



ALEX MILADI

Straight to the Point

By Jose M. Fraguas

Alex Miladi is the founder and chief instructor at the “Miladi Group” and one of the key individuals in the development of referees and judges in USA Karate and WKF. He began his karate training as a young child while he lived in Persia. Sensei Miladi’s desire to never stop learning and growing as a karate practitioner has forced him to continue training and traveling in order to expand his knowledge and understanding of the complete art of karate. He has taught karate in Asia, Europe and for the last 20 years, the United States of America. In that time, he has coached all levels of students, from the passive child to whom karate is just a hobby, all the way to international Junior and adult champions in elite competition. These experiences have taught him that the most important area of your daily life is “personal health”. You cannot put a value on how important it is to start physical activity at an early age, but it is never too late to start. With this in mind Sensei Miladi’s goal goes beyond simply focusing on sport. His vision of teaching is unlimited in the search of wellness in all karate practitioners that he touches with his words and actions.

How long have you been practicing karate and many styles have you trained in?

I started my training in Iran in 1972 under Sensei Farhad Varasteh who is known as “the father of Iranian karate” and served as the Vice President of WUKO which later became the WKF (World Karate Federation). He was primarily teaching Okinawan style karate with a strong emphasis on kumite which became the foundation for Iranian karate to this day. Shotokan is my primary style of karate. My involvement in the referee program has required that I understand the four major styles of karate. In order to do that, I have had to study each style in order to have a good grasp of the kihon of each of these styles. Because of this I have also studied Goju-Ryu, Wado-Ryu and Shito-Ryu to the point of being able to knowledgably judge the kata from these varying styles. As we all know, JKA is the most recognized Shotokan organization in the world. My karate training has strong influence from JKA instructors such as Alex Sternberg, one of the well-known Shotokan karate practitioners in the USA and the chief instructor of Shotokan Karate USA. Shotokan Karate USA has its strong influence from Asai Sensei, Abe Sensei, and Yahara Sensei.

How was the beginning of your study in the art of karate?

I started my karate training in Iran in 1972. At that time karate was more of a “combat sport”. To achieve higher ranks you should have acquired the spiritual, mental and physical aspects of karate which is a completely different concept from the “sport” of karate today.

When did you decide to get involved in the refereeing and judging field of sport karate?

The Iranian karate federation has been one of the well-known competitors in the world since the 1970’s. The dojo in which I started training karate was the main source of competitors competing nationally and internationally. Because of this, it was important to have a good understanding of the rules of competi-

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tion as a competitor and later as a coach and referee. My exposure to refereeing began around 1977 first at the dojo and then at the local tournaments. We did our share first as competitors and then doing our share as referees. In 1994, at the encouragement of Dr. Alex Sternberg, who was the Chief Referee of the USA-NKF (USA National Karate Federation), I dedicated myself solely to refereeing. This led me to pursue my national referee license and later my PKF (Pan American Karate Federation) and WKF (World Karate Federation) licenses. I have been involved internationally as a referee since 1997.

When did you start to compete and what attracted you to the world of karate kumite competition as a competitor?

I started competing in 1973. I earned my first national championship title in 1974 and I must say I was fortunate to start my karate training in a dojo that was very tournament oriented which produced a majority of the national competitors of the country that I was living in at the time. Training in that dojo and seeing everyone with a passion for competition was the draw to get involved in competition.

What did you think of the referees at the time you were competing?

We were taught never to question the sensei's integrity or ability. Since the majority of the referees at the time were the "sensei", we accepted whatever calls they made whether or not we agreed. We never dared to question. Of course later on, as we grew in karate rank and experience as a competitor, it was evident to me that the ability, skill and experience of the referees was greatly affected by the referee training they received.

How was the refereeing and rules system at that time?

The scoring system was Shobu Ippon (1 ippon or 2 waza-ari to win the bout), using 4 corner judges and 1 referee. The criteria for scoring allowed much more contact than we do today. Penalties were very limited leading to many injuries. Often as a competitor you had to fight for your life in the ring since the rules were not designed to protect the competitors but to encourage a combat mentality. Safety equipment was non-existent nor required.

Karate is nowadays often referred to as a sport... would you agree with this definition or is it a martial art?

I agree with the definition of "sport". The rules are more complete and clear, defining the difference between competition from fight, and scoring from hitting as there are clear criteria to score. The combination of categorized warnings, penalties and mandatory use of safety equipment defines karate competition as a sport.

Did you actually know the rule system of competition at the time you were competing?

Yes and no. I knew as much as I could make sense of from what the referees would call a point. Since it was clear hitting was involved, it made it easy to define what was a score. Remembering that the referees, who were also the senseis in the dojo, would leave us as competitors to make sense of what we should do. However this dramatically changed when we had a written set of rules that we could all read. Even then it was to the understanding and knowledge of karate, of each individual how they would interpret and teach the rules. This dramatic change occurred when WUKO (World Union Karate Organization) started putting an emphasis on training referees which has greatly improved and continues to improve today.



When teaching the art of karate – what is the most important element for you: self-defense or sport?

I would have to say self-defense because your question was; “When teaching the art of karate...” Competition is one small part of the art of karate. Let’s say the art of karate, in general, is like a hamburger. You have a bun, hamburger patty, lettuce, tomato, onion and all the other stuff. You can’t just have a hamburger patty and say, “I have a hamburger.” You’re missing all the other stuff. So the sport is just one small part of the art of karate. There are many more parts involved. So it is important to give a clear understanding, to whomever I teach, that once they are done with the sport of karate (competition), they can still train in karate. If it’s just a sport, when you’re done with the sport (due to age, injury or other reason) then you’re done. But with karate it doesn’t matter. When practiced as an art form, you do it from a very young age to the day you die.

Please give us an overview of how the rules system has changed throughout the years.

We started with Shobu Ippon (1 ippon or 2 waza-ari to win the bout) using 4 corner judges, 1 referee. Then we moved to Shobu Sanbon (3 ippon, 6 waza-ari or a combination of these totaling 3 points to win the bout) with 1 referee and 1 mirror referee (mirror system). And now Shobu first with 1 referee and 2 corner judges, the 1 referee and 3 judges with varying point systems to what we use today (yuko, waza-ari and ippon). Then came the implementation of penalties and later categorizing them. The term “hitting” was changed to “point”. The term “karate fight” is now a “karate competition”. From no safety equipment what so ever to the mandatory use of safety equipment today.

What is it that keeps you motivated after all these years?

I must say, my love for competition. I think, as a referee, you have the best seat in the house. You are the closest to the action and at some point you become part of the action itself.

How important is competition in the evolution of a karate practitioner?

If you imagine karate is like a building that has been built upon pillars. Competition is like one of the pillars that uphold the foundation of karate. It is said that “iron sharpens iron”. As a karate practitioner, you can evaluate yourself by measuring your skill against another practitioner. You can develop physically and polish your skill but when you compete against others you are also being tested mentally where other factors such as pressure, stress and excitement will help to strengthen and develop other areas.

How important is for a competitor to understand the competition rules system?

How could you possibly play a game or sport without knowing the rules? In every other sport, regardless of how skilled, talented and trained you are you cannot play well if you don’t know the rules of the game. Karate competition is no different. The more knowledgeable and skilled you are about the rules the stronger you will be in strategizing your game plan. You will know what the referees are looking for giving you an advantage in the ring.

How do you see the art of Karate evolve in the future?

When karate becomes an Olympic sport, there will be a clear definition between “karate sport” and “karate martial art” as only kumite will be adopted into the Olympics. At that time, the sport karate will be known only for kumite. Karate “practitioners” will study the art form, kata, kumite, and the history of their chosen style. They will study and train differently. For one, they could start their training learning all aspects of the art form, developing in competition and later continue to practice after retiring from competition.



(Top) During a conversation with Coach Antonio Oliva. (Bottom) Explaining the competition rules to the USA Team.

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What advice would you give to those who want to focus on becoming a Karate referee?

I would suggest they first pursue the study of karate in whatever style they would choose to the point that they are able to physically master the kihon of that particular style. This will establish a good foundation to begin refereeing. Of course, if they are interested in competing, this will be a great help. Secondly, start the journey as a referee by practicing these three areas: 1. Have a clear understanding of the rules allowing them to fluently interpret and apply the rules under extreme pressure within a matter of seconds. 2. Master the referee gestures to be able to express their opinion and effectively communicate with the rest of the referee panel (judges or referees) in the ring as if it was their second language. 3. Training their eyes first and foremost to see the points and be able to verify them according to the criteria of the rules of kumite competition. 4. To provide a safe competition environment by appropriately applying warnings and penalties.



How often do judges and referees need to update their credentials in the USA Karate National Federation and in the WKF?

USA Karate requires all licensed officials to renew their license once a year by participating in a sanctioned referee seminar that is conducted by the USA-RC (Referee Committee), affording them the opportunity to update their knowledge and practice, keeping their skills sharp. WKF requires all Kumite Referee A and Kata Judge A to renew their license every four years by participating in the referee course, passing the written test and officiating at the World Championships.

What advice would you give to referees who are struggling with their own development?

Experience, experience and...experience. Referee at all the tournaments from the local events to the national and international competitions. The more experience you get the more confident you will be.

You travel domestic and internationally giving seminars and helping referees to advance in their field. What are the most important points in your teaching methods for referees?

Training the eyes to be able to see the scores under all circumstances regardless of the pressure; the ability to interpret the rules and apply that knowledge in the ring and being able to simultaneously communicate your interpretation in the ring by using the correct gestures. Don't forget what defines the referee is the

difference between new and old wine which means, the more you experience you have the smoother and refined you will be.

Do you think that Olympics will be positive or negative for Karate?

I believe that it will be positive. One of the things I am personally looking forward to is having Karate offered as a collegiate sport at the same level as other sports. This will enable karate practitioners to take advantage of sports scholarships at the college level which is a major problem in the United States once they get to that age. I believe it will

also help with sponsorships from major corporations which will give USA Karate a huge boost financially and the freedom to advance its programs and services.

How do you think that WKF refereeing and rules system can be improved in both kumite and kata?

The rules have changed for the better. For instance, a committee was formed from the most advanced and experienced referees in the world to study the rules and bring suggestions for change leading to our most current rules of competition. However, we won't really know the results of these changes for the next few years. I am optimistic that we will have positive results and will move to make changes as deemed necessary for the good of the sport and safety of the competitors. I do believe that the karate rules of competition should move toward being more spectator friendly making it easy for a non-karate practitioner to tap in and enjoy. Otherwise karate will be an exclusive sport only understood by practitioners and those close to them.

What do you think is the most difficult aspect of refereeing and judging when it comes to a kumite match? And in a kata division?

The most difficult part, in my opinion, is to see the scoring technique. The eyes must be trained to see, recognize and verify the scoring technique enabling you to make the proper call. You must also be completely familiar with warnings and penalties in order to make the match safe for the athletes, keeping in mind that looking for the score should be the first priority. This goes hand in hand with the knowledge and understanding of the rules of competition, being well practiced in your gestures and effective communication with the rest of the referee panel. In kata, understanding the basics (kihon) of each style and the interpretation (bunkai) of movements and combinations that will determine the correct execution of those techniques. You must also be able to judge the performance according to the kata rules of competition. Officials must not allow themselves to be pressured or influenced by the audience or the matter at hand.

What can Karate offer to the individual in these troubled times we are living in?

Karate has been known for its principles that encourage a disciplined life which include three areas; physical, mental and spiritual. An individual who receives proper teaching and training on these principles can use that knowledge to live a disciplined life that will influence his/her surroundings and others rather than be overtaken by what is going on around them. This requires a much deeper training in these three aspects that is hard to find now a days.

Finally, what advice would you like to give to all Karate practitioners in general?

The way of karate is a treasure that has been handed down from generation to generation. There is a certain traditional philosophy attached to the art of karate and martial arts in general that it is important to keep and preserve for future generations. Those of us who are the current "keepers" of this treasure have a responsibility to teach and transfer this knowledge to the next generation. This is only possible if we understand and learn, study and practice, refine ourselves and finally pass it on. On the way, we may stumble, but in recognizing, owning and correcting our mistakes – allowing ourselves to learn and grow knowing that this is part of the process. 🐉



(TOP & MIDDLE) Teaching a black belt class at the Dojo.

(BOTTOM) Sharing a few laughs with Luke St. Onge and Head Coach Tokey Hill at the Olympic Training Center.