

Why Karate History Doesn't Matter...and Does

If you don't know history, you are doomed to repeat it. For karate-ka that means we would have to reinvent the wheel, doesn't it? Well, not really. The counterargument goes as follows: we do not have to know the people and the styles that led to the techniques we use—we only have to be good at the techniques and know generically that they came from karate so the people we teach don't end up training in kyudo by mistake.

Many karate-ka have won trophies, public notoriety, movie roles, and proficiency in self-defense without knowing, for example, that Sakugawa taught Matsumura who taught Itosu who taught Funakoshi who taught Nakayama who taught the guy who taught your sensei.

So why bother learning even the basic history of an art?

Enhancement and enrichment. Competence in performing an art can be as shallow as one's natural abilities. And, although history does not make up for an absence of profound ability, history does help enhance the details of what one learns, assuming one draws the correct lessons from it.

Recently, I was reviewing some of my old martial arts magazines and found an article by Hanshi Patrick McCarthy in the September 1995 issue of *Dojo Magazine*. The historical details were so numerous that, even though I was familiar with all the Okinawan masters mentioned, I had difficulty following the Chinese roots of the White Crane knowledge they had picked up. Said I to myself, "Too much! What good is this knowledge to me?" *And this coming from a guy who had been studying karate history since the 1970s!* My attitude caused me to question the value of something I had always taken for granted as valuable—karate history.

Let's go back to the idea of enhancement and enrichment. Knowing the history of, for example, the Heian kata allowed me to seek out older versions (the Pinans) and compare them. This allowed me to discern applications that I might not have seen and even general self-defense assumptions about distancing and retaliation that would have been invisible had I not made the comparison. In this case, my knowledge of history enhanced my physical practice of karate. Of course, knowing that Itosu allegedly developed the Pinan kata from older Channan forms or that a Chinese named Chiang-(n)an developed the original Channan forms (according to Mark Bishop) or, alternately, that a man named Yoshimura developed them (according to Ryusho Sakagami) did not enhance my repertoire of application, but it did enrich my broader knowledge so I could be more aware of other connections that, in later research, might produce more utilitarian results.

I certainly do not argue that, to be valuable, history must produce utilitarian results. I find history interesting in its own right, but those who dismiss karate history because of its lack of

utility do not see that much of the practical utility they are wont to employ comes from someone's painstaking delve into history—someone such as Hanshi McCarthy.

What would you have studied if your art had no history or even a limited history? What if you had a curriculum made up of basics and only one kata? What if you did not know about the concept of *bunkai* (analysis) and *oyo* (application)? I began my study of karate during an era in which not only was the study of history rare, but the study of applications was nearly non-existent. History told us that kata had meaning beyond a calisthenic exercise with which to terminate a sparring workout. Today, karate-ka take the study of applications as *de rigueur* and karate history as at least moderately necessary.

Yeah, I'd say so.