

**Good Drills, Bad Drills**  
by Gerald Lafon  
Vice Chairman, USJA Coach Education Committee

While most sport programs train their athletes the way they are expected to perform, Judo still lags behind by clinging onto what sports scientists call “irrelevant training.” At best it is training that will not affect learning one way or the other, and at its worst irrelevant training will negatively affect learning.

To better grasp the issue, let’s start with a simple formula that will help coaches and players understand how skills are acquired. Skill acquisition- learning- occurs when the skill is repeated correctly, frequently, in its entirety, and reflects the conditions under which the acquired skill will be ultimately performed or used. In other words, you must simply train the way you are expected to perform!

Based on the above formula, static uchi komi are an abomination in a dynamic sport like Judo. This is what Geof Gleeson, father of modern Judo pedagogy, has to say in his book *Judo for the West*:

In my opinion, because of the complete difference of uchikomi and competitive movement (randori and shiai) i.e. non-movement, non-completion of throw, passive partner, etc. etc., there will be negative feedback from the practices of uchikomi. That is, not only will uchikomi not help to improve the skill of throwing, but will actually hinder any improvement.

To the credit of many coaches, they have recognized the flaws in static uchi komi and have graduated to what is commonly referred to as moving uchi komi. While they are certainly an improvement over the static form, moving uchi komi if done improperly can create a different set of problems for the trainee. So rather than cure the problems associated with static uchi komi, moving uchi komi can create their own brand of an abomination.

Moving uchi komi are not only ill-designed in many local clubs, they are also ill-designed at many national and international camps. Most of the time, they are used as a form of warm-up. Moving uchi komi should however be used to perfect technique. Picture lines of players moving swiftly down the mat doing some semblance of Judo technique- going through the motions if you will- without actually throwing, and without doing anything that resembles what they would normally do in randori or shiai. This is clearly irrelevant training. Let’s take a look at some of the main flaws that may occur in moving uchi komi training.

Purpose of the drill: based on what is actually transpiring on the mat, there seems to be no clear-cut purpose for the drill. At times it might look like it’s a conditioning drill, sometimes it’s an extension of warm-up, often it’s considered a technical drill, and occasionally it’s done just to do something different. All too often, players have no sense of why they are doing the drill. With no clear purpose, objective or goal, the drill can only be irrelevant.

Tempo of the drill: usually these drills are run at speeds across the mat that in no way resemble the tempo in randori or shiai. The wrong tempo will negatively affect technique.

Relationship between partners: unlikely to resemble any postural relationship and interaction encountered in randori and shiai.

Wrong technique: often, players will choose a technique suitable for the movement pattern and tempo called for by the coach- usually moving at a faster than normal speed backwards or sideways- but one that is not part of their inventory of skills, and thus one not likely to be performed in randori or shiai. Here's what Gleeson says about the subject.

Bad as well as good movements can be repeated and take on a habit form, to quote Knapp again, "an individual who has practised hard at a poor technique believing it to be satisfactory will have made the bond between stimulus and response a very strong one. He will have worn a nervous "pathway" between stimulus and response which will be very difficult to change. When he tries to alter his technique he will find his problem greater even than if he were learning for the first time.

Full skills: skill acquisition calls for the repetition of skills in their entirety. Most moving uchi komi drills provide little training in complete skills. Even when they do, it is under conditions that bear little relationship to randori or shiai.

Bad biomechanics, bad technique: the lack of purpose, the use of an inappropriate tempo, the absence of realistic postures and interaction between partners, and the use of unsuitable techniques just to make the drill work all contribute to the development of incorrect biomechanics and poor technique. This is especially true for the beginning and intermediate players who are still in their formative years.

## **Designing Good Drills**

The good news is that with some simple changes, the bad moving drill can become a perfectly good moving drill. In designing good moving drills, you need to go back to the skill acquisition formula mentioned at the beginning of the article and remember its key components: correct, frequent, and complete repetitions that reflect the conditions under which the acquired skill will be ultimately performed or used.

Therefore, to make moving drills a relevant training method, the key changes you will need to make are:

1. Start by defining the purpose of the drill. The purpose should be to develop correct biomechanics in a setting that resembles randori or shiai.
2. Slow the tempo down to an appropriate speed for the technique being applied.
3. Make sure the technique is appropriate for the movement pattern called for. At times, athletes should be allowed to choose a preferred movement pattern as long as it is appropriate for the chosen technique.
4. Demand full completion on each repetition.
5. Require that the training partner vary grips, postures, stances and levels of resistance to mimic randori or shiai. Make sure, however, that tori is allowed to be successful on each repetition. Uke needs to provide realistic interaction but must stop short of making tori fail the drill.
6. Correct major biomechanical mistakes before they become "hard to break" bad habits, but don't sweat the small stuff. Rome wasn't built in a day and neither will perfection be

developed in a day...or two or three for that matter. Gleeson in *Judo for the West* mentions Comenius' three simple teaching rules, which we should all espouse:

1. Do not hurry, for learning comes easily when the proper stage is set.
  2. Avoid a difficulty, which can be safely ignored, or at least postponed.
  3. When the difficulty must be handled, make the boy's approach to it as gradual and as interesting as you can.”
7. Connect all tachi waza skills to ne waza skills, if only for a few seconds to make a quick transition to a pin.
  8. While line drills are the easy way to control large numbers of players, they are not necessarily the best way to develop sound skills. Whenever possible, allow players to ply their trade in a smaller area where they can develop movement patterns that are not predetermined and rigid, and that better reflect the nature of randori and shiai.

When designing drills, always remember not to stray from how the game is ultimately played. That is your compass. Train your athletes the way they are expected to perform, and keep it simple, coach!