

Benefits of Judo Kata by Ed Thibedeau

Many coaches who train players primarily for judo competition believe that kata does not relate to competition training, but kata is relevant to not only competition training but to all judo training.

Scrimmage: practice play or a minor battle.

Drill: to fix something in the mind or habit pattern by repetitive instruction (practice); a physical or mental exercise aimed at perfecting facility and skill, especially through regular practice.

Kata: a method for learning techniques. Kata are a series of techniques linked in logical manner and relevance. Each kata practitioner knows in advance the techniques for attack and defense. Most judoka view kata as only those approved by the Kodokan. In fact anyone can create a kata. All it takes is a series (two or more) of techniques executed sequentially.

There are several reasons for and benefits to learning and doing kata:

- to practice certain techniques that in a less controlled manner might be too dangerous to perform.
- to preserve techniques.
- to perform repetitions in a controlled manner in a non-competitive arena in order to develop gross and fine motor skills such as tai sabaki, maai, ashi sabaki, kamae, kuzushi, tsukuri, kake, mushin, and zanshin.
- to learn techniques that otherwise might be limited due to competition rules.
- to allow an instructor to watch for elements of execution that degrade quality and effectiveness of the technique.
- to practice judo for those unable to partake in competition or randori due to injury, etc. (cross transference).
- as a warm-up exercise.
- as an easy way to teach left- and right-sided techniques, as is the case with nage no kata.
- for cross-training using a relevant and efficient method of judo.
- for appreciation of the aesthetic qualities of judo as exemplified in formal kata.

Most judoka learn and stumble through formalities of their first and only kata, usually nage no kata, as a requirement for shodan. Once they pass the test they no longer explore kata. This leads to the misconception that kata always must be performed formally as a demonstration or for judging. Kata proficiency has suffered in recent years as the emphasis on sport judo has increased.

The ultimate goal of kata is not for contest, formal demonstrations, or speed. Just as judoka easily cannot learn techniques in the heat of randori or shiai, they learn kata better in a relaxed and informal environment. It is not necessary to perform any kata in its entirety. Judoka can perform individual sets or techniques. There is no reason always to perform kata formally. Perform kata in the same manner as throws in regular practice or randori.

Explore kata for their bunkai (practical and varied application of technique). Once a judoka learns kata to an acceptable degree, break it into individual or series of techniques for practice purposes. Once the judoka understands techniques, he should experiment with situational drills to vary the techniques and observe the efficiency and effectiveness of results. This is no different from learning any judo or jujutsu technique: first you learn the technique in its technically perfect and correct form (drills and scrimmage/uchikomi and kata) and then execute the technique under practical situations of self-defense, demonstrations, or competition (randori, shiai).

While not all kata may be applicable to competition training, many are. Only by thoroughly studying a kata can one appreciate the relationship to real world situations of competitive sport or self-defense judo or jujutsu. Unfortunately most coaches look at kata from an esoteric rather than eclectic exoteric perspective. They don't appreciate what's within the kata, waiting to be discovered, and therefore don't appreciate underlying principles that would benefit their players. Kata are not meant to be learned simply as a string of movements or techniques.

While competitive judoka might use kata only as a warm up exercise, in the full spectrum of judo it plays a more significant role. Coaches must realize there are many more students of judo than competitors at any level. While specificity skill training may be more appropriate for elite level competition, most judoka are not competitors and deserve exposure to the wholeness of judo (randori, kata, and shiai). Too much emphasis on competition is a major contributing factor to the high turnover and short retention rate of judoka. More students seeing and practicing kata in an informal way could overcome this situation. Fortunately an increasing number of judo instructors once again are advocating study of kata. This will serve to expose more judoka to the realities and practicality of kata and thus increase the number of kata practitioners.

Most competitive judo coaches teach a limited set of throws and other techniques. They may have students learn a particular throw left- and right-sided, attacking from four major directions. As competitors gain experience they most likely will learn combination techniques. The game plan might go something like this: o uchi gari to ko uchi gari to harai goshi. A coach might have students practice this series as a drill, attempting to perform the first throw and transitioning smoothly and directly into subsequent throws as uke steps away. In fact this is a kata.

Practice kata, be it formal or improvised, as a skill development drill. In fact any skill development drill comprised of two or more techniques is a kata. So it seems that modern day coaches actually are doing kata whether they realize it or not.

The playbooks of football, basketball, etc. are really no more than formalized kata – predetermined paths of execution or movement. Each team has its own prearranged movements or kata that they hope will defeat the opposition. The playbook is kata; playing the game is shiai. While current sports physiology has developed an entirely new lexicon for purported proper training methods, a simple comparison of these modern terms finds an equivalent term defined years ago and readily apparent within old martial art principles.

References

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