceedings of the 14th International Conference on Applied Human Factors and Ergonomics and the Affiliated Conferences (AHFE 2023)* are different [28-33].

However, scientific arguments and patterns of noble hand-to-hand combat are dominated by the media narrative. For the multi-million audience, the attraction is not only the knockout of the opponent, when the competitors fight in a vertical position. The norm in MMA is to massacre a lying opponent. Meanwhile, such a model contradicts both the criteria of self-defence [34, 7, 35], as well as the provisions of the Olympic Charter and the philosophy, ethics, and social mission of sport [36, 37].

Therefore, MMA is not a sport. Neo gladiatorism is the correct term for this negative phenomenon [38-40] – Jagiełło et al. [41, p. 34] already in 2015 they emphasized: 'There are numerous interest groups promoting neo gladiatorship' Moreover, it is right to argue that neo gladiatorship is camouflaged by adding the word 'mixed' before 'martial arts', thus depreciating their humanistic mission [42, 43, 27]. Tropin et al. [44] consistently separate martial arts athletes from 'neo gladiators' during bibliometric analysis. Therefore, it is also right to argue that it would be counterproductive to continue using the name 'martial arts bibliotherapy' when promoting the humanistic and utilitarian values of many martial arts with such a scale of MMA expansion [45, 46, 27]. Therefore, in our opinion, the phenomenon and name 'INNOAGON biblioprophyllactic & bibliotherapy' [27] are appropriate in the sense of further exploration.

On the other hand, a popular fighting method that, depending on the training objectives, fully fits into martial arts and combat sports as well as self-defence systems, is the traditional formula karate [47-49].

Along with the escalation of neo gladiatorism, karate began to lose popularity [50]. Therefore, to maintain the numbers of practitioners in karate, a kumite competition formula called mix fighting was created towards the end of the 20th century [51]. This was intended to meet the demand of the combative market and create real competition for neo gladiatorism [52]. Since then, the division of kumite systems into four main formulas has been maintained in karate: semi contact [53], knockdown (see in glossary: 'knock out'

and 'knockout') [54], full contact [55], mix fighting [56]. Depending on the varieties of karate: traditional (style); sport (inter-style); Olympic; kumite competition in a given formula is adopted. At the same time, it should be noted that the potential of karate as a martial art, combat sport and self-defence system is evidenced by its great stylistic diversity [57]. This means that not all karate practitioners can be attributed to one fighting model [58]. This is evidenced by the somatic and motor diversity of karatekas [59]. For example: slim and fast adepts perform better in the semi contact formula, while athletic, strength and endurance adepts dominate in the knockdown formula. These issues still influence the perception of karate as an attractive method of fighting the opponent and oneself [60]. The promotion of karate through film art and video games tops off the rest [61].

It is legitimate to raise the assumptions of theory of combat sports [6] as a set of directives for the practice of bodily [62], mental [63] and spiritual [64] combat methods in a viable counteroffensive to neo gladiatorism. Indeed, this relates to generational change. In the 21st century, one notices an increasing social acceptance of the promotion of aggression in everyday life. Neo gladiatorial fights are escalated in the media and on the Internet. Younger and younger people are given access to watching these confrontations. Therefore, karate's mission, with its strong educational aspects in physical culture [65], grounded in pedagogy [66] and in psychology [67], is being confronted with the new challenges of the 21st century.

The objective of this article is the most general conclusion (knowledge) resulting from synthetic reflection on the effects of transformation of competition formula in karate in the 21st century.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The qualitative research was based on the method of source material analysis [68]. The query was conducted between November 2022 and June 2023. It covered online materials related to contemporary karate sport competition. Updates of websites about karate, posts on online forums about karate, and the popularity of karate videos on the YouTube channel were analysed. The data collected was related

to the existing division of kumite systems. Because the text presents the results of theoretical research, it was published in the form of an original work.

RESULTS

Semi contact

In the semi-contact formula, the most popular competition takes place within the World Karate Federation (WKF). This organisation currently brings together two hundred countries worldwide. The popularity of the WKF was first determined by the organisation's inclusion in the International Olympic Committee in 2000. And further activities have only maintained the WKF's high standing in the world of sport. In 2016, WKF was included as an Olympic discipline and thus this semi-contact competition was classified as Olympic karate. Four classical styles participate in these competitions: *shotokan*, *goju-ryu*, *shito-ryu*, and *wado-ryu*.

The first Olympic games took place at the Youth Olympic Games 2018 in Buenos Aires. The next, senior ones were played at the XXXII Summer Olympic Games in Tokyo, which, due to COVID-19 pandemic, were held in 2021. The rules of Olympic semi-contact karate stipulate: obtaining a *yuko* (1 point) for a straight punch delivered to the opponent body or to the opponent face; obtaining a *waza-ari* (2 points) for a middle kick delivered to the opponent body; obtaining an *ippon* (3 points) for a high kick delivered to the opponent head or punch delivered on an opponent who has been taken to the ground after a sweep or take-down. However, penalties in these games refer to two categories: 1) penalties for techniques with excessive contact or forbidden techniques or attacking non-scoring areas of the body; 2) penalties for feigning or exaggerating an injury or technical-tactical errors. Victory in Olympic karate is decided by the greater number of points scored after the end of the regular fighting time (3 minutes) or by having a lead of eight points over the opponent during the bout. In the event of a draw, the referee's verdict is decisive. It should be noted that the competitors compete in karategas on the tatami with protectors (for fists, shin-foot, jaw, torso, suspensors) in different weight categories for men and women.

Karatega – karate training clothes.

Ippon – one point. Achieved through the execution of a valid technique on the opponent [13].

Waza-ari – a *judo* term for a technique that cannot be regarded as a full *ippon* but is very close [13].

Knock out – verb 1. (in boxing and some other full-contact sports) to knock an opponent down for a count of ten, thus winning the match 2. To eliminate an opponent or team from a competition by winning a match or game [89].

Knockout – noun 1. (in boxing) a punch that knocks an opponent down for a count of ten and so wins a contest 2. a sports competition in which a person or team beaten in one game or match is eliminated from the entire competition [89].

Counterproductive – from praxeological perspective certain action can be productive – non-productive – counterproductive – neutral. The action is counterproductive when a doer achieved goal opposite than intended [91, p. 220].

Częstochowa declaration 2015: HMA against MMA – "continuous improvement of health through martial arts as one of the most attractive form of physical activity for a human, accessible during entire life should constantly exist in public space, especially in electronic media, to balance permanent degradation of mental and social health by enhancing the promotion of mixed martial arts – contemporary, bloody gladiatorship, significant tool of education to aggression in a macro scale".

Gdansk 2nd HMA World Congress Resolution – Article 1 The white flag with five interlocking "Olympic rings" is the most recognizable symbol in the global public space. Neither did the resurrected idea of Olympia, "Citius, Altius, Fortius" save humanity from the horrors of two world wars, nor did the declared mission of the International Olympic Committee (IOC): "1. (...) the promotion of ethics and (...) ensuring that, in sport, the spirit of fair

play prevails, and violence is banned" (Olympic Charter, p. 18) stop the pathology of permanently educating contemporary man in aggression. **Article 2** Likewise, symbols (a sword pointed downwards surrounded by five rings) and motto ("Friendship through Sport") of Conseil International du Sport Militaire (CISM) did not stop soldiers from killing each other and murdering people after 1948 (the year of establishing CISM, the second largest multi-sport discipline organization after the IOC, and also the year of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights). **Article 3** Although there are five identical combat sports in the Olympic Games and the Military World Games, their potential is still not used to meet the second of the Fundamental Principles of Olympism: "(...) to place sport at the service of the harmonious development of humankind, with a view to promoting a peaceful society concerned with the preservation of human dignity" (Olympic Charter, p. 13). **Article 4** Boxing and wrestling cultivate the traditions of ancient Olympism. Judo and taekwondo have given martial arts humanistic and health attractiveness. Fencing combines this tradition with modernity in the spirit of chivalry. Aiming dynamic offensive and defensive actions directly at the opponent's body (irrespective of the protectors used) in such a way as not to hurt is a measure of respecting those knightly rules. This rule harmonizes with the principle of respect for the opponent's as well as one's own corporeality and dignity over the vain victory at all costs. **Article 5** For the civilized individual and the society for whom human health and dignity are the common good, participation, in any role, in brutal shows of people massacring each other cannot be a standard of the quality of life. Neo gladiatorship camouflaged under the banner of martial arts or combat sports is a slight to the Fundamental Principles of Olympism, but also to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Therefore, this Resolution should inspire as many actors of Knowledge Society as possible jointly to oppose any deformations of the mission of Olympism and sport. The expansion of the pathology of unauthorized naming neo gladiators as combat sports athletes will

Knockdown

In the knockdown format, the most popular competition still takes place within the karate kyokushin style competition. The rules of knockdown vary minimally between karate kyokushin organisations. But generally, a leading trend is set a given bout is fought within the regular fighting time (eliminations 2 minutes, finals 3 minutes) until an *ippon* (1 point) is obtained by either competitor. An *ippon* is awarded for a technique after which the opponent is eliminated for more than 3 seconds or has lost the will to fight. On the other hand, *waza-ari* (0.5 points) is awarded for a technique after which the opponent has been knocked down for less than 3 seconds and is still able to continue fighting. Scoring two *waza-ari* results in full *ippon*. If no winner is determined during the regular time of the bout, this is done by a referee's verdict. If the referee's verdict does not determine a winner, then extra time is declared. Further, in inconclusive situations, the weight of the competitors (the competitor who is ten kilograms lighter wins) and the number of boards broken are decisive. It is also important to note that in the knockdown formula you cannot attack the head with the upper limbs. On the other hand, fouls are awarded for prohibited techniques or behaviour. Also, competitors compete in karategas on the tatami with protectors (jaw, suspensors) in different weight categories for men and women.

Full contact

In the full contact format, the most popular competition takes place within the karate combat (KC) competition. This American organisation was founded in 2018. It represents the renaissance of full contact karate, after this formula in karate was significantly reduced in the 1990s in favour of karate competitors competing in K1. KC is the organisation that was the first in the world to establish a professional karate league. Fights are held on a seasonal basis. Confrontations last up to 12 weeks and only the best athletes from different karate styles can participate. The KC full contact rules are more spectacular than the previous ones created in the 20th century. They stipulate that fights are PIT in three-minute rounds (non-title fights three rounds, title fights five rounds) with one-minute breaks. Referees assess the outcome of each round based on the total number of legal techniques and take-downs, fight area control and effective aggressiveness. A new feature is the ability to attack a downed opponent

for five seconds, but only with punches. It should be noted that throughout the bout, the following strikes are considered fouls: open hand, fingers to any target, back of the hand (when the fighter is grounded), elbow, forearm, head; and throat grabbing, strikes to the spine, back of the head, groin. The winner of a given fight is decided by knockdown or, after the end of the regular fighting time, by the number of points scored, just like in boxing. This is why the full contact system is still adopted as a resultant of the knockdown and semi contact systems. It is also important to note that the fighters compete in KC trousers with a belt and in protectors (gloves, jaws, suspensors) in different weight categories for men and women.

Mix fighting

The mix fighting formula in karate was created in parallel with MMA rules by the dynamic promotion of the *daidojuku* karate style (see glossary). In 1993, the first world branch of *daidojuku* karate was established in Vladivostok, Russia. And international competition in this formula was initiated at the first World Championship in year 2001. After that, the authorities emphasised the fact that they were in favour of mixed budo and the name of the *daidojuku* karate style was changed to *kudo*. It was emphasised that *kudo* is MMA practised in reference to the tradition of budo martial art. Nowadays, this competition is very popular in Japan and Russia. In global karate, on the other hand, these competitions have been almost completely abandoned in favour of performances by karatekas in neo gladiatorial organisations. The reason for this is the greater financial gratification for MMA fights in cages, which is lacking in the skirmishes of the mix fighting formula in karate. It should be added that in the mix fighting formula, full contact stand-up and ground fighting very similar to MMA is allowed. All hand techniques with the fist and elbow are allowed, as well as kicks with the whole limb on all possible attack zones and at all levels. In addition, throws, uppercuts, wrestling, attacking in the clinch, head strikes, levers and chokes are allowed. A fight can be won ahead of time by knockdown or by forcing the opponent to submit by applying leverage or choke. On the other hand, victory after the end of the regular fight time is determined by the number of points scored, just like in full contact. It is also important that competitors compete in karategas on the tatami with protectors (helmet, gloves, suspensors) in different weight categories for men and women.

DISCUSSION

The results obtained show that karate is constantly evolving and adapting to changing times. But this is the result of a constant battle in the field of combat sports for the multitudes of karate practitioners [69]. There is a declining interest in specific varieties of style karate in semi contact, full contact and mix fighting competition [70]. In contrast, kyokushin style knockdown competition remains popular [71]. While the mix fighting formula did not do well when confronted with the popularity of neo gladiatorism [72], the semi contact formula has maintained its popularity due to the inclusion of WKF as an Olympic discipline, and the full contact formula has been revived due to the creation of a professional KC league [48].

The above shows that karate as a martial art, combat sport and self defence system can only survive through sport [73]. The more people train karate for sport, the more popular the discipline becomes. Therefore, it is the WKF and KC, as inter-style karate organisations, which are most popular [74]. On the one hand, we have great high-level spectacles, on the other hand, different fighting regulations [75]. Semi contact competition in the WKF is in a truly Olympic spirit. And full contact competition in KC retains the realism and effectiveness of karate techniques. In semi contact there is primarily a speed and endurance motor accent [76]. And in full contact there is a main motor accent of strength and endurance [77]. Therefore, each karate adept can, depending on his or her predisposition, choose the direction of competition that suits his or her physical and mental conditions and philosophy of confrontation [78]. Furthermore, former Olympic karate athletes continue their competitive careers in KC. This is a result of the formation of new fighting skills by biological age. As an athlete grows older at the senior level, his or her speed starts to decrease, but strength can still be maintained [79]. Therefore, athletes who are already slower in WKF still have a chance in KC.

The above issues indicate that karate is heading in three directions: semi contact competition through the Olympic sport, knockdown competition within kyokushin karate and full contact competition in the professional karate league. In contrast, the path of mix fighting formula has stopped in favour of confrontation between karatekas in neo gladiator fights. The values of budo are different from MMA and therefore karate cannot be trained in the mix fighting formula [80]. But there is no telling what the coming years will bring [81]. However, the continuation of karate's transformation paths and their popularity will depend on generational changes determined by technological advances [82]. Most today's athletes at senior level are 'Generation Y' or 'Z'. 'Generation Y' grew up during the computerisation of work and 'Generation Z' grew up at the turn of the century. In contrast, most today's young athletes are the 'Alpha Generation', who are taught to live in constant connection with the internet [83]. It is these three generations of karate trainees that form the backbone of the popularity of today's karate pathways in the semi contact, knockdown, and full contact formulas [84]. With the next generational change, the directions of karate transformation may be different, incomprehensible to people coming from a budo background [85]. This is why the continuous transfer of knowledge, values, and skills from master to student is so important. One which does not lose this proper way of karate in the spirit of budo [86].

soon turn the Fundamental Principles of Olympism into their own caricature – objective indicators are a testament to the devastation of all dimensions of health by the practice of legal bloody pageants [92].

CONCLUSIONS

Three trends of karate are evident nowadays. The semi contact formula is accepted as an Olympic sport, so it meets the criteria of development in line with the humanistic assumptions of the creator of these martial arts. The knockdown formula, on the other hand, is stabilised in kyokushin karate. And the full contact formula dominates through KC. The mix fighting formula in karate, by contrast, has been abandoned in favour of neo gladiator organisations.

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