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Competitive Aikido for Young People - Explained.

Competition, especially for young people is not universally accepted in the wider world of Aikido. But since 1977 the British Aikido Association has promoted and developed competitive Aikido for young people. The inaugural event was at the Leeds Athletic Institute with 35 young people competing in just four events. Newport Pagnell, a traditional Aikido Club, won the very first competition helping to demonstrate that competition is for all styles of Aikido and is a useful tool in the development of Aikido technique. Over the years additional age ranges and events have been added and numbers have continued to grow until now an average 150 competitors attend each event.

Since the first competition in 1977 only a few clubs have won the overall team championship including: -

Newport Pagnell	1
Wakefield	2
Huddersfield	3
Scarborough	4
Bradford	7
Leeds	23

The first ever Junior British Champion was a young person named Williams from Newport Pagnell, he won two golds and one bronze medal from four events. By the late 1970s and mid 1980s outstanding players from Leeds were dominating the events, including Buchanan, Godfrey and Sahota. **(Fig 1)** They were replaced for a short period during the late 1980s by the pairing of Lish and Coates from Scarborough. But throughout the 1980s and 1990s Leeds were supreme with many high achieving young people including names such as Hartshorne, Lightowler, Smith, Doohar, Jones, Gradys, Boland, Pinder, Akal, Carr, Richardson, Smalle, Fletcher, Pennells, Lindley and Beardsmore. **(Fig 2)** By the 2000s Bradford was dominating with Mazacs and Lal, hotly pursued by Wakfields Moran, Harden Jackson, Fountain and Morgan Murphy. Currently a new range of names are emerging Bolton, Gander, Firth, Pullen, White and Shergill are coming to the fore. So many talented Aikidoka at such a young age, indeed too many to quote, but all achievers. I applaud them all.



Fig 1 National Champions 1979 pioneers of Youth Competition from left to right Paul Woodhead, Darren Grieg, David Buchanan, Nicki Godfrey. Darren went on to represent the UK in Japan winning Team Silver in 1985.

These successes do reflect an early focus in the North of England on the coaching and development of young people which has brought dividends at senior level by producing some excellent Aikidoka for the National Team.



Fig 2 Silver medalists at the National Display Team Championships 1980 Hartshorne, Howson, Sahota, Smith and Fellows with Mrs Fellows in the background who acted as narrator.

Over the past few years Junior and Youth European Competitions have been established, the first hosted at the Sport-und Feriencentre, Fiesch in Switzerland, no snow but stunning scenery. **(Fig 3)** The second competition was held in St Petersburg, Russia in 2014, this was a wonderful Aikido and cultural experience for all the juniors who attended from the UK. **(Fig 4)** Many friendships were forged and it was also an excellent performance from the UK contingent medalling in all age groups. The third European Junior and Youth Championships will be held during October 2016 at the English Institute of Sport, Sheffield and a full report will appear in next months magazine.



Fig 3 The First Junior and Youth European Championship, Switzerland



Fig 4 The Second European Junior and Youth Championships, St Petersburg, Russia.

The core of competitive Aikido for young people focuses on Embu (kata) and Kakarigeiko (free practice without resistance) like Ninin Dori (two people attacking one). There are five age groups with five events including Basic Kata, Tanto Kakarigeiko, Ninin Dori with Tanto Taisabaki and Open Kata for the older age groups. Over 14s are now eligible for entry into senior competitions within Embu events and Ninin Dori. This phased transition to senior competition proves popular with young people, yet serving to protect vulnerable joints.

Kata or formal Embu.

Kata is an informal sequence of techniques undertaken for the purposes of learning technique in a logical and sequential order. It provides a structured approach to mastering the key principles. Kata can be part of class teaching, or in competition is performed as Embu, formal military demonstration.

Free practice and Randori.

Free practice, either Kakarigeiko (free practice without resistance) or Hikitategeiko (free practice with light resistance) provides for the introduction of counters and combinations within free moving practice. How dynamic this practice is, will depend on the abilities of individual. Free play is also a learning tool, engaging students and developing their reaction and counter reaction in a free moving exercise. Free practice Randori training can lead to full contact Aikido usually performed during competitions.

Sport and Competition in Aikido

By definition all physical activity that develops skill and understanding is defined as a sport but the majority of Aikido practised does not include the opportunity to take part in competitions. Personally, Aikido competition is a stimulus for training and self-improvement, winning is not the ultimate goal but demonstrating good Aikido under pressure is.

Within the UK there are three junior (Under 10 years) and youth (Under 16 years) competitions each year. Competition is always friendly and provides an opportunity to develop a wider range of skills such as co-operation, communication and leadership. At European level there has been the introduction of a Cadet level that includes an Under 18s category.

Judging and Refereeing

In all sports judging and refereeing is key to successfully achieving an honest and unbiased outcome for the young people taking part. It is about fairness and fair play, about trying to be objective and not subjective in the decision making process.

Most performances rely on the experience, training and observation skills of the referees and judges. This can only be done if a framework around competition is provided. Starting with the rules and extending into criteria from which decisions can be made, the framework must be understood by all judges and referees otherwise inconsistency can creep in to the scoring and deliberation process. Judges and referees have to be in a position to make accurate split second decisions, to assimilate multiple strands of information simultaneously and be able to control the mat. It is a demanding role and can be very difficult to get absolutely right. The overriding concern of a judge or referee is the duty of care, the health and safety of the young people competing. Whatever the result a young person should enjoy their performance without the risk of injury.

The difference between a judge and a referee relates to the events in which they officiate. In the case of Aikido Competitions, five judges are used to deliberate Kakarigeiko events. **(Fig 5)** These sit at the side of the mat and create a score. Each judge is given a range of possibilities from the lower score being 6.0 to the highest attainable being 7.5 thus providing them with a 15 point selection. The system then removes the highest and lowest score to produce an average overall total. So a series of score such as 6.5: 6.6: 6.5: 6.4 and 6.6 would lose the 6.4 and a 6.6 mark and leave a total of 19.6. Judges are selected from different clubs to reduce the incidence of personal preference in technical appreciation. There is also an appeals system built into the proceedings.



Fig 5 Kate Bolton throwing with Kote Gaeshi (wrist turn) during Tanto Kakarigeiko competition.

Embu events are decided by five judges, one in each corner of the mat and one central judge who acts as announcer. Two pairs perform against one another. At the end of the performance, and using the criteria below, indicate with a red or white flag who they think is the winner. **(Fig 6)**



Fig 6 Embu Competition, you can clearly see the judges with their red and white flags ready to score.

For the different forms of Embu (**Fig 7**) there are specific criteria set out for the judges including the observation and scoring of: -

- Posture, for both Tori (thrower) and Uke (faller), posture must be maintained throughout the delivery of every technique during the sequence.
- Tori to effectively avoid the attack.
- Balance Breaking must be demonstrated as part of the technique. Uke's balance must be disturbed prior to the throw being executed.
- Distance must be maintained between Tori and Uke linked to a tatami (mat) spatial awareness by both partners.
- Co-ordination, the pair performing the sequence must demonstrate pace and purpose in a coordinated but flowing performance. Throughout the performance good break falls must be demonstrated.

The overall complexity of the performance and the techniques demonstrated, especially in Open Embu allows the judges to add to their score.



Fig 7 Kate Bolton performing Ude Garami during Embu competition.

For the Kakarigeiko events such as Tanto (Knife) Kakarigeiko and Ninin Dori, the principles are similar but with some minor differences. Both these events are demonstration events with young people partnering someone from their own club. Again posture and avoidance are key, points deducted if the attacker touches Tori. Co-ordination and breaking balance are elements of the judging criteria. But here two additional concepts emerge, speed and stamina and the variation of defence play a more important role.



Fig 8 A team of three young people engaged in a Ninin Dori competition.

In Ninin Dori (**Fig 8**) young people gain an understanding of having to cope with two opponents, they realise the importance of spatial awareness, movement and positioning. Ninin Dori is a fast dynamic event with adult teams aspiring to produce 15 excellent throws in 30 seconds, with an aim to achieve 45 throws in the 90 seconds allotted. This takes extreme skill, stamina and timing. All these events bridge the gap between Embu and Randori and provide a useful development stage in young people Aikido.



Fig 9 James Staton defending (left) about to be attacked by Tanto wielding Brandon Cox

In more recent years Tanto Avoidance (**Fig 9**) has been introduced to the older age groups and is about avoiding a stylised attack by someone with a knife. Each competitor has to try 8 strikes within one-minute. This is the first event where a referee is used. The referee, along with two side referees stands in the middle of the mat and controls and scores the bout. (**Fig 10**) In sport Aikido the term Tanto is still used but the more modern approach is to use a “softo” or flexible baton to strike at the opponents body. This gets away from the concept of “knife fighting” which is not the aim of the exercise.

Recently a limited form of Randori has been introduced to the Under 16s and Under 18s age groups. The limitation being that many of the harsher joint locking techniques have been made illegal. However this is still full contact Aikido with all the risks that this entails. Referees are usually selected from the senior rank referees, as they need both the experience and ability to command the mat area and players.

Each player, who is actively competing against team members from other clubs, has 1.5 minutes with the Tanto to try and score points. A legal tanto strike scores 1 point. The unarmed person (Toshu) attempts to throw or restrain their opponent. At half time the roles are reversed for another period of Randori. Toshu can score: -

Ippon (4 points) for excellent technique, Waza-Ari (2 points) for good technique and Yuko (1 point) for an effective balance break. The differentiation between the three is down to the referee and their assistants’ interpretation. Infringements of the rules can be met with either a shido for minor infractions or Chui an automatic deduction of 1 point. In the case of a serious and deliberate breach of the rules or dangerous play a disqualification can be given “Hansoku Make” which immediately stops the bout.



Fig 10 A decision is made the referee awards the bout to red.

Ultimately subjectivity will play its part in judging and refereeing any competitive event, guidelines and training can not always eradicate bias or favouritism but a framework for marking and scoring does limit the possibilities and abuses.

Having said this, Aikido competitions are very well officiated and judged providing fair and open competition for all. All British Aikido Association competitions are open and free for spectators, go to the website for details of forthcoming events.
www.britishaikidoassociation.co.uk

What does the future hold? Currently associations around the world are discussing the merger of the junior, youth, cadet and adult competitions into one event at World Championship level. This would be an enormous logistical task but a much better spectator and competitor event.

The development of young people is key to the success of any sport. It must be done with care and consideration and at a young age focus on personal development and not just winning. Regular training and competitions provide opportunities for that development but both can be effective tools in enhancing young people knowledge skills and understanding.

Junior and Youth competition creates focussed young people that value hard work and see the investment of their time in sport as developing both their physical and mental attributes.



About the Author...

Bob Jones is Chief Executive Officer of the British Aikido Association and has been practising martial arts since 1966 and has attained the rank of 7th Dan Sport Aikido, 3rd Dan Traditional Aikido and 1st Dan Judo. He competed for over 20 years achieving several honours. He was to be appointed National Team Manager in 1987, a role he held until 1997. During that period the British National team won 6 gold, 7 silver and 8 bronze medals at World Championship level. Bob has trained in Japan and taught Aikido in several countries including the USA, Russia, Czech Republic, Poland and Japan. He is now working on the establishment of the WSAF "World Sports Aikido Federation" an organisation focussed on the promotion of Sport Aikido.