

Professional paper

HAND BLOCK TECHNIQUES IN TRADITIONAL AND MODERN SPORT KARATE

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Apstrakt: The paper points to the position and role of block techniques in traditional and modern sport karate. The realization of blocks in traditional and modern sports karate is essentially different, and those differences represent the focus of this paper. An in-depth analysis underlines those differences not only in terms of execution, but also in terms of training methodology. Understanding the essential differences in the execution of blocks in traditional karate on one side and modern sport karate on the other side can be of crucial importance when it comes to achieving maximum sports results, especially among top athletes. Comprehending the technical differences between blocks, i.e. their implementation in traditional and modern sport karate holds essential importance for the preparation of competitors in modern sport karate, above all for fights. Rejecting the given fact would most certainly have a negative impact in shape of the absence of sports achievements in fights in modern sport karate.

Key words: *block, karate, traditional karate, modern karate, sport karate*

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INTRODUCTION

Karate is a martial art that originates from India, from which it came to China and then to Okinawa. At first, Okinawa did not practice martial arts from China and Japan, because of the peaceful character of their advanced Buddhist culture. However, that harmony was disturbed by the arrival of Japanese troops and police controls, when any kind of military class was prohibited and all weapons confiscated. For that reason, Okinawa martial arts used a defence system that involved staff, truncheon, or bare hands. The aforementioned circumstances led to the development of a martial art “kara-te”, which means “an empty hand”, where the basic principle was to defend from an enemy with bare hands, without using any weapons. Karate is a basic, weaponless martial art. The early karate from Okinawa comprised three different styles:

1. Okinawa capital Shuri produced a karate style called “Shuri-te”.
2. Coming from a town called Naha is another style – “Naha-te”.
3. The third style got its name from a town named Tomari, so it was called “Tomari-te”.

Each of these names includes the word “te”, which means “hand”. Even though all the aforementioned towns were not far from each other, the fighting styles they nurtured were quite different. The first style, “Shuri-te”, used predominantly linear movements and direct techniques; the “Naha-te style included more circular movements, while “Tomari-te” comprised elements from the other two styles.

At first, the authorities strictly prohibited karate practicing, which was conducted in secret; only later was karate allowed and practiced in schools as well. After some time, Okinawa rulers became fascinated with karate, and demanded karate masters to make public demonstrations. One of them was the famous Funakoshi Gichin, who brought karate demonstrations to Japan. The first well-known centre for training the art of karate was founded in Japan and named Shotokan. Both in Japan and Okinawa, karate was developed above all as a martial art whose fundamental goal was self-defence. Funakoshi’s primary idea was not only that adult men practice karate (as was the case at that time), but to spread it among wider population, including women and children. An important step on that path was the simplification of certain self-defence elements and their modification into body strengthening exercises.

Karate styles and their history

Several students of Funakoshi Gichin later developed their own karate styles. Today, there is a range of karate styles, the best known being:

Shotokan style

The very transformation of karate from a self-defense art to sport karate began in the first half of the 20th century. Today, Shotokan enjoys a vast number of followers in the world, and it is known as one of the major karate styles.

The Shotokan style is dominated by blocking and striking techniques in low-focus and straight-line stances. The basis of the Shotokan style lies in the Kihon (basic techniques), Kate (form or movement pattern) and Kumite (fighting) disciplines.

Kihon (basic techniques) in the Shotokan style is characterized by low stances that provide stability, strong movements, and they also help leg strengthening. Arm and leg blocking and striking are strong, fast and contracted.

Kate (form or movement pattern) which actually depicts fighting an imaginary opponent, is composed of a number of karate elements – techniques which must be performed in an exact order, at the same time maintaining their actual purpose; to repel an opponent's attacks and counterattack, to disrupt the opponent's balance and inflict accurate strikes. In addition to the exact set number of stances, blocks and strikes, all kata have a specific connection rhythm, the firmness of execution, the speed of execution and, generally, the precondition for a good execution of a kata is the technical level. Without mental strength, all these elements are void. The moment the mind disappears from any move, the entire kata becomes pointless.

Kumite (fighting) in the training process is practiced gradually and it consists of different levels. The first level of kumite through sparring is kihon kumite, which involves three types:

- The first type is jodan (high level) where with a step backward from an attack at the head, high blocking techniques age uke are executed to block the attack.
- The second type of kihon kumite is chudan (the middle level) where with a step backward from an attack at the upper trunk (chest and upper abdomen) the middle-level blocking techniques – ude uke or soto uke - are executed.
- The third type of kihon kumitea is gedan (lower level) where with a step backward from an attack at the lower region (bottom of the trunk and lower), the low blocking techniques of gedan barai are used.

The second level of the kumite sparring training is sanbon kumite (a three-step sparring), which is executed in the same way as kihon kumite, only consisting of three steps in the execution of attack and defense technique. This level can also be executed in five steps with different execution of attack and defense technique.

The third level of kumite sparring training is jiyu ippon kumite (a free-style single-step sparring) which means kaateka – a defending practitioner is

familiar with the type of an attack, or the selection of the attack technique, but they do not know when it is to take place. This level requires from karateka to be in motion.

The fourth and final level of kumite sparring is jiyu kumite or free-style sparring where karateka freely use any karate technique or combination of attacks or defense.

Titles - Kyu (karate belts)

In order to provide a level – assessment of students (practitioners), in 1920 Funakoshi Gichin adopted a system of testing for belts where he classified the testing to the level of student titles – Kyu, and masters' titles - Dan.

For the students' level, the colour ranks go from lighter to darker (white, yellow, orange, green, blue and brown). The higher level, i.e. masters' titles are black belts distributed in degrees – Dan, and they range from the first to the tenth Dan.

Apart from Shotokan, the best known karate styles are Wado-ryu, Shito-ryu and Goju-ryu.

Wado-ryu style

It was founded by one of Funakoshi's oldest students Hironori Otsuka. The style involves a number of techniques and evasion. The striking force is achieved by a jerk of the wrist. In 1964, Wado-ryu joined the Japanese Karate Association.

The kata in the Wado-ryu style differed from the kata in other styles based on the variations of pre-selected exact movements and techniques that implement fighting techniques.

Shito-ryu

It was founded by an Okinawan karate master Kenwa Mabuni in 1934. Sensei Mabuni was a contemporary of Funakoshi. The characteristic of this style is that it uses straight line and circular moves. The Shito-ryu style has more kata than any other style, and some of them are particularly famous as the art of self-defense for women.

Goju-Ryu

This style is based on the circular movements of the Naha-te style, that is, hard and soft style. The very name of the style “Go” means “hard” and refers to closed hand techniques, straight movement and “Jo” means soft, and

refers to open hand techniques and circular motion. Godju-ryu karate is widely known for teaching breathing techniques extensively. The primary goal of Godju-ryu karate is self-defense.

METHOD

For the purpose of the paper, the authors used bibliographic-speculative method, which implies and primarily relies on the use of available literature.

Data was collected, analysed and interpreted by means of the bibliographic-speculative method. The basic sources of data, i.e. primary bibliographic sources in synthesis with the authors' multiannual experiences as competitors led to the creation of this paper.

Definition and systematization of hand block techniques

The word "block" refers to the defence techniques we apply as a response to the opponent's attack. Even though the significance of blocks is evident, its effect during the execution is uncertain and requires a lot of training. Unlike hand strikes, whose execution does not have to be perfectly precise, recognizable or correct to see a satisfying final result, the use of blocking techniques cannot be imprecise. Adjustment during the execution of a blocking technique at the moment of contact with the opponent's extremities is impossible. The fate of the defending side depends on the efficient application of a block. After a poorly performed block, the situation cannot be helped. Sometimes, even what seems to be a successful block cannot provide utmost security to the defender, because the body position during blocking can often be such to make counterattacks or making a safe distance from the opponent very difficult. Such situations occur because of inadequate blocks, inadequate movements and inadequate end position in relation to the opponent (bad stance, closed position of body and hands when blocking, which disables counter-strikes or prevents the action from continuing, small distance, etc.). A defence from strikes, so-called "block" embodies the essence of karate: defence simultaneously serves as an attack. Therefore, those are strikes that block strikes (Jorga et al., 1968). Blocks are movement structures realized by hands and legs with participation of other body parts, and their aim is to disable the opponent's attack whose realization comprises various abilities (Milošević et al., 1989). The term block in karate denotes a technique that intercepts, stops, blocks or diverts opponent's hand strike or kick. Even though it does not represent a scoring technique in karate, block reflects the defensive essence of this art (Jovanović, 1992). The term "block" implies all the techniques that can serve as a defence from an attack using hand

or leg. Karate features a wide range of techniques that can be considered to be blocking techniques and striking techniques. Even though both groups are equally important, when karate was transformed from an art into a sports discipline, many hand techniques, especially striking techniques (strikes with fingers, open hand, elbow, and head) were cut out of training and almost completely neglected. This reduction of techniques occurred at the time of karate's sudden expansion. In Japan, karate was introduced into the educational system so all techniques that could potentially cause serious consequences for practitioners were cut out of fighting competitions. These techniques are learnt and practiced in kata. Blocking techniques are trained through kata, pre-arranged sparring, semi-free and free sparring.

Blocks can be classified according to the following criteria:

- in relation to the body part that performs the block
- in relation to the level of application of the block
- the character of blocking lines
- the area used to block.

Following the same principle as with strikes, blocks can be divided into:

- blocks executed via “shuto” blocking area (rigid open hand)
- blocks executed by means of “ude” blocking area (a part of the forearm)

Based on the first criterion, blocks can be classified as:

- hand blocks (using one or both hands)
- leg blocks

Based on the application level, blocks can be divided into:

- high
- low
- medium

According to the “character of blocking lines” criterion, blocks can be categorized according to:

- the shape of movement line
- the direction of block execution

In line with those two elements, blocks can be:

- upward
- downward
- inside-out
- outside-in

- rising
- lowering
- inside
- outside

Even though modern sport karate quickly approaches the family of Olympic sports, there is a deficit of professional instructors. The illusion still prevails that specific technical qualities (high ranks), without education, are enough to make one a good instructor (Mudrić, 2017).

Karate practice also comprises “counter” blocks (Gyaku blocks) with the opposite hand (for example: front left stance – right hand block), even though it is not studied as a special technique. Those are rare and forced situations. Such techniques are applied and used by highly trained karateka, who are always fully aware of the situation they are in and possess full control over all their moves. The application of blocks and their efficiency is closely connected to the applied movement techniques. In traditional training (the art of karate), but also modern training (sport karate), blocks are learned and applied through various movements with rectilinear and curvilinear paths. The applied movement techniques can be: direct step back or step forward (Oi Komi Ashi), step back and sideways, and forward and sideways (left or right) – diagonally in relation to the basic direction of movement, by turning around the “front” or “back” leg, sliding movements (yuri ashi), chased step (tsugi ashi), or various jumps up, in or out. In traditional training methodology, movements had an aim to oppose to the attacker’s violent striking force by applying an appropriate block, and to reach a favourable position for a counter strike. Movements that characterize modern sport karate aim only to quickly overcome the distance to the opponent during attack, to strike or kick, or to avoid the opponent’s attack by withdrawing backward or sideways, to a safe distance, without applying blocking techniques.

Blocking techniques can be executed with one or both hands. One-hand blocks are less complex or simpler. The explanation and justification for this lies in the efficient strike with the other, “free” hand, immediately after executing the block. Blocks that require both hands in defence are mostly executed when intercepting the opponent’s attack, and require a high level of technical training, resourcefulness and boldness. Considering that the attacker is striking with an aim to crush the opponent, quickly and forcefully, while preparing the attack they make additional, so-called preparatory movements with some body parts that can tell -reveal – us the attacker’s intentions. That is why it takes calmness, concentration and focus (mental presence in the given moment) to spot such “signals”. Besides, it is much harder – almost impossible - to wait for the opponent to attack first and then apply a block. Our movement should extort the opponent’s attack, which makes it easier to apply a block in defence.

Japanese instructor Nishiyama also composed some valuable instructions concerning blocks (Nishiyama, 1959):

"Make every effort to turn the opponent's strength to your own advantage".

"Be sure to maintain your own balance and posture in blocking".

"The blocking hand should not be over-engaged in the block, but should be preparing for the next technique".

"While blocking you should have in mind the counterattack you will follow up with".

"While blocking and afterward be sure your posture or position does not offer your opponent an opening".

Position and Role of Hand Block Techniques in Traditional and Modern Sport Karate

In traditional karate, blocks are executed with a maximal range of movement, every block can be executed as a strike, blocks are performed from a stable stance with determined execution of the technique – *kime* (exhalation with abs contraction), and muscular contraction of the extremity that performs the given block.

In modern sport karate, block is performed using a brief, fast movement with the necessary strength, while the stance does not have to be stable.

Hand Block Techniques in Traditional Karate, with Overview of Differences in Execution in Modern Sport Karate

All the perceived similarities and differences in terms of the technical characteristics of the execution of hand block techniques in traditional and modern sport karate represent the essence of this paper.

Downward block (Gedan barai) – Traditional form

Gedan barai is the most frequently used blocking technique in all beginners' training. This technique is used to defend lower body (the abdomen or the groin) from a direct striking or kicking attack. It is most frequently used to defend from a front kick. There is also a reverse variation, *gyako gedan barai* (opposite from the forward leg in the stance). The gedan barai block can be combined with different movements, stepping, docking, sliding or semi-circular movement around the front or back leg in a stance. It is mostly performed backward and sideways at an angle to the attack line. It can be used for interception, as well as for moving forward and sideways at an angle to the attack line. From the preparatory stance, the blocking hand is swung from a point ne-

ar the ear above the opposite shoulder (right hand - left shoulder), with the fist looking downward. The other arm is extended aslant downward with the fist in pronation. The elbows almost touch. The forearm of the blocking arm lies on the other upper arm, with straight body and straight look. By moving the appropriate leg from the preparatory stance at the final stage of the technique, one can occupy the desired stance (for example *zenkutsu dachi*, *fudo dachi*, etc.). The blocking hand falls aslant in front of the body. The other arm makes a compensatory move backward and stops with the fist above the hip and the fist in supination. All that is accompanied by an appropriate contraction in the trunk and leg muscles. While executing the block, both arms do not only bend and extend, but also perform appropriate rotations. The blocking hand rotates the fist inward, until reaching pronation. The hand withdrawn on the hip and preparing for a potential counter-strike rotates the fist outward until reaching supination. At the moment the block is executed, the blocking arm is extended with the palm up, and the fist at 10cm to 15 cm above the knee of the forward leg. The opposite fist is on the hip with the elbow drawn toward the spine. The trunk and the head stand vertically or slightly forward. The body is slant in order to reduce the attack impact surface. At the same time, this body posture enables a counter-strike (by means of hip and trunk rotation forward with an accompanying strike).

Downward block (Gedan barai) – Sports form

Gedan barai is one of the most frequently performed techniques in sports karate. This technique is used mostly for defence against hand strikes aiming at the abdomen. Considering that the *Mae Geri* attack is somewhat rarer in sports karate, the implementation of the *gedan barai* blocks is therefore less frequently used as a response to this type of attack. An opposite variation of the block can also be executed (*gyaku gedan barai*), opposite from the front leg in a stance. The *gedan barai* block is performed by means of various movements, stepping, docking, sliding or semi-circular movement around the front or back leg sideways. It is mostly performed backward and sideways at an angle to the attack line. It can be used to intercept as well as move forward and sideways at an angle to the attack line. A block can be performed from almost any stance. When the *gedan barai* block is practiced in modern sport karate, it is performed identically as in traditional karate. During a sports fight, there is a difference in the application hand block techniques in relation to *kihon* (basic – school technique). The stances in sport karate are adapted to the situation in a fight, so the form becomes secondary. In this case, the starting position is a guard (*Kamae*), from which the *gedan braai* block is executed similarly to traditional karate, only this time at maximum speed, with shorter range of movement, without stressed *kimeo*, sometimes even with an open

hand. Considering that in competitive sport karate escapes serve to avoid an attack, blocking has a secondary role. The position of the trunk does not necessarily occupy vertical position.

Rising block (Age uke) – Traditional form

This block protects the head and the neck from direct hand strikes and cold weapons (knife, cane, etc.), which the attacker swings from high angles downward.

Executing rising block age uke from Zenkutsu dachi stance

From the preparatory position, the blocking hand rises from the hip to the front up to the middle of the body and upward. The other arm, which was extended in front of the body, withdraws back following the shortest path. At the same time, the body begins descending into the front stance by moving the corresponding leg to the back or to the front. At the final stage, the body is in the chosen stance, depending on the situation in which the block is used. The arm that performs the block passes the face, making contact with the attacker's hand in the same area as in the downward block gedan braai, and stands above the head, with the elbow bent at an angle somewhat bigger than 90 degrees (the fist is positioned above the level of the elbow). The hand is positioned so that the opponent is visible. At the moment of the contact, there is a brief isometric contraction. In the finale of the block, the fist of the blocking hand is in pronation forward and above the forehead, while the other hand is on the hip with the fist in supination, ready to execute a counter-strike. The body and the head are set vertically, the trunk is slant and the look directed forward. After the block, the action can be continued using an appropriate technique from other martial arts (judo, jujutsu, etc.).

Rising block (Age uke) - Sports form

The *Age uke* technique in sport karate begins from the guard (*Kamae*) with a short and fast jolt upward. It is applied in two forms: the first one is a simultaneous execution of the block and a counter-strike; the second one implies executing a counter-strike after performing the block.

Age uke block in gyaku variant

The block is combined with various movements, stepping, docking or semi-circular moving around the front or the back leg sideways. It is mostly performed backward and sideways at an angle to the attack line. It can be used

for interception, as well as for moving forward and sideways at an angle to the attack line. The block can be performed in almost any stance. In modern sport karate, training the *Age uke* blocking technique is conducted in the same way as in traditional karate. During a sports fight, a difference appears in the implementation of the hand block technique in relation to *kihon* (basic – school technique). The role of the rising block *Age uke* in escaping an attack is significant because of the circumstances in which it is performed. Moving backward is not enough to escape an attack, which is why the block secures the defence.

Middle outside block (Soto uke) – Traditional form

The outside block of the forearm, *Soto uke* is a very effective defence technique that opposes all attacks (mainly rectilinear) aiming for the middle part of the body, the chest and sometimes in the area of the neck and head. It is mostly performed at the middle level (*Chudan*) and combined with an appropriate attitude, most frequently *fudo dachi*. During the execution of the middle outside block, the body is removed from the direction of the attack backward and sideways or rotated around the front leg in the stance, which increases the efficiency of the block. This block can also be executed in intercepting in combination with the *gyako zuki* strike, as well as in the retreat, while staying in the line of attack, that can be seen in sport karate.

Executing middle outside block (Soto uke) from fudo dachi stance

From the preparatory position, the fist of the blocking arm is lifted at the height of the head sideways (frontal plane) to the supine position. The arm is bent at an angle of 90 degrees. The other arm is extended in front of the body (sagittal plane). By a slant movement, the fist of the blocking arm comes in front of the body. The trunk is twisted so that the opponent's arm is pushed sideways and removed from the attack line. In traditional karate, the contact with the attacker's arm is made by a cutting movement (bone against bone) which causes pain. In sport karate, the contact is made with the inner side of the forearm is a soft part, with the forearm rotating inward. In this way, we do not injure our partner, which enables further sparring. The other hand reaches the hip using the shortest path. At the same time, by moving the appropriate leg, the desired position is taken in relation to the attack line.

Middle outside block (Soto uke) - Sports form

Unlike the traditional form of executing this block, in sports fight it is performed quickly, with a brief strike from the *chudan kamae* guard, where-

by the hand is generally open and the contact with the opponent's extremity is "sliding", in order to avoid unnecessary pain. The block is combined with proper movement and counter-strike. The form of stances is not of primary importance.

Upward sweeping hand block (Te nagashi uke) - Traditional form

This technique blocks attacks directed to the head. The block is very efficient and its application does not require too much strength. This block can be executed in retreat, step backward or interception of the attack. The block is executed by the inner side of the open hand. After completing the block, the *kokutsu dachi* or *zenkutsu* or *fudo dachi* stance is taken. The main characteristic of this block is speed rather than strength. From the preparatory stance (*yoi dachi*), the preparation for the execution of the block is conducted by stepping back and extending the opposite arm forward with an open hand. The weight of the body moves backward, towards the supporting leg in the *kokutsu dachi* stance, lowering down at the same time. The blocking arm moves almost straight-line diagonally and backward to the opposite shoulder, ending the movement with the palm facing the ear. At the same time, the other hand withdraws to the hip. After the block is completed, the body is in the final stance, *kokutsu dachi*. The variants of this block are upward blocks with the "radial" or "ulnar" side of the forearm (Naiwan, Haiwan and Gaiwan Nagashi uke), which are effective in defending from semi-circular fist strikes (hooks) or from an armed attacker (Mudrić, 2017).

Upward sweeping hand block (Te nagashi uke) - Sports form

The sports form of this block is almost no different from the traditional one. In a sports fight, this block has a shorter amplitude and starts from the fighting guard (*Kamae*), with a fast move. It is combined with body deflection (escape) to the opposite side, with appropriate movements and counter-strikes. Given that action is of great importance, respecting the form of stances becomes secondary.

Vertical inside outward sword hand block (Tate Shuto uke) – Traditional form

This block removes a direct frontal attack. The block is performed in combination with a counter kick or strike. When executing this block, the body moves from the preparatory stance away from the attack line (*yoi dachi*) and takes the appropriate fighting stance, mainly *fudo dachi*. From the starting stance (*yoi dachi*), the arm that performs the block is brought to the op-

posite shoulder with an open hand facing the ear. The other hand is extended forward downward with the fist in pronation. The blocking arm starts from the shoulder forward, extending and rotating the forearm so that the palm moves forward. At the moment of contact, due to the rotation of the forearm, the palm edge removes the attacker's extremity from the attack line. The other hand ends its movement backward on the hip with the hand closed in the fist. Shoulders and hips are slant, the body is in an appropriate stance.

*Vertical inside outward sword hand block (Tate Shuto uke) –
Sports form*

The traditional and sports way of executing this block are similar. The difference is that the sports form of technique is carried out quickly, with a shorter amplitude of movement, which starts from the fighting guard (*Kamae*). Given that action is of importance here, strict compliance with the form of stances is secondary. This block can be executed by means of pushing forward, which pushes the opponent's arm away from the direction of the attack, with a maximum shortening of the distance to contact chest to chest and finishing the attack by the *Osoto Gake* (major outer hook) or *Osoto Gari* (major outer reap).

CONCLUSION

Karate consists of several groups of techniques and one of them involves blocks. This paper aims to clearly point out the differences in terms of technical characteristics in the performance of hand blocks in traditional and modern sport karate. The understanding of the technical diversity of hand blocks, i.e. their application in traditional and modern sport karate, is essential in the preparation of competitors in modern sport karate, concretely for fighting. Rejecting the facts mentioned here would certainly result in the absence of sports results when it comes to fighting in modern sport karate. The word "block" refers to defence techniques that we use in response to an opponent's attack. Although the significance of blocking is clear, its effect during application is uncertain and requires excellent training status. Unlike hand-strikes, whose performance does not have to be fully specific, recognizable or precisely executed to reach a satisfactory ultimate effect, the use of blocking techniques must not be imprecise. The "fate" of the defending party depends on the effective implementation of the block. After a poorly executed block, the situation cannot be helped. Sometimes a seemingly successful block cannot provide complete security to the defending party because the position of the body in the block can often be such that it makes it difficult to counter-strike

or take a safe distance from the opponent. These situations arise due to the use of an inadequate block, inadequate movement and an inadequate end position in relation to the opponent (poor stance, closed position of the body and arms when blocking which does not allow a counter-strike or prevents the continuation of the action, too small a distance, etc.). Karate requires developed intellectual abilities of the practitioner (fast observation, making conclusions quickly, good orientation) and highly developed technical and tactical skills. Fighting forces us to predict the opponent's intentions several moves in advance. For effective defence, it is crucial to be calm and balanced so that we can act in a stressful situation, because that is the only way for our perceptive abilities to be efficient. In order to successfully respond to the new fighting situation, long-term and continuous training is required, and in particular, "situational training". An efficiently executed block can cause paralyzing pain to the opponent that causes deconcentration and seizure of the attacker, which allows counter-attack to strike. An effective block is one that is performed timely (at certain speed and strength). A block depends on the length of the lever, the moving mass, the ability to rapidly express force, the resistance in the joints of the extremity in action and the path. The firmness of a block is enabled by the muscle contraction of the extremity that executes the given block. When one hand performs the block, the other one returns at the same speed and the coupling of the forces appears. Only a clearly defined difference that can be perceived in blocks that are performed in traditional karate in relation to blocks that are performed in sport karate can lead to effective training of future fighters in modern sport karate when it comes to blocking techniques.

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