

Repetition and Application

Prior to writing this article, I was watching the USA women's gymnastic team compete. The announcer reported that when people say that the women make the difficult moves look so easy, the women respond by saying, "That's because we do so many repetitions in training." The announcer went on to confirm that the number of repetitions they do in any given practice-day is higher than anyone outside the sport realizes. The same, of course, can be said of many competitive activities in which a routine is demonstrated. A few examples are figure skating, dancing, or karate kata competition.

Other sports require a lot of repetition, too, but do not require precise repetition. Football, Baseball, Basketball, Hockey, and Soccer, all require skills that must be repeated in practice to be applied in competition, but in sports like these, repetition is generic, that is, it must be adjusted to the circumstances that the individual game presents. You do not throw the football exactly the same way to the same wide receiver if he happens to have a different defensive back defending. You modify your trusty T-42-dive play because the opposition put a linebacker where you did not expect him. Similarly, in baseball, you may be hitting .300 with your perfect swing, but you adjust that swing according to the pitch that is thrown and the field into which you want to send the ball.

The same can be said for Olympic sports like Track and Field and Swimming. Running or swimming is pretty repetitious, but the qualifying athletes you will be racing against and the lane in which you start may not be the same in each race.

What about sports in which the unknown factors outweigh the known factors? If you compete in MMA, you will not know if you should repeatedly practice takedowns, boxing, or moving inside a kicking attack unless you know your opponent in advance, and even then you will not know what adjustments he has made in preparing for you. In non-contact karate sparring, you probably will not know most of your competitors. Sure, you can size them up during the competition, but you cannot prepare for them a month in advance by repeating the low-high-roundhouse kick that would score against Shoto Ken or the sweep-reverse-punch that would score against Taekwon Joe. Your practice then, although it will contain repetition, will contain variations of that repetition. You may train solo to be able to initiate the kick or sweep instantaneously, but you will need to spar various other karate-ka in order to sense when and where it might work. Even with a dozen training partners, your actual tournament opponent may be of the 13th variety, and your timing, despite your repetition, may be off.

Now consider a martial artist training for self-defense. What does she repeat, and how often? Certainly generic basics are a good start, but if she repeats too much, if she takes them too literally, they will actually become a drawback to her accurately responding to an attack.

I have an idea! We'll modify her basics and throw them into different combinations. That will give her repetition of a sort but will add more variety. But then she'll have to memorize dozens of combinations which themselves may be taken too literally. Okay, we'll step up to putting those combinations into choreographed sequences. After she learns a dozen or so of those, she'll have plenty of variety but less chance to take each movement literally. Still, she could become so performance-oriented that she favors precision and aesthetics over potential application.

I've got it! Do all three methods of practice and then study the heck out of the applications, perhaps seeing a new way to apply a familiar movement every practice. Oh wait! Sounds familiar.