8 Karate

Bowing to the Olympics in style

Wolfram Manzenreiter

Karate makes its debut as Olympic sport on home ground – not to the unanimous delight of its global followership. Many regard karate as a martial art of self-defense, not a competitive sport belittling its spiritual depth. Yet the popular identification with Japanese philosophy and etiquette is a “modern invention.” Karate originates from Chinese body techniques that reached Okinawa long before Japan annexed the former kingdom in 1879. Only when it was refashioned along the lines of other martial arts, karate gained wider acceptance throughout Japan in the early-20th century. After World War II, Occupation Forces helped spread the art abroad. Hollywood has to take the blame for the creation of karate’s distorted Orientalist image.

The World Karate Federation (WKF) has more than 190 national members and boasts over a hundred million karateka around the globe. The Japan Karatedo Federation only acknowledges the schools of Shotokan (about 500,000 members), Wado-ryu, Shito-ryu, and Goju-ryu (100,000 each). Then there is a large pool of traditional and full contact karate styles, sporting their own schools, associations, and worldwide networks. Styles differ largely, and quarrels about legitimate forms, techniques, and rules substantially delayed the acknowledgement as Olympic sport ever since first attempts were made in the 1970s.

Tokyo 2020 features 80 female and male athletes, competing in *kata* (form) and *kumite* (sparring) events. The former is a solo performance of strikes and blocks, chosen from 98 officially recognized forms. For the latter, the WKF conflated its established five weight categories into three. Points depend on power, precision, and quality of form of punches and kicks athletes land on their opponents’ body. Results from the most important tournaments ahead of the Games determine entries. Host nation Japan is entitled to a maximum of eight representatives with one in each category. Japan’s team was the most successful at the 2018 world championships, and Kiyuna Ryo and Shimizu Kiyo are two of the men’s and women’s WKF champions.

The competition is run at the Mecca of martial arts, the Nippon Budokan. Originally built for the judo tournament at the 1964 Olympics, the octagonal facility is also known for staging concerts and hosting world acts such as The Beatles, Oasis, or Janet Jackson.

Karate’s bow to the Olympics however evoked a snippy nod: In February 2019, the IOC decided to scratch karate from the program of Paris 2024.