

“Practice Like You Play”

There is one piece of good advice you’re likely to hear from every coach of every sport anywhere in the world: “Practice like you play!” In other words, if you expect to play like a demon in the big game on Saturday, you had better practice that hard *all through the week*. If you loaf through practices, you are *not* going to shine when your big moment comes in the big game. “Saving your strength” in practice is counter-productive.

Martial arts are no different, except for the fact that we usually don’t have a big “game” or tournament every week. And, since many students choose not to compete in tournaments at all, they aren’t ever called upon to perform their very best in a competitive situation. This is unfortunate. For non-competitors the “big game” only comes when someday they find themselves in a real-life self-defense situation; at that point it is too late to “Practice like you play.”

Many students, especially in the younger age groups where energy is normally so abundant, come into class with their energy output suddenly set on “low.” They seem to be thinking, “Okay, I’ll come to class today, just as long as I don’t have to *work* too hard.” Then they spend the whole class in an apparent effort to conserve energy. This is the worst kind of attitude to bring to the martial arts. The student wastes his own time and that of his instructor.

Think about this: maybe it’s time to re-dedicate yourself to karate. Make up your mind that you are going to go full-bore at every class session, and worry about resting up later. When you step on the mat at the beginning of class, it’s *tournament time* and the crowds are cheering! When you face an opponent in sparring practice, visualize him or her as the biggest, meanest, toughest slugger on the tournament circuit and you’ve got to pull out all the stops in order to win. When you practice self-defense techniques, convince yourself for a moment that it’s *real*, stopping just short of actually hurting your practice partner (as attacker *or* defender). If you have not been competing in tournaments, maybe it’s time to start, just to put a little pressure on yourself to train hard and to do your very best.

Why should you go to all this work if you’re not forced to? Because the sad fact is that having a black belt by itself just doesn’t guarantee very much. You can loaf through your classes at half speed, look sloppy, skip every sparring class, avoid tournaments entirely, and still eventually be granted a black belt. But it’s only worth what you put into it; a black belt isn’t much good if you haven’t learned how to fight and perform kata like a demon, and only *you* can make the decision to do that, *every time* you step on the mat. Make it a point of pride to do every practice at full speed and full power, with rigorous precision and total concentration. Yes, it takes more energy; but you’ll feel greater satisfaction too. And when the “big game” comes, you’ll be ready.

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