

Black Belt Thesis:

Karate and Young Athletes: The Cross-Training Advantage

by

Michael G. Langer

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**Outline  
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**Title: Karate and Young Athletes: The Cross-Training Advantage**

**I. Introduction**

Thesis Statement: The following essay will examine a multitude of ways in which karate training can provide significant competitive advantage for young athletes.

**II. Goal-Setting and Self Discipline**

**III. Poise and Confidence**

**IV. Respect and Courtesy**

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Few individuals, who are truly knowledgeable in the field of athletic training and development would not concur that confidence, goal setting, agility, reflexes, strength, and flexibility are vital to the overall make-up of superior athletes. Those athletes who possess and develop these elements or skills greatly increase their ability to separate themselves from their competition or counterparts who do not.

Enormous amounts of time and money are expended on training regimens and equipment intended to provide the edge that will turn an athlete from ordinary to extraordinary. In fact, this quest for excellence has helped establish entire new businesses and careers over the past 20 years such as personal trainers, acceleration programs, sports camps, and a huge variety of specialized training equipment. Now, even the youngest athletic participants are routinely involved in year-round training programs which promise to sharpen and hone skills to ensure success.

As coaches, athletic trainers and parents seek the training tools that will set a young athlete apart, something that should strongly be considered is the study and practice of martial arts, and, in particular, karate.

The following essay will examine a multitude of ways in which karate training can provide significant competitive advantage. These include: Goal setting and self discipline; respect and courtesy; poise and confidence; and agility and flexibility. While the subject matter could certainly be applicable to various levels of athletic development and competition, the focus here will be on young athletes and the early stages of development.

While various resources will be used to support the premise of this thesis much of the information and various hypothesis will be based upon this writer's more than 20 years of coaching experience for hundreds (if not thousands) of children in a multitude of youth sports.

### *Goal Setting and Self Discipline*

Regardless of the sport, one of the more imposing challenges for young athletes is accepting the fact that learning and competing in any sport is a process. Even when participants seem to immediately excel, they will almost certainly learn that at the next level there will be others who possess the same or greater skills than they do. This continues at every level all the way up to the pinnacle of sports—the professional ranks. Along the way, more and more participants are eliminated or “weeded out” because either they do not have the necessary skills and are released from their teams or because they quit playing due to various factors including frustration with the amount of work required to keep up with or surpass their competition. According to the University of Missouri, national statistics reveal that almost 50 percent of American youngsters play at least one youth sport every year, but 70 percent of them quit by the time they are 13 and 90 percent quit by the age of 15 (Rural Missouri).

One of the real challenges or weaknesses of youth sports in general is that children often do not understand or are not sufficiently instructed as to what is expected of them and what the skills are they must possess in order to succeed at each new level of competition.

Often this is not discovered or understood until a young participant flounders against much stronger competition or does not make a particular team which he or she has tried out for. This situation can easily deteriorate into a child becoming discouraged and demoralized. Subsequently, what often transpires is that the child chooses not to participate in a particular activity any longer.

Clinical psychologist, Monica Frank who has studied psychological methods that are useful in the area of sports performance enhancement suggests that to achieve peak performance and competitive success, it is imperative to have specific goals that include target dates and strategies for reaching the goals. She reports that goals should be written down and should also include both long and short-term goals as well as practice and competition goals. The goals must be challenging, yet realistic and they need to be focused on personal performance, not on winning. Finally, the athlete needs to develop concrete plans for achieving the goals with occasional feedback (from a coach, teacher, trainer, etc.) to assess the effectiveness of the plan. Frank emphasizes the point that athletes, coaches and parents must be aware of some pitfalls in goal setting including not recognizing individual differences in setting goals, not setting reasonable goals, and setting too many goals (Frank).

The failure to establish realistic but challenging expectations and goals, does not apply to karate where it is, or certainly should be, laid out very early that in order to reach the next level or belt rank, there are specific requirements and achievements that must occur. While various forms of martial arts may have different rankings (or belt colors), one commonality that most possess is that they require students to progress along a defined continuum and that until a student passes all the requirements necessary to graduate to the next level, he or she must stay at their present level. This understanding and defining of ground rules leads to the reality that there are no surprises and that participants know exactly what needs to be done in order to progress (Goodman, 6-9).

By having a child involved in karate, a parent, coach or instructor can help the child more easily relate to the basic fact that it is not a given that he or she will automatically advance to the next level. The child, in turn, has the opportunity to develop a mind-set of self-discipline which assists the young athlete in understanding that hard work and practice are necessary ingredients for success and that it is largely up to him or her to do required work to succeed not only in karate but in other sports as well. Additionally, because karate students do not always pass every test they take, by relating this experience to other sports, the participant is less likely to think of him/herself as a failure or disappointment for not making a certain team or succeeding as well as hoped at the next level. Instead, they may very well tend to look at it as a learning experience in terms of what needs to be done to improve.

## *Poise and Confidence*

In team sports, such as baseball, football and hockey, with the exception of superior teams which are simply loaded with talent or, at the other end of the scale, completely deprived of talent, most teams fall somewhere in the middle and can very easily win or lose on any given day. The same can be said for individual sports including swimming, golf, and tennis.

Often, the major variable that sets a team or individual apart is in the way an event is approached mentally. Those which approach the event with confidence and an inner-belief in themselves are far more likely to succeed, even when they might be a tremendous underdog, than those who are hesitant, afraid, or are lacking confidence.

An example of this could be taken from a famed sports moment which has received much notoriety once again recently due to the Hollywood production of the movie, *Miracle*, the true documentary of the 1980 United States Olympic hockey team coached by the legendary Herb Brooks. Leading up to the Olympic games, one of the biggest challenges facing Coach Brooks was convincing his team of college players that they could actually compete on the same level with a team such as the mighty Soviet Union which had a 20 year history of winning world tournaments, Olympic games and other exhibitions with professional National Hockey League All Star teams. Leading up to the Olympic games, while the U.S. team thought it could contend with most countries, it was without question intimidated by the powerhouse Soviet Union. In fact, just over one week before the start of the 1980 games, the two teams met in an exhibition and the Soviet Union essentially toyed with the Americans during a dominating 10-3 victory.

As the Olympics moved forward, the U.S. team opened with a last-minute 2-2 tie of a very strong Sweden team and seemed to begin coming together as Coach Brooks had hoped and envisioned. During the games, the momentum of the U.S. team increased as it upset traditional powers including what many thought was the second best team in the world, Czechoslovakia. By the time the United States and the Soviet Union would meet, both squads were unbeaten and, while the Soviets were enormous favorites to win, Team USA had developed a tremendous belief in itself and, while still highly respectful of the Soviet team, they were no longer intimidated by the Soviets. What followed was what many sports historians will argue was the greatest upset in the history of sports, a 4-3 United States victory (Johnson, 186).

Another high-profile example of a team which believed in itself and overcame tremendous odds would be the 1969 New York Jets from the world of professional football. While professional football of today is one league (the NFL or National Football League), in 1969 it was made up of two separate leagues which had not yet merged, the National Football League (NFL) and the upstart and lightly regarded American Football League (AFL). The only time that teams from each league would play each other was in the season-ending Super Bowl which began in 1967 and had been dominated in its first two years by the NFL. In Super Bowl III in 1969, the NFL champion Baltimore Colts were expected to easily handle the AFL's representative, the New York Jets who were led by flamboyant quarterback Joe Namath.

When, just days before the game, Namath was asked by a national reporter how he thought his team could possibly compete with the Colts, the quarterback shocked the sports world by saying not only could his team compete, he boisterously guaranteed a Jets victory! The Jets proceeded to back up his prediction by defeating and dominating the Colts and Namath was named Super Bowl III's most valuable player (Rozelle, 67-80).

What both of these examples have in common is that while their teams were heavy underdogs, the players and coaches who made up the teams possessed a great deal of confidence and sincerely believed that they belonged where they were and that they could in fact win.

One of the most fundamental aspects of karate is that by instilling requirements and principles such as performing in front of a group, being prepared, always being aware of your surroundings, staying calm under pressure, and not being intimidated by a larger and/or skilled opponent, the tremendously valuable element of confidence is uncovered and fostered. For karate students who participate in other sports, this confidence and belief in one's self may very well prove to be the difference between winning and losing.

### *Respect and Courtesy*

If one were to survey a group of coaches from various team sports regarding the most difficult aspects of coaching modern athletes, one of the most likely answers would almost certainly be the general lack of respect that exists among participants. This means respect for coaches, other players, and the game itself. With today's pervasive "look at me" attitude, professional athletes routinely put themselves above their teams, show frequent disrespect for their coaches and team owners, and excessively showboat in front of opponents for even the most minor of successful plays. It is now commonplace for players to be in trouble with the law, to hold-out for more money even after signing new contracts, to demand trades, to force management to choose between keeping a particular player or the coach who doesn't get along with the player, and to stage rehearsed celebrations that include props such as cell phones, cheerleader pom poms, and markers to sign autographs immediately after making a big play. During the most recent National Football League season, Randy Moss of the Minnesota Vikings even went so far as to simulate dropping his pants and pretended to "moon" Green Bay Packer fans after scoring a key but very ordinary touchdown.

Unfortunately, thanks in large part to the modern television era, young athletes see this type of behavior constantly and subsequently use it as a role model for how they too should perform. The result is an ever-younger, more difficult athlete to coach or manage. Evidence of this growing lack of respect and poor sportsmanship comes from actions being taken by organizations such as Minnesota Hockey, the governing body of Minnesota youth hockey which recently implemented a policy called "Fair Play." The purpose of the policy is to address major concerns in youth hockey including lack of respect for opponents and officials. The purpose of "Fair Play" is to reward sportsmanship and proper game play.



This is done by giving teams an extra point in the league standings after each game if the team members and coaches exhibited acceptable behavior during the game. While perhaps this type of governing of conduct has arguably become necessary and can be justified, it is nevertheless a sad statement as to what has been allowed to perpetuate (Minnesota Hockey).

Simply put, this type of conduct is not tolerated in karate training (or at least should not be by any reputable school or program) where great emphasis is placed very early on a number of respect-related factors. For example, students are instructed to always respect the opponent regardless of experience, size, or other factors. Students are also taught that they must demonstrate consistent respect for the instructor.

This takes place through practices such as bowing or performing a formal salute, never interrupting, and often using formal titles for the instructor (ie. Sensei, Sifu, Mr., etc). Next, because they are expected to study and follow historical formal practices or traditions involved with karate, students who advance and succeed come to respect the martial art itself. Finally, because karate involves significant dedication, discipline and self-motivation, participants develop a healthy respect for themselves and how they fit into the overall martial art which they are studying.

By soundly instilling this element of respect into the young karate participant who is involved in other sports, it seems reasonable to expect that there will be a carry-over effect in terms of the general overall respect that the participant brings to his or her other sport-related activities.

### *Physical Skills and Benefits*

Looking at the four major sports in the United States, basketball, hockey, football, and baseball, each has specific physical demands. Basketball requires height and explosive jumping ability; hockey players must have tremendous endurance and speed; football is a game based on strength and massive size; and baseball demands that players possess amazing hand/eye coordination. While certain physical skills such as speed and strength are unquestionably advantageous in any of these sports, what all of them have in common is that their top performers have developed outstanding, balance, flexibility and agility. While there is generally little that any training method (assuming it is a legal, medically approved method) can do to increase or decrease the natural tendencies for height and weight, other key physical skills can be developed and honed through proper, focused training. Because it embodies so many of the physical aspects of sport (power, balance, coordination, muscle explosion, lateral and circular motion, and endurance), karate can serve as an outstanding cross-training tool in terms of developing physical prowess. According to the National Karate Federation, while karate training builds strength, cardiovascular fitness, and flexibility like most sports, it also particularly builds perfect body awareness and control, precision in movement, and speed and strength (National Karate Federation).

It is logical that the earlier this training tool is implemented, the more beneficial it will be for the young athlete in moving through the various age groups and levels of competition in his or her sport of choice. This is precisely why numerous amateur hockey associations in Canada have begun to implement karate as part of their off-season hockey training programs.

One such program for 11-14 year old children is operated through the University of Manitoba and features 3 hours of karate daily during each one-week hockey camp. This camp emphasizes inner being elements such as confidence and self-esteem, as well as the physical benefits of karate, including the refining of crossover skills which are vital to hockey players in generating power and speed as they turn and skate through corners (University of Manitoba).

There exists great opportunity for developing and implementing karate-based youth camps and cross-training opportunities, similar to that being offered by the University of Manitoba, that focus on other sports simply because, regardless of the activity or sport, there are numerous fundamental, routine movements, stances and other maneuvers which are also staples of karate.

For example: the basic karate neutral stance closely resembles a typical baseball batting stance; the horse stance mirrors the correct defensive posture of basketball players and can also be seen in nearly every play of a football game as linemen, linebackers and running backs anticipate the start of a new play; and footwork such as crossovers which are tremendously important not just for hockey players but also for baseball players who rely on them to put their bodies in correct, powerful throwing position. By practicing and developing these types of maneuvers as well as forms and techniques that demand and foster hand/eye coordination and different multiple movements occurring simultaneously, young athletes are more likely to acquire physical skills that will successfully translate to nearly any sport that he or she may be involved with or choose to pursue.

Further supporting evidence for the cross-training theory comes from Champion Youth, a leading provider of youth karate classes in the St. Paul and Minneapolis, Minnesota metropolitan area. The organization reports that "many athletic teams have used karate training to improve performance. Children lacking coordination may find self-defense/karate to be one of the best activities to develop balance and fluid movement. Flexibility is a standard part of training, making a young athlete less prone to injury and more flexible later in life (Rolando). The National Karate Federation states that another related benefit of karate is that, because it is an indoor sport, training can take place year-round and this leads to steadier, more consistent results. Because breaks do not need to take place in between seasons (as opposed to a sport such as Football which generally runs from about August to November), there is no skill loss between sessions and there are not typical early season injuries as the body readjusts to specific physical demands. It is also important to note that because classes take place in climate-controlled environments, heat stress and outdoor allergens become non-factors. For youth this is of particular importance due to the fact that children are more prone to heat stress and allergies than are adults (National Karate Federation).



Finally, Avery Faigenbaum, an associate professor of exercise science at the University of Massachusetts, in looking at the benefits of cross-training as a whole states that cross-training should not really even be thought of as an option simply because specializing in a single sport early in life usually backfires. According to Faigenbaum, kids may hone certain skills in a particular sport with early, intense specialization, but they can also burn out emotionally and physically. Thus, they may not be achieving the goal they or their parents had envisioned—becoming the best athlete they can be in their chosen sport. According to Faigenbaum, “when you play different sports, you use a variety of motor skills—jumping, running, twisting—that can transfer to a lot of sports. But if young kids focus on just one sport, they may not reap these benefits (Stenson). Very few, if any, sports or methods of training contain more of the movements and motor skills promoted by Faigenbaum than does karate.

### *Conclusion*

To develop and attain a level of skill that is superior to the competition is the ambition of nearly any serious athlete or coach. While most athletic training experts would agree that cross-training can be of tremendous benefit over specialization, large-scale debate would likely occur among the same experts as to what cross-training methods or combination of methods are the most beneficial. Without question there exists any number of reputable, and likely worthwhile, skill building programs and camps, personal trainers, schools, and equipment. Unfortunately, what many of these training methods lack is the ability to serve and develop the entire athlete. While any of these methods may have the potential to be outstanding in building muscle, increasing speed or improving other skills specific to a sport, they may very well miss or neglect critical and essential mental aspects. The same simply does not hold true with karate. While there can be little dispute that karate training demands, develops and sharpens physical skills such as balance, agility, flexibility, and hand/eye coordination, it also provides and significantly enhances inner-being benefits that include self-esteem, confidence, respect, discipline, and goal-setting. This differentiation as a comprehensive training method should clearly establish karate as a tool that merits strong consideration as a, if not the, primary cross-training instrument for young athletes.

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