

# How to Prepare Taekwondo Tournament Sparring



# How to Prepare for a Taekwondo Sparring Tournament

One of the most common questions I hear from students is "How can I prepare for competition?" The best way to get ready for competition is to follow a plan designed by your instructor or coach. If you are a top level competitor, everything will be scientifically planned for you and all you have to do is show up and train. However, if you are one of the thousands of recreational competitors around the world, you are responsible for designing some or all of your competition training plan.

The first thing you have to do is assess what level of competition you are preparing for and how much time you have available. Ideally, for a local tournament, a few months are enough to get in competition form. By spending about two months on general practice and one month on specific competition skills and strategies, you can refine your skills to the level necessary to succeed in a small tournament. For a national or international competition, however, planning should begin at least one year ahead of time. Once you have determined the level of competition and amount of time available for your training, you can create an individual plan.

For a national or international level competition, the first type of training you have to undertake is fundamental physical training. This consists of general fitness activities like calisthenics, running and weight training. At the beginning of your competition regimen, your daily training should consist of 70% fundamental physical training and 30% basic martial arts skill practice. Ideally, this plan should be followed for 4 to 8 weeks to develop the proper physical condition for competition.

The next stage of preparation focuses on sport-specific training - conditioning the particular muscles that will be used in competition. For martial arts this means interval training (for instance, explosive interval sparring, target drills, speed heavy bag workouts), stretching, footwork and sport-specific weight training. During this period, 50% of the training time should be devoted to conditioning and 50% to skill development.

After four to eight weeks of sport-specific conditioning, the focus should shift to technical practice. Technical practice includes free sparring, target drills, and heavy bag workouts to hone reflexes and speed and perfect individual skills. In this phase of training, 30% of the training time should be devoted to maintaining conditioning and 70% to developing and perfecting skills to be used in competition. This stage should last at least as long as the previous two stages. If extra time is available in the training plan, it should be used to extend the technical practice stage.

The final phase of preparation for competition consists of establishing mental fitness and strategy. By this time, in the weeks leading up to the competition, the competitor should have established a solid foundation of skills. In the final weeks, a game plan must be established and the competitor should do his or her best to stay focused and healthy. At least one week before competition, all hard contact training should be discontinued and the competitor should begin to conserve energy for the competition day.

On the day of the competition, be sure to arrive with plenty of time to register, weigh-in and warm-up. If you will be competing late in the day, bring water or juice and snacks to keep your energy level high. After you have passed through the weigh-in or registration process, go over your plan and review your most important techniques. Spend some time to familiarize yourself with the competition site and get used to the temperature, lighting, and layout.

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If you know when you will compete, plan to start warming up about thirty minutes before the start of your match. If you do not know when you will compete, as is often the case in smaller competitions, try to stay loose and focused but do not overexert yourself early in the day. If you win your first match, you will most likely have to compete again soon. Take a few minutes to relax and cool down after your first match, then ask your coach for feedback. Focus on what you did well and what you need to improve for your next outing. Attend to any injuries you might have gotten with ice or tape. About fifteen to twenty minutes before your next match, begin to physically and mentally prepare yourself. Follow this pattern until you have completed your competition for the day.

Although each competitor eventually develops an ideal individual training plan for competition, this outline can help you get started on your own training regimen. Always keep in mind your goals for training and strive for consistent, measurable improvement on your road to competition.



## SAFETY

Martial arts training is full of positive benefits, but those rewards do come with some risks, particularly when you get to the competitive level. This is why it's so important to be proactive about safety in training and tournaments. No matter how well you prepare, martial arts competition, especially full contact martial arts competition, does come with the possibility of injury. This isn't a reason to be intimidated or scared away from competition, but it is a reminder to be smart and be aware of what you need to do to properly prepare for a tournament or a fight that will make you successful and safe.

Whether you're a rookie preparing for your first competition or a veteran brushing up on your pre-tournament routines, here is a list of things you can and should do — from purchasing martial arts headgear to developing better body awareness — to protect your health and prevent injuries when participating in martial arts matches.

### 1. Visit a medical professional before competing.

There's a reason why almost every type of organized physical activity will warn you to see a medical professional before participating, and it's not just about fending off any potential lawsuits. It's very wise to see a doctor and get a complete physical before competing in martial arts for a number of reasons. Not only is it necessary to make sure that your body and your health are in good working order and that you are fit to compete, but consulting with experts will also alert you to any potential concerns regarding any concerns you might have with any of the above. Which will allow you to be more aware and take better care of yourself in martial arts fights and tournaments.

### 2. Invest in good protective gear.

If you value your health and safety in martial arts, it's vital that you research and purchase the right protective gear to use in both sparring and competition. Each martial art will come with a slightly different combination of necessary equipment. Ear guard and knee pads have helped saved the body parts of many competitors. Striking sports will require martial arts headgear to help prevent brain injuries. Cups are vital for martial artists who require groin protection. Mouth guards are always a good idea to protect your teeth and help guard against concussions.

When it comes to competition, it's also important to keep in mind that many tournaments have their own rules and regulations about protective equipment, so be sure to do your research before gearing up to fight.

## 3. Warm up before competing.

Pre-competition warm ups are a matter of health and safety as well as performance. We know that martial artists fight better when they've actually taken the time to responsibly raise their heart rates into a zone where it will be prepared to meet the intense physical demands and adrenaline rush of competition and prepare their muscles and joints for a wide range of movements. But this same process will also protect you from placing unnecessary demands on your cardiovascular system and forcing your body into a series of positions that could pull or tear muscles or break bones if you were to go from a complete resting state to full-blown competitive martial arts. So take advantage of any warm-up time that is provided at tournaments and make sure to stay moving and limber until it's your time to shine.

## 4. Listen to your coaches.

Your coaches and trainers are there to help you succeed in martial arts competition. They're there to keep you focussed on your game plan and call attention to details that you might be missing because you're in the middle of competitive combat. But they are also there to make sure that you're not missing any pertinent details about your own health and safety while you're fighting. Sometimes adrenaline and the thrill of competition can keep us from realizing that something might be going wrong as we participate in martial arts. So it's always wise to respect the people at the side of the ring or mat who have your best interests at heart. If they're saying that you need to be aware of something — or even stop — you should listen to them.

## 5. Listen to your body.

As mentioned above, it's not always easy to know exactly what's happening when your mind and body are both focused on competing in a match. But it's important to be as present in your body as possible when you're fighting. If something feels wrong or off, don't ignore it. Be honest with yourself and make decisions that won't just ensure your success in your current fight, but your continued success over the course of your entire martial arts career. One match isn't worth your long-term health. And no victory in martial arts is worth your safety. So be smart and responsible. If you need to tap out or quit, there will be more martial arts tournaments and matches waiting for you when you're healthy and ready to compete again.

# 10 Benefits of Tournament Competition

## 1. Test Your Skills

Tournament competition is an opportunity to take your months or years of training and put it to the test. Competition tests your physical fitness, your technique, your stamina, your timing, your mental strength, and your determination in ways our regular training doesn't. Just like in belt grading, tournaments offer an opportunity to show that our training has made a real difference in our ability level over time.

## 2. Get Out of Your Comfort Zone

When we train in class, we get comfortable. We get comfortable with our training floor, we get comfortable with our instructors, we get comfortable with our peers and comfortable with our sparring partners. We can even get comfortable with our complacency. Competing in a tournament – be it patterns, sparring or board breaking – puts us in a new environment where we're forced to perform in front of new eyes, in a new room with people we don't know. It's this act of stepping out of our comfort zone that pushes us to work that much harder.

## 3. Challenge Yourself Against New Opponents

When we continue to spar with the same opponents over and over – as we do in our classes – we learn how people move, what techniques they throw the most and where their weaknesses are. We learn to adapt to each of our opponents and anticipate their moves. We know who we could reasonably win against and who makes us a little nervous. When we step out on the competition floor we have no such insight. It's a true test of skill against an unknown competitor – an opportunity to gain a new perspective and find out how sharp our instincts really are when we have to think on our feet.

## 4. Overcome Your Fears

Martial artists must learn to stay calm in stressful situations. Tournament competition creates jitters for sure. Sometimes it can cause some significant adrenaline surges we need to take control of and learn to channel into useful energy. Learning to stay focused and relaxed, lower our heart rate and breathing rate under stress in order to be able to perform at the highest level is a skill that is only developed over many opportunities to try it in practice.

## 5. Build Confidence

Since tournaments often break down their competitors into relatively small fields by age, gender and belt level, competitors get a chance to see how they really stack up against others their size, age and rank – something we don't always get to do in class. By comparing yourself to others on a more level playing field, you can really see that you are gaining new skills over time. Furthermore, whether you win or lose in sparring, one thing is virtually guaranteed: you will finish your round feeling empowered knowing that you did what you set out to do and came out relatively unscathed.

# 10 Benefits of Tournament Competition in Taekwondo

## 6. Build Team Spirit

Tournaments give you a chance to grow closer to your peers. When a club travels together, competes together and spends a couple of days in close contact with one another, cheering for one another and giving hugs and high-fives for performance and effort, the natural outflow is a more cohesive team spirit. Everyone wants to feel like they belong. Martial arts – and tournament competition specifically – gives participants that opportunity to belong to a tribe of sorts... to bond with like-minded people who share the love of the art.

## 7. Build Character

Winning and losing is part of any competition; and healthy competition is good for you. It creates opportunity to build mental strength and determination but it also offers a chance to learn humility. Compete often enough and you will see that there will always be someone who is a stronger competitor than you are. Tournaments give you the opportunity to test your skills, recognize your weaknesses and congratulate others for their successes regardless of how you place.

## 8. Get Motivated Watching Top Level Competitors

When you're moving up through the belt ranks, watching top level black belt competitors can be very inspiring. It motivates you to want to not only continue your training but to take it up a notch and focus more on areas where maybe you see room for improvement: conditioning, flexibility, speed, accuracy, self-control or power. It can motivate you to aim to master a new technique or combination and

## 9. Give Yourself a Short Term Goal

Registering for a tournament can help shift your focus towards preparation in advance. As that date draws near, you can use it as a short-term goal to seek to improve your focus on your training. It's an excellent motivator for ensuring those patterns don't get overlooked at home, workouts don't get skipped and class attendance remains regular.

## 10. Have Fun

Tournaments are fun... and you might just win a medal.

