

WORLD JKA KARATE ASSOCIATION



Instructor Trainee's Report #14

Striking in Karate

WJKA (Canada)

Instructor Trainee # 002

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History tells us that White Crane Kung Fu is one of the roots of modern-day karate, and that some of its methods are strongly represented in our modern Traditional Karate training and teachings:

By studying the Bubishi one can easily draw the conclusion that White Crane is the basis for all of the Karate that we have today. The creation of karate as a combination of the White Crane and Tiger styles is mentioned very early in the book. This was even illustrated in the article #28, where a woman was presented while performing Hakutsuru no kamae while a man was presented in position characteristic for Tiger style. This symbolic uniting of female (soft, ju, jin) and masculine (firm, go, jang) style resulted in creation of a perfect method of fighting, according to the manuscript¹.

Having said that, a look at the specific practice of White Crane in an article by Paul de Turreil² tells us:

...attacking pressure point targets with specialized hand strikes became a trademark of Fukien White Crane [...] powerful strikes to the temple, eyes, throat, solar plexus, floating rib, kidney, groin or knees could successfully debilitate even the most determined attacker.

How these teachings came to be studied by the forefathers of Karate can be seen in the interactions of Chinese Martial Artists such as Wang Ji and Chantan Yara with Takahara Peichin, the Sensei of Sakugawa. Sakugawa³ is known as the man most responsible for passing down the Karate we have today.

An examination of the Striking techniques in Karate can start with a definition provided to us by Nishiyama Sensei in the book *Karate, the Art of Empty Hand Fighting*⁴:

The Japanese make a clear distinction between punching and striking which may not be clear from the English words. Basically, the difference is like that between stabbing and slashing in the case of the sword. The force in a punch is transmitted in a straight line through the forearm to the striking point whereas in striking the force is executed laterally, usually with a snapping motion, particularly of the elbow.

¹ See Monte Cox' article here: <https://www.martialartsplanet.com/threads/the-influence-of-the-crane.9192/>

² See 'A Portrait of the Art and Grand Master Lee Kiang Ke'

³ Cox, The Influence of the Crane

⁴ Nishiyama goes on to do a hierarchical breakdown of hand and foot techniques

In essence, a punch is delivered in a straight line with the fore knuckles of the fist, whereas if another part of the hand (or body) is used, it may be classified as a strike (kicking excluded).

To explain further Nishiyama’s notion of “*force is executed laterally*” we can use the following as examples:

Shuto Strike	Typically delivered across the body in a downward/outward sweeping arc
Backfist Strike	Typically delivered with an extension of the arm (at the elbow) from the side, along an arc to the opponent
Ridgehand Strike	Typically delivered to the opponent along a crescent path the to the target

The necessity of strikes in karate come about as they are an essential part of the toolbox of the karateka, in the same way that a carpenter may use different hammers with varying weights and designs. The tool or weapon used in karate depends on the intention of the technique, whether it is in defense or offense, whether it is to set up for another technique, or to appropriate Ikken Hissatsu.



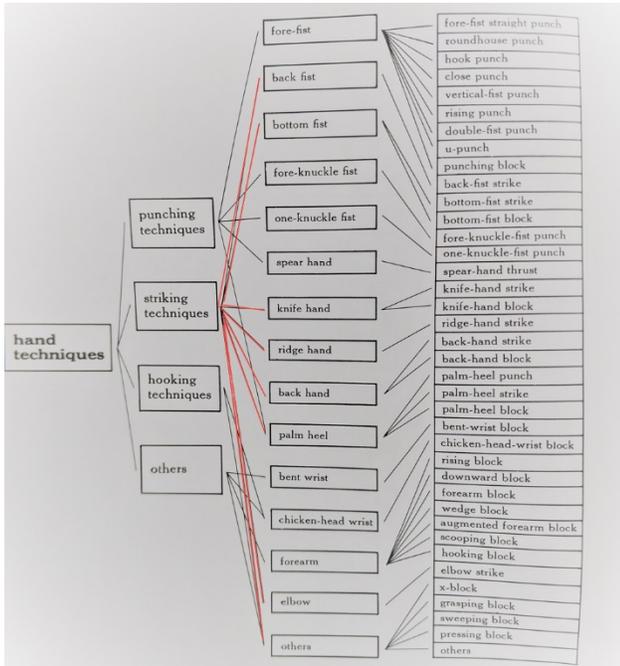
Sensei Nakayama, pictured here, illustrates the Shuto Block/Strike while in Zenkutsu Dachi. Illustrated in red are some of the striking weapons of the body.

Most common when we discuss striking techniques, we look at the weapons of the upper body:

- Uraken (Backfist)
- Shuto (Knife hand)
- Haito (Ridge Hand)
- Tetsui (Bottom/hammer fist)
- Shotei (Palm Heel)
- Koken (Wrist Joint Strike)
- Haishu (Back-hand).
- Empi Uchi (Elbow Strike)
- Ude Uchi (Forearm Strike).

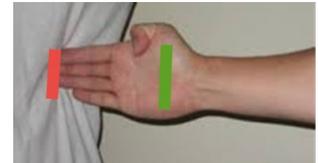
In attempting to differentiate between strikes and punches, certain strikes can be delivered in a fashion similar to a punch. The Nukite (Spear hand) is a good example, as it is often delivered from the hip, straight to the target using ground reaction force and hip rotation. Even though Nukite is open hand,

Kime is just beyond the point of impact, similar to a punch. In addition, the Nukite can be delivered from in close, using rotation or vibration power to strike a target like the throat.



In the illustration here from Nishiyama's book⁵, we can see that the Nukite is actually listed as a punch, subcategorized as a thrust, whereas in other materials and teachings it appears as a strike. The Nukite is seen as a versatile strike in that it can quickly morph into a second technique, deepening on the scenario at the time of delivery.

For example, the Nukite delivered here (striking points red line) and be altered to a palm-heel strike by simply



changing the hand position slightly (green line).

Hence, the intention of the technique dictates the attacking weapon used. The Nukite is an excellent weapon for a strike to the throat during in-close combat where other techniques are limited. In addition, as illustrated above, a Nukite intended for the solar plexus can be foiled if the opponent turns their body even slightly. In this case, the weapon is revised and a palm-heel strike may be delivered to the ribs instead – still a very effective technique with similar consequences.

Maintaining similarity to the punch, strikes like the Nukite have to include the fundamentals of a powerful technique such as utilizing ground reaction from the floor, hip rotation or vibration, breath energy and body contraction and expansion.

The basics of power generation do not change simply because the weapon a karateka chooses is different.

⁵ Karate, the Art of Empty Hand Fighting, PP 24-25

Versatility in strikes can be illustrated by the downward sword-hand thrusting strike (shuto-uchikomi) in Bassai Dai (pictured here).

The intention of the weapon here may be two-fold: to deliver a high-impact palm-heel strike to the opponent's groin area and subsequently to grab the opponents inner leg to pull them off balance (see red arrow).

The technique is two-handed. As the downward strike is delivered, the upper, open hand may be redirecting an incoming punch, which may then also turn into a grab of the opponent's leading arm, or the opponent's hair even, to assist in an unbalancing or throw.



Variations of similar techniques (the grab and strike) as seen below⁶ use the same fighting principles, but different weapons are used, and different targets are chosen.



Picture 1 shows a rising palm-heel strike to the neck/chin.

Picture 2 shows a knife-hand (or wrist) strike to the neck.

As stated previously, striking, like all karate techniques, must utilize some sort of power generation. If we describe picture one as a rising strike, we can assume that the power generation comes from the floor (ground reaction force). This rising force, along with rotation in the right hip is channeled to the striking limb and then to the target. If *force is mass times acceleration*, as the karateka pulls the opponent inward (left hand) he is increasing the effectiveness of the strike – higher impact.

In picture two, the target seems slightly smaller than the attacker, so it is possible that some downward motion or dropping power can be used to generate force. There are also two options here for hip

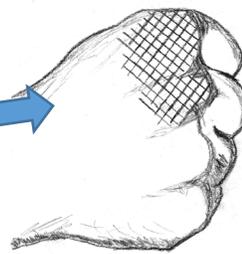
⁶ Google Image search 'Shuto Strike'

rotation: rotate/cut the hips sharply into the strike, or do the opposite and open the hips to drive the striking hand into the opponent in more of a thrusting fashion.

In both scenarios, the attacker should be in a stable stance to effectively make use of the grabbing and pulling of the opponent. Karateka have to ensure that the unbalancing and striking of the opponent doesn't jeopardize their own stability.

To better understand the portion of Nishiyama Sensei's definition of striking, we can look at the Backfist to illustrate the "usually with a snapping motion" portion of the statement.

Moves 11-17⁷ in Heian Sandan use a series of elbow blocks/strikes followed individually by a Backfist



strike from kiba dachi. Using the hips, the Backfist is whipped to the target, and then snapped back to the hip chamber position. The weapon is the uraken, as pictured here.

The backfist has to become an extension of the body in order not to break the body's upper and lower connection. For example, if the karateka *leans into* the backfist strike they are jeopardizing adequate hip action, as well as upper body balance. In actuality, rather than lean to deliver the attack, the Karateka would simply yori-ashi to accommodate proper Maai. Maai (functional distance), according to Nakayama Sensei in his book *Kumite 2*, is *the point of greatest importance in fighting strategy*⁸.

⁷ From <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=udHZgCRHWnk>

⁸ See point 4 on page 16

For maximum effect, when impacting a target with a Karate strike there are a number of things to consider:

For maximum effect⁹, Karate strikes should have;

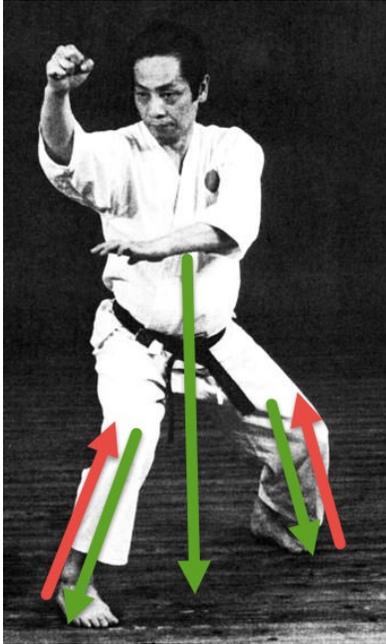
- Correct Tension in the striking surface – In the case above, a strong, properly tightened fist with straight wrist
- Appropriate *kime* to strike deep and decisively – Energy has to be focused as the Backfist makes contact with the target in a fashion where the impact is driven *through* the target
- Use of a fast snappy whip-like action to shock – Correct timing means that as the impact of the strike is delivered, the fist is pulled back, creating the snapping action of the technique and forcing momentum to carry forward
- Use of the other arm as a counter action – Karate techniques make use of both halves of the body working in unison. If one side is delivering the strike, the other is a mechanism for maintaining upper body stability, is prepared for defense, or may be chambered for the next technique
- Most times a straight wrist is utilized in order to maintain connection to the Tanden¹⁰ (body's core)

In addition, any technique in traditional Karate should be rooted in a solid stance. The depth of stance isn't directly proportional to stability, but Karateka understand that the physical and psychological connection to the ground is instrumental in generating energy and conducting it to the striking limbs.

In the example above, simply utilizing a deep kiba dachi does not equate to being grounded, rather, the feet in the kiba dachi have to be awake to the notions of ground reaction and mobility. A balance is required in tension: too much inward *or* outward tension dismisses the effectiveness of the technique, hampers mobility, and it also means the technique will be simply thrown from the upper body. The stance then, is grounded, but not at the cost of mobility. One can imagine a tree squirrel, which is sure-footed, but very agile and mobile.

⁹ Adapted from, <http://www.dynamic-karate.com/basic-karate-moves.html>

¹⁰ Personal correspondence with Sensei R. Chernoff



Delivering a Backfist strike from the horse-riding stance is an act of balance and weight centering in both the legs, as well as timing. It isn't simply a matter of shifting the weight onto one side or another. Delivering a strike to the front means transferring energy in that direction without giving up the center of gravity. Using ground reaction force in both feet and legs allows this.

The image here shows Asai Sensei¹¹ with arrows indicating energy directions due to gravitational pull and ground reaction forces. The idea is to show that even a seemingly static Karate stance is dynamic in nature, and has to be so to deliver effective strikes and to parry attacks.

As with all karate techniques – punches and kicks included – no matter the skill used in delivering the attack, the target (or where we attack), is of utmost importance. An ardent fly caster knows that even a cast with perfect finesse is of no use if the fly doesn't land at the desired point on the river.

In *The Art of War*, Sun Tzu said, "*to be certain to take what you attack is to attack a place the enemy does not protect.*" In Sun Tzu's day, chinks in armor meant there was a possible target. Similarly, an opponent caught off guard, or with the guard down due to inexperience or exhaustion, also meant there was an open target.

Pictured here¹², the attacker commits to a lunge punch without a guard, leaving his head open to attack. The defender can simply shift in, rotate his left wrist and deliver a hammer strike to the attacker's throat or chin (black arrow).



¹¹ Adapted from <https://www.shotokanmag.com/magazine/skm-gallery/600-tetsuhiko-asai.html>

¹² Image taken from WikiHow: Blocking Punches

Biologically we know that a punch that is delivered to the target at the body's center is the strongest¹⁴. It makes sense then that we teach younger students to attempt to deliver their attacks to the center of the target: chin, throat, solar plexus, etc. This essentially allows them some margin of error if the attack is slightly off target. For example, a strike that is slightly off center from the throat is still more damaging than a strike to the opponent's shoulder.

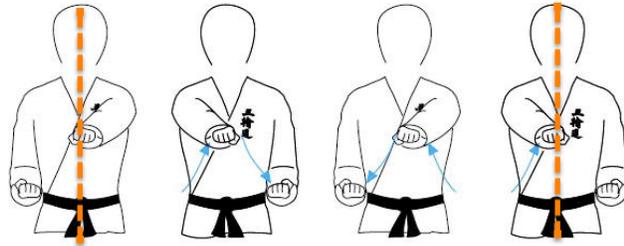


Figure 2 Centre Line Target

The concept of accuracy can be reinforced in the ardent study of basic techniques. Kihon provides the repetition that the Karateka needs in order to build proper muscle memory and biomechanics. Regardless of the technique, the *form* in which it is delivered dictates the outcome in terms of effectiveness. Attempting a knee strike in kumite is ill used unless the karateka has a clear understanding of stance, contraction and expansion and body focus. Kihon and Kata training invariably reinforce these concepts.

Repetitions using proper form then ensure that a reactionary strike, or a strike delivered in Kumite or combat is much more likely to pinpoint a precise target.

An analogy can be made with music. A guitarist becomes adept in blending notes and chords into music only after practicing proper form. The constant repetition in changing hand positions and finger positions on the strings takes his or her technique from mechanical to fluid.

The transitions between the chords on the guitar are as important as the chords themselves.

Just as in Karate, the guitarist has to get good – practicing form – before they can get fast and fluid. Taken further, after extensive practice we see a guitarist who uses the instrument to tell the musical story, not unlike the karateka whose movements and delivery of techniques (various strikes included) adopts a union of Yin and Yang to illustrate the depth of the Art.

¹⁴ Image adaptation by the Author

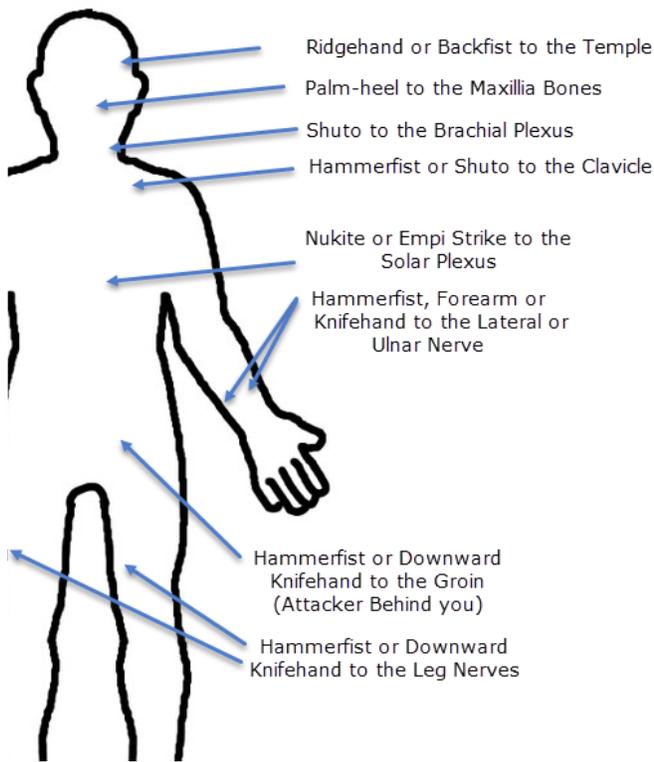


Figure 3 Valid point of contact for karate Strikes

Pictured here¹⁵ is a sample overview of the possible strikes that may coincide with specific targets. In essence, the weapon that is used is a product of the target that presents itself. As an example, if the target that is available is the opponent's forehead, it makes more sense to attempt a hammer fist than a knife hand strike.

Another consideration when looking at the concepts of striking in Karate is conditioning of the weapon.

With the punch, we see that the fist is pretty much a ready-made weapon, already capable of delivering a blow to the opponent, as well as absorbing reaction energy – when formed properly.

This is not necessarily the case with weapons used in strikes such as the ridgehand or knifehand. These weapons may require some more deliberate conditioning.

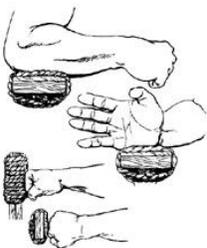


Figure 4 Google Image Makiwara Strikes

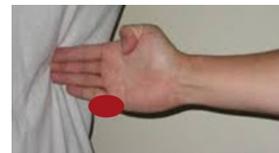
According to Nishiyama Sensei, one can assume that the striking power of someone who does not use a striking surface is lacking.

His teaching was that something like a punching board (Makiwara) improves muscular control, focusing, hand conditioning, and breath control.

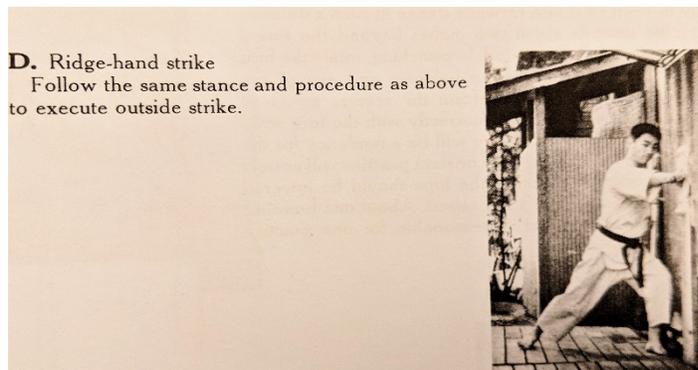
One of the most important facets of using a striking surface is feedback. For example, understanding the necessary muscle contraction and hand positioning while doing a shuto strike is difficult unless you make contact with a target. Making contact provides the physical reaction required in order to make determinations about how the striking surface of the hand (the weapon) is positioned. Slight adjustments with the positioning of the fingers or wrist influence the effectiveness against the striking surface, and may also reduce the risk of injury. Striking with a shuto

¹⁵ Image adapted by the author

attack that uses too much of the metacarpal hand bone¹⁶ (specifically the end toward the finger), or proximal finger bone will result in poor impact on the target, and self-injury. See image here:



In addition to better understanding your own striking weapons and their effectiveness in delivering powerful blows, a striking surface also reinforces the concepts of *Maai* and *Kime*. In this image from Nishiyama's book, the karateka is performing the ridgehand strike against the Makiwara.



Here the Karateka is able to study the distance to the target that is required in order to get maximum effect. They are also able to gauge whether or not they are executing proper posture and stance upon impact. Similarly, the Karateka is forced to begin to understand body contraction on impact. Failure to focus mental intention as well as to contract the proper muscles on impact will produce unfavorable feedback. Conversely, when the Karateka strikes with the correct timing and distance, along with proper body contraction, there is a better understanding of the biomechanics required to strike properly.

In this case also, the ridgehand is also hardened in that careful and repeated bone percussion (as the hand strikes the target) enhances bone density.



(Seen above are a series of strikes practiced on the Author's homemade Makiwara).

¹⁶ Anatomy of the Hand Bones from <https://www.knowyourbody.net/hand-bones.html>

In conclusion, striking in Karate requires more than the act of striking itself. To become proficient, a Karateka has to study the various tools (weapons) of striking, as well as the uses and adaptations of these through Bunkai (and a deeper look via Oyo). In addition, the practitioner has to understand the target that these Strikes are suitable for under various combat conditions, and how to condition the weapons used to attack these targets.

Most importantly, the karateka has to understand and implement defined and functional stances in order to empower defending and attacking strikes. Ground connection is to the Strike what the engine is to the vehicle.

With practice and study, eventually the notes and chords come together to make the music.

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