

Judging Bias

Years ago when my son (then age 7) first began thinking about competing at tournaments outside of our system, Sensei warned us about the probability of judging bias. Favoritism and even downright cheating on the part of some tournament officials were, he said, very real possibilities for which we should be emotionally prepared. I was totally disbelieving. Karatedo is a character-building way of life, and black-belt tournament officials are the end-products of many years of karate training and its accompanying spiritual and philosophical development. It was unthinkable to me that *any* of those revered teachers and masters from *any* system of karate would stoop to what amounts to stealing from children. For that is what judging bias is: stealing. (Biblically speaking, I suppose it would be classified as “bearing false witness,” but the result is to steal honor and recognition from competitors who have earned them honestly through diligent work and practice.)

As it turns out, judging bias is indeed common. But, as with everything else in karate, what seems on the surface to be a very simple, black-and-white issue turns out upon closer examination to be a very complex and subtle problem with many causes and many levels. A grasp of the underlying causes and motivations, not to mention justifications, can help competitors (and their families) learn to recognize, understand, and be philosophical about judging bias. It can also help future black belts to guard themselves against the kind of thinking that will one day tempt them to play favorites when their own turn at officiating comes.

For starters, judging bias can be divided into “justified” and “unjustified.” It can also be divided into “conscious” and “subconscious.” And, finally, it exists on a spectrum ranging from “nearly negligible” to “ridiculously blatant.” Let’s examine these in detail:

Justified Bias

How can any bias be justified? Primarily on the basis of assuring that the best competitor *that day* (preconceived opinions aside) wins, and that an inferior competitor does not win by accident. In some tournaments the judges will slant their scores or adjust their calls to make certain that “the best man” really does win, especially in sparring. This is a philosophical approach which hinges on one’s view of the true purpose of tournament competition. Tournament fighting is already substantially removed from the reality of street fighting, so much so that a person can win on points against an adversary who would surely have killed him or her in a real fight. This is disturbing to many officials, and as a simple matter of pride in their art they may try to see that such a thing doesn’t happen in their rings. They may favor the competitor having the best form and technique, who in their view dominates the match.

A specific criterion for scoring in karate is “attitude,” and a competitor who lacks the proper attitude will also find himself discriminated against. Bad attitude can manifest itself in many ways, including failure to report on time, bad sideline behavior, and lack of proper respect for officials and fellow competitors. Unsportsmanlike conduct, or an

improper word or expression, can get you on a referee's bad side in short order, after which even the most sterling performance will not receive a commensurate score. This kind of bias is really a training tool, letting competitors know what is expected of them in karate.

What alternative does an official have when he sees other officials actively discriminating against his own style, school or students? He may feel that his only choice is to counterbalance their bias with his own, providing at least partial redress. The practice of throwing out the highest and lowest scores of the five kata judges is designed to deal with this problem, provided that judges from one particular dojo, style or school are not allowed to form a majority of the panel. It can be argued that neutralizing a bias with a bias is justified.

Unjustified Bias

So much for biases that can, to some degree, be justified on philosophical grounds. Other motivations are not so noble. Here are six reasons why officials may show unjustified bias or favoritism:

(1) Style Bias

Pride in his own system of karate, a love for its particular techniques, and a belief that it truly is better than any other style, may prompt an official to favor competitors from his own style. This may come into play as an unconscious preference or as a conscious decision to publicly confirm superiority and dominance. Then again, an official may simply be more accustomed to seeing and scoring certain techniques which are most valued in his system. Taekwondo actually formalizes this bias by awarding 2 points for kicks and only 1 point for hand techniques in sparring. Some systems won't score a lead-hand punch or jab, no matter how perfectly executed, preferring to favor the reverse punch.

(2) School/Sensei Bias

A knowledge of who a competitor's instructor is may result in positive or negative bias, depending upon the official's relationship with and respect for that instructor. Officials tend to "consider the source," and will not expect the students of lower-ranking senseis to outperform students of higher-ranking masters, nor will they want to reward disliked instructors by allowing their students to win. Some officials may think they are doing their own sensei a favor by showing favoritism to students from his dojo...they may even look upon this as a display of loyalty. Others exercise old grudges against particular senseis, dojos or styles. (This is why some tournaments forbid school and style patches which might activate biases.) Still others are simply corrupted by the local political environment and the culture of their group.

(3) Ignorance

Lack of sufficient knowledge about other systems can lead to a logical-sounding bias. If an official is certain that a competitor from his own system performed extremely well according to how that system is taught, how can he score someone else from another system *higher* if he isn't sure what constitutes a perfect performance by that other system's criteria? In such a case he may feel that he has no alternative but to score the

competitor from his own system higher. This same bias can affect weapons competitions, favoring well-known weapons over uncommon ones.

(4) Empathy

A sensei knows his own students well. He knows how hard they have worked, what obstacles and hardships they have overcome, and what a price in pain, sweat and money they have paid to get where they are. He knows none of these things about an outside competitor, who may well not have paid the same dues; naturally his empathy will be with his own student, and this may seriously cloud his judgment. He may feel that bias toward his own students is a way of repaying their loyalty with loyalty.

(5) Money

A sensei knows who pays his bills and who puts the food on his table: his own students. Should a student become discouraged by tournament losses, or should his parents become disgruntled, he may not continue with his training, and the income of the dojo will be correspondingly reduced. This is surely a tough thought to ignore when scoring one's own students against others, especially when their families (who may know little about proper scoring) are watching. It is particularly hard when the sensei's student has performed exactly as he has been taught, and it still isn't good enough for a legitimate win against an outsider.

(6) The Darling of the Dojo

Many of the above-mentioned factors come together as a protective bias in favor of what I call the "darling of the dojo." Each dojo usually has a best student (especially among their children, but sometimes also from among the adults). This student represents, in the official's mind, the best that his school and style have to offer. If that student can't take first place at tournaments refereed by senseis from his own school or style, then the validity of that school or style is called into question. I have seen numerous tournaments in which the d.o.d. was given first place with total disregard for performance quality. The officials simply will not allow that student to lose. You'll know one when you see one.

Tactics of Bias

How can you tell when judging is biased against you? It's usually pretty obvious, but it begins when you and an opponent have performed equally but he ends up ahead. Don't expect to see a call of *ai-uch* (simultaneous techniques); if they are indeed simultaneous, the tie will go to your opponent and he will receive the score. If you get in a good shot and he counterpunches, the counterpunch will be scored. So if you want a point it needs to be clean and very obvious to the spectators, with no counterpunch from your opponent. Another common difference in biased refereeing is that your techniques will need to be perfect in order to score, but your opponent can score with sloppy techniques, inaccurately targeted or from incorrect distance, even if they are partially blocked. Focus shots by you may not be called, no matter how close to the head they come. Penalties may be enforced more strictly on you than on him.

Kata scoring is strictly by the numbers; in order to win against bias you will have to be so much better than your opponent that the judges would embarrass themselves in

front of the audience by *not* giving you the win (and some of those judges have very high thresholds of shame). I recently saw a competition in which the judges each scored the local boy identically to a significantly superior outsider; only when forced to publicly declare a winner by a show of hands did *all* judges vote for the outsider.

Of course, whether in fighting or kata, if the officials decide they are not going to let you win under any circumstances, there is nothing you can do but give it your best shot anyway and try to look as good as you can to the audience. Fortunately, bias that severe is relatively rare. Usually they will let you win if you are good enough. But face facts: if you expect to go to someone else's tournament and take first-place trophies away from their best students, you will have to be *significantly* better than they are.

Dealing with Bias

A tournament official who can overcome biases of style, school, and sensei, who is knowledgeable and appreciative toward other styles, who sets personal feelings totally aside, and who is oblivious to pressure from his own students wanting to win is a rare treasure indeed. He will be a person with integrity, solid self-esteem, and broad knowledge, a person who has achieved a high level of spiritual maturity and a love for *all* students of the martial arts. He realizes that objective, accurate judging provides a lesson in character to officials of lower rank and enlightenment. Such people exist, and they merit our sincere gratitude and admiration. They are the embodiment of the true Martial Spirit.

As for the other officials of less advanced character, we know they will be encountered regularly, and we show our own martial spirit by accepting the challenge. To win in the face of discrimination is a double victory. To lose undeservedly is a test of our own maturity, and our own ability to remain calm and unruffled, knowing inside that we were the best even if unacknowledged. That knowledge should really be our principle source of satisfaction, rather than the trophy or medal. And beyond that is simply the joy of competition, regardless of who wins or loses and whether the win or loss was justified. True joy and satisfaction can only come from within, they cannot be bestowed, and each tournament encounter is a valuable learning experience. With the proper attitude, every tournament can be a no-lose situation.

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