

Some Notes on Sparring Gear

By Senpai Chris Linneman, Japan Ways Traditional Karate

Common sense safety rules, as well as insurance requirements at virtually every karate tournament, require that certain safety equipment (commonly referred to as sparring gear) be worn during kumite matches. Following these same common sense rules, Japan Ways also requires a minimum amount of sparring equipment for dojo sparring (regardless of whether it takes place in the Sparring Class or during regular training). There are a whole variety of different types of sparring equipment available to students, and I hope to provide some guidance as to the advantages and disadvantages of the common types of equipment.

First off, what exactly is required. The answer to that depends on the type of sparring – most tournaments have more stringent requirements than our dojo sparring. Here’s a rundown:

<u>Equipment</u>	<u>Tournament Sparring</u>	<u>Dojo Sparring</u>
Mouth guard	Required	Required
Cup/supporter	Required (male participants)	Required (male participants)
Hand guards	Required	Required
Foot guards	Required	Recommended
Shin guards	Optional	Optional
Head protection	Required	Required for those under 13, optional for everyone else.
Chest protector	Required (female participants)	Optional
Chest/torso guard	Required for some age groups	Required for those under 13, optional for everyone else.

Ok, so what is all this stuff? Well, here are the basics.

Mouth guard: This is your most important piece of protective equipment – every student should have a properly fitted mouth guard and bring it to every class. Generally, there are three types of mouth guards:

- One size fits most guard. This is a basic plastic trough that comes in a few sizes. It is often offered for free with sparring equipment packages and provides decent protection, although it may not have the most comfortable fit.
- Heat-fitted mouth guard. Commonly referred to as the “boil in a bag” guard, these are made of a plastic that softens when heated in the microwave or boiled in water, after which it can be form-fitted to the user. These provide better protection and improved comfort compared the basic guard.
- Custom fit dental guard. These mouth guards are custom molded to the individual (usually by a dentist), and provide the greatest amount of protection and comfort. Although they are more expensive than the other options, students who are wearing braces or have had significant dental work should consider this type of guard.

Cup and supporter: All male students should have and wear a cup and supporter to every class. There’s not much to choose from here – just get it and wear it. Enough said.

Hand guards: There is a whole variety of styles of hand guards available to students, as well as some that are not generally acceptable for karate training. Additionally, some tournaments have restrictions on which types of hand guards can be used. Here's a quick run down:

- **Foam-dipped mitts:** These are foam mitts that cover the hand, knuckles, and fingers and are generally accepted for all types of sparring (dojo and tournament). They come in a bunch of different colors with some variation in price range (about \$20-\$40).



- **Cotton mitts:** These are old style cotton hand wraps. They do not provide as much cushion as the foam mitts and are not commonly acceptable for tournament use, but are ok to use in dojo sparring for the more advanced students.

- **MMA/Grappling Gloves:** These are gloves developed for MMA and Jujitsu type matches. They provide padding over the hand and knuckles but leave the fingers exposed for grabbing. They are acceptable for dojo sparring but are not generally accepted at most karate tournaments.



- **Vinyl-cover type mitts.** These are a vinyl covered pad that covers the hand and knuckles, and most of the fingers, but allows the hand to open for grabbing. These are acceptable for dojo sparring and most (but not all) tournaments. They tend to be a bit more comfortable than the foam-dipped mitts.

Note that boxing gloves (including muay tai style gloves) are not acceptable for dojo or tournament sparring.

Foot guards and shin guards. As with hand gear, foot guards come in a variety of styles and prices. For most karate tournaments, shin guards are not required, however foot guards are, and they must cover the toes, which limits the styles pretty much to this:



For dojo sparring, foot/shin guards are not required, although they are recommended. Any of the styles commonly available are acceptable for dojo use.



Head gear. Head gear is just a foam helmet that covers the head. They are required for most tournaments and for students 13 and younger for dojo sparring. For karate, head gear with face protection is not required.

Chest protector: This is a plastic or foam shield that provides chest protection for women. They are usually supported by a sports bra or elastic bands. I have no direct experience with them but I'm told that they tend to restrict motion a little and range from mildly annoying to downright uncomfortable. Never the less, they are required at most tournaments (although I've never seen a tournament judge actually check for one). These are not required for dojo sparring.



Chest guard: Not to be confused with a lady's chest protector, chest guards are foam pads that wrap around the torso of the student, protecting the sternum and ribs. As with the hand guards, there are a variety of these available, most of which are acceptable for tournament and dojo sparring. Note that most tournaments do not require these except for the younger age groups. For dojo sparring, these are required for students under 13. Japan Ways has two sets of chest protection for dojo use.



Sparring Etiquette: Regardless of whether you are sparring in a tournament or in the dojo, there are a few general rules of etiquette that need to be followed by everyone.

- Keep your fingernails and toenails trimmed. While sparring, you'll be striking, blocking and grabbing your opponent. Long and jagged finger and toenails can leave scratches which can lead to infection.
- Follow the instructions of the referee or class instructor. When the referee says stop, stop. Period.
- Keep in mind that accidents happen. Karate is a fighting art and when sparring, an occasional bruise or black eye is inevitable. In fact, learning how to deal with getting hit is an important part of karate training.
- Keep your cool. Sparring is an important part of karate training but it's not about beating the other person so much as becoming better yourself. Keep your emotions in check and leave the ego at the door. Getting angry or losing control may result in injury, which is not good for anyone. Karate begins and ends with respect, loss of control or respect will not be tolerated at the dojo.