

GKR KARATE JOURNEY

KUMITE TIPS

1. Establishing Your Stance For Kumite

The first thing any student must establish for kumite is their stance (generally referred to as fighting stance).

How:

Standing with one leg back (a leg of your choice), the stance should be approximately two shoulder widths long and one shoulder width wide. This will mean that your hips are on a 45 degree angle from your opponent.

» Both knees must be well bent and your weight centered. Ultimately, your kumite stance should loosely resemble a Horse Riding or Sumo stance. Think of your formalised basic stances (of Horse Riding and Sumo stances) as training you for combat. By pushing as low as possible during basics, we create the habit to sink down into stance as well as developing our leg conditioning. During kumite we can relax a little, remaining low but not pushing down as far as possible. We may also allow our back heel to rise slightly off the ground.

» You will quickly discover that sitting low in fighting stance to be an excellent leg workout. A common error made by karate students is to shorten their stance (like a boxer's stance) to ease the burden on their legs. This should be avoided at all costs, and the reasons extend well beyond getting a better leg workout. To understand the importance of the fighting stance, be sure to read on.

Why:

Your first question may be 'Why should our fighting stance resemble a Horse Riding or Sumo stance?' For combat, we desire speed and agility, yet equally, strength and stability. A shorter stance (similar to a boxer's stance) will give us speed and agility, but it will have virtually zero strength and stability. This means that in real life, an attacker will find it easy to grab us and destabilize our balance, or worse, tackle us to the ground. By contrast, creating a very long stance (for example, two and a half or three shoulder widths long) will give us excellent strength and stability, but will render us slow and less agile. It is therefore essential that for real life combat, and therefore kumite (where we develop our habits for real life combat) to establish a stance that finds an even compromise between speed and agility and strength and stability - hence the development of Horse Riding and Sumo stances.

» Both the Horse Riding and Sumo stances can withstand enormous pressure from the side (keep in mind we stand on a 45 degree angle to our opponent) and yet each

Yellow Belt (8th Kyu)



(with their weight centered and knees well bent) creating the platform to spring in multiple directions with speed and agility.

2. Establishing Your Guard For Kumite

Once you have established your fighting stance, the next part of call is your guard. Your guard does not just exist as the platform from which you launch attacks or execute blocks. It also serves as a form of communication, sending subliminal messages to your opponent. A poor guard will subliminally communicate to your opponent, "Come on in and attack with confidence," while a quality guard will communicate, "Beware of the dog - not only am I well prepared to block whatever you have to offer, I am also poised to strike." Which would you prefer your guard to say?

» Additionally, a poor guard will have many holes, exposing multiple targets. This will allow your opponent to quickly formulate a clear plan of attack (increasing their confidence to attack). By comparison, a quality guard will seem to cover everything, exposing no targets. As such, your opponents will find it difficult to formulate a plan, leading to hesitation and diminishing their confidence.

The Front Arm Of Your Guard:

Whatever leg you have forward, that arm should also be forward. The forearm should be placed in front of the torso with a closed front hand held around chin height. Note that higher grades may choose to open their hands, but Yellow belts should keep their hands closed at all times to prevent injuring their fingers.

» While the hand is chin height, it should be held well out from the chin. A boxer will keep their front hand close to their chin because they have the luxury of giant gloves to protect them from blows. A karate student without such luxury must keep their front hand well out in front giving them more time to block. Equally, an extended front hand means we are quicker to execute a strike off our front hand.

» The elbow of our front arm should be tucked in, resting one or two fists distance in front of our vulnerable floating ribs. A common error among students is to let the elbow tilt out to the side. This exposes the floating ribs as well as weakening your blocks and strikes.

The Rear Arm Of Your Guard:

Keep the rear elbow in front of your body. A common error is for students to have their rear elbow behind them. The problem with this is two-fold. Firstly, your rear arm is not in any position to block, and secondly, your strikes have further to travel, therefore your opponent will have more reaction time if you choose to strike with it.

» Keeping the elbow to the front of the body will not only mean you can use your rear arm to block or strike more quickly, it will serve to cover up more target area, resulting in hesitation and diminished confidence in your opponent.

» A closed front hand should be raised slightly higher than the solar plexus and well out in front. In short, it's tucked in just behind and slightly lower than the front arm. This manages to cover up your opponent's targets - reducing their likelihood of attacking. And should they attack, it ensures their strikes must go through traffic (your guard) to reach their target.

3. Keep Your Hands Closed

Upon first starting out in kumite, your coordination for blocking will not yet be refined. Therefore, in the interests of protecting your fingers from being accidentally jarred from a poor quality or timed block, it is suggested you keep both of your hands closed at all times.

» Having said that, as human beings, we learn more by what we see rather than what we are told. Therefore, looking around the dojo you will likely see higher grades sparring with their hands open. Rather than following their example, remind yourself that they are further along their journey and can do so safely.

4. Follow The K.I.S.S Principle

During Kihon (basics) we learn numerous hand techniques and kicks. Upon starting out in kumite, students often feel an overwhelming enthusiasm to try every one of these

techniques - often all at once! It's not uncommon to see beginners in kumite throw a combination of different kicks and punches each time they attack. While this enthusiasm is to be applauded, the reality is, the key to developing your kumite is to take it one step at a time.

» The K.I.S.S principle is used in various situations all over the world. This common acronym is generally short for 'Keep It Short & Simple'. As a Yellow belt in karate, it best stands for 'Keep It Simple & Singular'.

» Executing techniques in kumite is vastly different to executing them in Kihon (basics). Therefore, just like our Kihon training where we focus on techniques one at a time, we should do the same in kumite. Don't be in rush to develop combination attacks or counter strikes. If you do you will inevitably become a jack-of-all-trades, the absolute antithesis of what karate is geared towards.

» Once again, students learn more from what they see than what they hear, and seeing a number of higher-grade students attacking and defending with multiple techniques can see Yellow belts trying to emulate this. It's imperative you understand that these students move like this because they are further along in their journey, and they once started off just like you.

» In terms of self-defence, our goal is not to stand toe-to-toe with an attacker and trade blows. Our goal is to execute one single, swift, clean and accurate strike (delivered from a sound stance) to an anatomical weak point, finishing the situation quickly and decisively. In short, it's about quality over quantity.

» Therefore we should adhere to this principle in kumite. Obviously we are not going to strike hard to our partner's anatomical weak points, but we are going to practise the principles of self-defence, of quality over quantity.

Don't be concerned with combination attacks. Instead focus on singular strikes that...

- Start from a quality-fighting stance.
- Afterwards, see you return quickly back to your fighting stance.
- Have clean, crisp technique.
- Involve the entire body.
- Do not have any excess movements (before, during or after).
- See the correct use of your hips.
- Exercise control and good distance.
- Are well timed, etc.

Once you are able to adhere to quality techniques delivered one at a time, then you can start to add to them. But this will not occur during your time as a Yellow belt.

» Don't be concerned with counter attacking to begin with. Instead focus on the development of your defensive skills. Two key areas to focus on are:

- i) Maintaining your solid stance. If you lean back or fall out of stance, your opponent will quickly gain the upper hand.
- ii) Use economy of movement. From a quality guard, a successful block requires an arm to move barely a few

inches. Over blocking may stop the first attack but it will leave you open for forthcoming attacks.

Once you have developed your defensive, then you can start to add counter-strikes. But this will not start to occur during your Yellow belt kumite.

5. Two Hands

When a person starts playing the piano they generally practice chopsticks, not Beethoven. This is because they receive excellent feedback from the piano - via a horrible sound - when they try to play beyond their current ability. In karate however, we don't always get such clear feedback. In fact, we may throw a myriad of ugly techniques and find our partner backs away, which is in many ways is positive feedback.

» It's essential that you start off simple (chopsticks) and develop a few basic skills before attempting advanced techniques. Our last point dictated that you focus on executing attacks one at a time. We extend on this point and offer you two hand techniques that you should predominantly work on as a Yellow belt. These are:

Lunge Punch (oi tsuki)

This is a punch that is executed off the front hand in your guard. While we practise punches from our hip during basics, this punch should be launched directly from your guard. This makes it more of a jab punch (known as a kizama tsuki in Japanese).

» This punch is excellent both in kumite and self-defence because it is the closest weapon to your opponent, thus giving them the least reaction time. While it is also the weakest strike (less movement equals less momentum), when aimed towards the throat or nose (in self-defence only) it can cause immediate injury or at least set you up for a follow up technique.

» For Yellow belts in kumite, while you are still developing your control, it's best advised to aim this strike body level.

Keys to the lunge punch are:

- Control. You cannot develop your kumite ability if every student in the class is afraid to spar you because you have no control. Starting out in kumite, be sure to strike body and aim to miss by an inch or two. Be sure however that as you strike short your punching arm is bent. This tells you that in a real life situation your distance is fine, you only need to straighten your arm out to make contact.
- Avoid pulling your arm back prior to striking. While pulling the arm back first will add power it also lets your opponent know your intentions, granting them extra reaction time. This is known as telegraphing.
- Keep the elbow in tight. This is a common error made by beginner students. If the elbow flails out to the side just prior to, or during the process of the lunge punch it will result in greatly reduced power.
- Step into the strike. Lunge or step out with your front foot as you execute your lunge punch. This will allow you to cut the distance between you and your opponent,

giving you greater reach and power.

- Recover quickly back to guard. A common error is to strike and hold the arm out. It's important that after you strike, you pull the hand back (like a spring) to your guard position. This will allow you to block or execute follow up strikes.

Reverse Punch (gyaku tsuki)

This is a punch that is executed off the rear hand of your guard. While we practice punches from our hip during basics, this punch should be launched directly from your guard.

» This punch is excellent both in kumite and self-defence because it generates enormous power. While in self-defence, one will aim their reverse punch towards anatomical weak points (nose, throat, floating ribs etc), during kumite, be sure to aim towards the torso.

» All the technical pointers given in the lunge punch (above) apply to a reverse punch. You need to exercise control, to avoid pulling your hand back to your hip prior to striking, to prevent the elbow from flying out to the side during the punch, to step out with the front foot as you strike, and to pull the punch straight back to the guard position.

» The reverse punch is the bread and butter punch to the karate student. It is fast, and equally, very powerful.

» Striking with the reverse hand also enables us to use our front hand as a blocking arm. Liken it to a gladiator doing battle in the colosseum, who holds a shield in his front hand to block with, and a sword in their rear hand to counter strike with. However, sometimes the gladiators held a net in their front hand. This was used to capture and control their opponent before finishing them off their sword (held in their rear hand). This principle can also be used in karate by advanced students, whereby the front hand can serve to seize, control or unbalance an opponent before finishing them off with a powerful reverse punch.

6) One Kick

While you practise four kicks during kihon (basics), upon starting out in kumite, work on developing just one - your front kick (mae geri). This is a highly effective technique in both self-defence and kumite. It is the easiest to execute, has the least amount of upper body movement, and it is direct, fast and powerful. In self-defence, this kick can be directed towards the shins, knee, groin, floating ribs, chin etc. During kumite however we always aim the kick to the stomach.

» You may practice this front kick off your back foot (as you do in kihon) or by stepping the back foot up behind the front foot and then kicking off your front foot.

Kihon Front Kick Vs Kumite Front Kick

When executing kicks during basics training, our kicking leg comes out to meet the target, then travels back to its original position. As students become used to kicking in this fashion, they generally follow the same route when executing kicks during sparring. During kumite however, it should be your goal to step forward.

» This is because stepping back after a kick means your

weight is then transferred backwards - away from your opponent! A clever opponent will take advantage of this and always attack immediately after your kick. It is not only for defence purposes that we should avoid stepping back after kicking. From an attacking perspective, stepping forwards after your kick ensures all your weight is behind the kick, thus making it extremely difficult for your opponent to block, and/or deflect your kick.

» To be more specific, it should be your ambition to replace your opponent's real estate in the dojo after a kick. So what does this mean? After your kick, you should be stepping down into the space in which your opponent occupies. Some people step forward after a kick but take a tiny step forward to avoid stepping in too close to their opponent. If you have your weight behind a kick properly, you should be able to step right into your opponent's real estate. This will see them either move backwards (giving you the upper hand), or if they hold their ground, gives you an excellent opportunity to follow up immediately with a hand strike (similar to the kick, punch combination found in second kata).

Other key elements to ensuring a successful front kick are:

a) Control. You cannot develop your kumite ability if every student in the class is afraid to spar you because you have no control. Be sure to aim body level and aim to miss by an inch or two. Be sure however that as you land short that your kicking leg is bent. This tells you that in a real life situation your distance is fine, you only need to straighten your leg out to make contact.

b) Don't give your intentions away. Successful kumite is not just about what you do, it's about what you don't do. Many students develop habits of excessive movements (telegraphing), which give their intentions away, granting their opponent extra reaction time. Telegraphing your front kick might involve:

- Coming up in height to kick rather than kicking from your low stance.
- Dropping the guard prior to kicking.
- Pulling the guard in close to the body prior to kicking.
- Turning the front foot to the side prior to kicking.
- Leaning back prior to kicking.

Hints To Further Develop Your Front Kick:

A person's legs are longer than their arms, and can deliver much more power than their arms. This makes kicking highly effective in self-defence. This effectiveness is even amplified when a person is wearing shoes. What's more, kicking enables a person to maintain distance from their attacker - a distance outside their attacker's potential striking or grabbing range. It's also worth noting that the four basic kicks serve to protect a person from attacks on any angle.

» The goal of any karate technique is known in Japanese terminology as 'Ikken Hisatsu'. This is both an attitude and ability to completely incapacitate a potential attacker with one single technique. Considering the power generated by the legs, this is more likely to be achieved when kicking.

» Ultimately with your kicks, speed is more important than power because a fast kick to a vulnerable area will still cause a massive amount of pain. For example, a fast, swift kick to the groin, thigh or shins (if you are wearing shoes) will cause immediate pain.

» Having said however, we should always endeavor to deliver as much power in our kicks as possible. The key to remember however is that power should NEVER be achieved by sacrificing speed as speed is what will take an attacker by surprise. A question to consider is, "Do you want to give an attacker a fast (surprise) kick to the groin or powerful kick to their hands because they had time to cover their groin?"

» Once you understand that power is a good goal...yet only without compromising speed... you can start your journey to gaining power.

Power is achieved via two means:

1. Increasing the amount of force in the kick.
2. Decreasing the amount of reverb.

1. Increasing the amount of force in the kick is

developed through practice. Practice will allow you to:

- Develop the leg strength to hit with more power.
- Develop the leg speed to move faster towards the target.
- Develop the coordination between every muscle and bone in the body to work in unison to create a flow of power.

2. Decreasing the amount of reverb. If you are unsure of what this means, try this exercise. Stand close to a wall with your feet together. Next, push the palm of your hands towards the wall. Upon impact you will find that you are knocked backwards. This is reverb.

Why is it that when we push towards a wall we get knocked backwards? The wall isn't pushing back! Reverb is referring to the bouncing of energy. When energy meets an object (eg, the energy of your palm hitting a wall) the energy then bounces back up your arm. In effect, you are knocking yourself over with your own energy.

» When you front kick, upon impact you are going to experience reverb. Your goal is to minimise this. With the exercise with the wall, if your feet are together you are going to stumble back. If however you push the wall while standing in a zenkutsu dachi, you are going to stay strong. Your ability to stand strong means that more energy will be absorbed by the wall (your target).

» It's the same with a kick. Your ability to stand strong upon impact is going to greatly reduce the reverb, thus more energy will be absorbed by the target. The problem is that when we kick we only have one foot on the ground.

We can minimise the reverb by:

- Keeping our base foot completely on the ground.
- Staying low during the kick
- Keeping our base leg well bent.
- Ensure the knee of your base (supporting) leg is moving forward upon impact (reducing reverb in the back foot).

Despite the above points, when most students kick a kick shield or punching bag they come up in height. They do this because it adds more momentum; but it also adds more reverb. And they often lift their base heel off the ground.

» Work on minimising your reverb while practising your kick and you will develop a fast, powerful front kick.

7. Zenkutsu dachi In Kumite

We have already discussed the ideal fighting stance in our kumite tips:

- The weight is centered.
- The legs are well-bent (sitting in stance).
- A stance that involves a compromise between speed and agility with strength and stability.

Now we move onto our striking stance.

As the goal of karate is to:

- Gain mastery over the use and movement of our body.
- Teach us principles for self-defence

Therefore while we do not have to make a formal zenkutsu dachi in combat, we do take the principles practiced and learnt from the stance. These are:

a) Front knee well bent

This will add both reach and power to your strike. Additionally, it will keep your centre of gravity low preventing an opponent from being able to tackle or unbalance you.

It's human nature to always seek the easiest path in any situation. In karate terms, this implies a student will always stand relatively high in their stances as it is easier on the legs. In fact, it's not uncommon to see students punching in a virtual standing position. The regular practise of zenkutsu dachi during basic training will develop the instinctive habit to always strike with our front leg well bent.

b) Front knee is pushed over the front foot

This extends beyond the previous point. Keeping the front knee well bent is but the first stage, the second key factor is where the knee stops. When the front knee is pushed directly over the front foot it ensures your entire weight and momentum is 100% involved in the strike.

When developing the zenkutsu dachi, the early Okinawa masters were specific about the front knee being over the foot and modern physics backs this up. When the knee does not extend as far as the front foot, the body weight is not completely involved in the strike – reducing both power and reach. However, the opposite also applies. When the front knee extends out past the front foot, the leg muscles must kick into reverse in order to stabilise the body (preventing it from falling down). This means that an enormous amount of our energy is being thrust in the opposite direction of our strike, minimizing power. The regular practise of zenkutsu

dachi in basic training (especially when moving forwards and backwards in stance) develops our muscle memory; hence our instinctive ability to always hit the stance with our front knee directly over the front foot.

c) Hips Square

Our fighting stance sees us standing on a slight angle from our opponent. This is done to:

- Minimize our opponent's target area, making us a smaller target.
- To remove the vulnerable points found down our centre line (groin, solar plexus, throat, chin, nose etc) away from our opponent.
- To allow us the chance to drive our hips forwards when striking.

Many beginners during kumite will step out to strike and adhere (mostly) to all the principles of the zenkutsu dachi except one – squaring their hips up. Squaring the hips up at the precise moment our strike reaches the target creates extra reach and power via the means of torque (rotating force).

» The regular practice of zenkutsu dachi in basic training (especially when moving forwards and backwards in stance) develops our muscle memory to always lock our hips square when striking. Furthermore, it develops the instinctive timing so that the hips square up at the precise moment the front foot makes contact with the ground and the strike lands on the target.

d) The back leg extended out well behind the hips

In all the three previous points, the execution in kumite can be identical to basics training. The only real difference between the kihon (basics) zenkutsu dachi and the kumite zenkutsu dachi is the back leg and back foot. During basics training we lock our back leg straight and keep our back foot completely on the ground. During kumite however we are permitting to bend our back leg (slightly) and raise our back heel off the ground.

Many beginners to kumite will adhere to zenkutsu dachi's front leg principles but ignore the back legs. Common errors include:

- i) Bending the back leg far too much instead of keeping it near straight. When we bend our back leg too much it lowers our body weight sending energy downwards instead of directly forwards towards the target.
- ii) Having the back knee below the hips instead of extended back behind them. When the back knee sits below the hips (instead of well behind them) it implies that there is no forward's momentum in the strike (reducing power) and very little stability (increasing the chances of being destabilised by your opponent).

The regular practice of zenkutsu dachi in basic training (especially when moving forwards and backwards in stance) develops our muscle memory always keep our back leg extended well behind our hips.

Final Thought

If every principle of our kihon (basics) zenkutsu dachi is followed identically in kumite bar one (the back leg), why don't we just practice the kumite zenkutsu dachi in basics training? The reason is that the zenkutsu dachi has many uses. We allow the back leg to bend when striking in kumite because we are creating a force.

» If one were to require their zenkutsu dachi as a means of resisting another person's force (eg, being pushed or tackled backwards), then locking the back leg straight, and placing the entire surface area of the foot on the ground would become essential. Remember that kumite prepares us for many aspects of self-defence, but it does adhere to a set of rules. Kihon (basics training) by comparison prepares us for any and all types of combat.

8. It's An Equal Balance

When practicing kumite, be mindful that you are aiming to develop both your attacking and your defending skills equally. You may be larger or simply more confident than many people in the dojo and as a result, tend to consistently attack, attack, attack.

» Keep in mind that kumite exists to prepare us for real life, not to see who is the 'king or queen of the dojo'. There is no point running everyone around with your confident attacks while neglecting to develop your defensive skills. In real life, it's generally a case of 'big fish eat little fish'. So while you may be big enough to neglect defending in your dojo, you can bet in real life that the tables will be turned and you will be wishing you had developed your ability to defend.

» If you find that your opponents are too nervous to attack you in kumite (due to your size or speed etc), encourage them to do so and let them know that you will only try to block rather than counter-strike.

9. Habits, Not Sport

Despite the tips already given to do with stance and guard, some students tend to neglect this advice forming stances that are too high and too short, and guards that are too low and too close to the torso. Equally they strike in stances that are too high. They do this for two major reasons:

» The first reason is because a lazy stance and guard is physically much less demanding. Equally, striking in a tall stance also takes the pressure off the legs to perform. Be mindful that the more you persist, the stronger, fitter and physically more conditioned you will become.

» Beyond the physical component, students then find their lazy stance and/or guard do not inhibit their ability to attack or defend too harshly in kumite. And if it does not negatively impact their kumite too greatly, they reason that it's worth saving their energy. Irrespective of whether or not your kumite is impacted, it's vital that you remember that kumite is designed to instill effective habits for self-defence, not just to become more proficient in kumite.

» Despite its practicality for self-defence, kumite is still a sport (a sport being any game that follows a set of rules). In kumite, the rules dictate (for student safety) that we may

not tackle our opponent to the ground, wrestle, kick our opponent in the groin; make excessive contact with our kicks and punches etc. The pitfall students can fall into is they develop habits that work effectively 'within the rules' of kumite. Instead, they should develop habits that will work effectively against HAV's (Habitual Acts of Violence), even though many of these won't occur or be apparent in kumite. Examples of this are:

- i) Even though our opponent is not allowed to tackle us in kumite, we must still spar in a stance that will enable us to withstand a tackle attempt.
- ii) Even though our opponent is not allowed to target our anatomical weak points, we must still spar with the mindset of protecting these areas (via our stance and guard).
- iii) Even though we are not allowed to make contact with our opponent, we must still practice techniques with power in mind. This means our techniques should still have correct weight distribution, distance, use of the hips, a low centre of gravity, quality stances etc.

10. Focus On What You're Doing; Not Winning

When comparing kumite to kihon and kata, the obvious difference is that we are putting our skills to practice against an opponent. If we place too much emphasis on winning, adrenalin will kick in and our body will naturally switch over to using our primal brain (instincts). As a Yellow belt, you must understand that you will not yet have developed instinctive competence with your techniques. Therefore, by focusing on winning you are sure to fall short on developing sound self-defence habits (including clean technique, timing, weight distribution etc).

» Just like kihon and kata where we focus purely on ourselves (our technique), a beginner to kumite should do the same. Forget winning (you have plenty of time to worry about that later in your journey), in fact, be more than happy to lose. This will keep adrenalin at bay and allow you to use your conscious/logical brain during kumite. When you use your logical brain you are able to think your way through the experience, and you are able to learn from your mistakes. This will serve you to create effective habits for self-defence.

» As a Yellow belt, we have already given you 9 kumite tips to focus on. This should give your brain enough to think about so let winning concern you later. Remember with karate, first and foremost we learn to effectively use our body as a weapon. Later we can worry about strategies for using this weapon. So keep your mind concerned on your performance, on learning from your technical mistakes and creating effective habits for self-defence.