

Myth: Snapback in Mae geri

During your training in the past, have you ever heard some instructors yell, "More snapback!" or "Faster snapback!" while you were doing mae geri? Do you also remember that their yell stressed on "BACK"? Yes, I am sure you have had that experience, and most likely have heard those phrases more than a few times.

Then let's look at how a snapback works. Take a look at the following formula:

$$F = "M" \times "A"$$

F, the force or amount of impact energy, is equal to M (the mass or weight) times A (acceleration). This simple physics equation proves the importance of a snapback. Since the mass is constant, (as your foot will not change its weight whether it is traveling in the forward or backward directions,) the act of snapping back in mae geri could potentially double the acceleration, thus increasing the impact energy. So, it is easy to see that the influencing factor is A or foot acceleration.

Therefore, it translates that the faster the speed of the snapback, the more impact you will produce from your kick. Does this make sense? So, your sensei's command was right and you owe your sensei a big "thank you" for this command. Now you want to ask, "Why are you making a big issue out of this then?" My answer is this question to you, "Is a kick without snapback a bad or poor kick?" If you say "Yes", then you need to read on.

Is there a kick without a snapback but yet considered a good kick? Of course there is. Have you not practiced Yoko geri kekomi (Yoko kekomi) thousands of times? You may say "Yes, but we snap back after kekomi too." You may believe that is what you do but if you are executing kekomi correctly, believe it or not, you are NOT snapping back your foot. You need to realize that the foot movement in kekomi is actually a PULL BACK, a different animal from a snap back of keage. Again, if you are executing a kekomi correctly, your kicking foot will stop as your leg is fully extended (if it doesn't then you have a keage). Therefore, even if you quickly pull back (not snap back) your lower leg right after your foot stops it will not add to your foot acceleration in a kick. But you may think, "OK that may be true but my Yoko kekomi can create a great impact, maybe more than my keage." Your observation is correct and that is exactly why I am writing this article.

Be aware that the energy your opponent receives from a kekomi is not an impact one alone but instead a gross force. Here is the formula:

$$GF = M \times A \times T$$

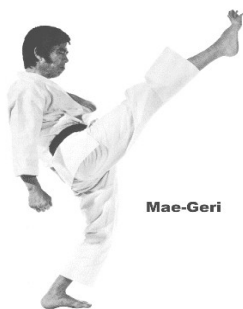
The gross or accumulated force one receives from a kick will be a multiplied result of F (mass times acceleration) and T (the length of time or how long your kick & push last). In keage the impact time is minimal so you want to increase the acceleration of a snapback in order to create more impact amount. In kekomi on the other hand, you do not have a snapback (or increased acceleration,) but you can lengthen the kicking time by thrusting your kick (mainly with a horizontal movement of the hip region) to increase the gross force.

Let's see how it works. If keage's impact time is assumed to be at 0.1 second and that of

kekomi at 0.4 second or 4 times longer, it will result in 2 times increase of gross force by kekomi over by keage (even assuming that the acceleration increase in keage is doubled that of keage.) This shows you mathematically why your kekomi is more devastating and forceful.

Well if that is the case, is kekomi better than keage? As we all know we cannot compare the importance of these kicks, or any other techniques for that matter. Yoko keage has a different “character” or role from kekomi (I am sure I do not have to explain on this point), thus they are used differently and they are equally important in karate techniques.

So the fuss I am making is about kekomi. We are very familiar with these two different kicks: Yoko keage and Yoko kekomi. But think for a moment. Do we see Mae kekomi and Mawashi kekomi incorporated in our regular training? No? Don't you agree that it is a bit strange that we don't? If you can say, “My sensei includes those kicks in our regular training menu”, then you are very lucky. But at tens of dojos that I have visited or observed (though that number is limited and not all exclusive,) I did not see those kicks in their kihon training.



You may wonder if those kicks are really that unpopular. Let me prove that they are indeed not popular or standard. We all know Wikipedia, a public encyclopedia where anyone of us can be a contributor and provide relevant information to create a virtual reference library. I suggest that you check out how karate kicks are introduced and listed in this Internet encyclopedia. Go to “List of Shotokan techniques” and then “Keri waza”. There they list kicking techniques which includes Yoko geri keage and Yoko kekomi; BUT, we only see Mae geri and Mawashi geri. We do not see any other kekomi techniques listed under *keri*. Hundreds, if not thousands of Shotokan practitioners must have viewed this website but no one has added Mae kekomi and Mawashi kekomi. Amazing! This means those two kicks have not been considered standard enough to be mentioned there. Of course, there are other kicks such as Ura Mawashi, Gyaku Mawashi, Kakato otoshi, Kaiten geri, etc that are not listed there but those kicks can be classified as non-standard. So why ignore Mae geri kekomi and Mawashi geri kekomi? Mae geri kekomi must not be considered as non-standard if we find it in Unsu (isn't it an advanced kuro obi kata?) There is something very strange about this gap, and a mystery why these kicks are ignored.

By the way, (you may already know this,) Mawashi geri is a kicking technique that was added after karate was introduced to mainland Japan from Okinawa about 100 years ago, so it was not practiced in ancient Okinawa. Therefore, it is natural that we do not see this keri in kata.

But do you know this other interesting fact? Mikazuki geri, a definite kekomi keri, is incorporated in many kata such as Heian godan and Bassai Dai. Yet this keri is also missing from the Wikipedia list. So, can I assume that Mikazuki geri is another keri waza not

practiced in your regular kihon or kumite training? No wonder this keri is not well remembered. This is a mystery, isn't it?

Here is another very interesting question. Did the ancient Okinawa masters ever practice Mawashi geri? I am sure they did, as Mawashi geri is a very fast and useful kicking technique. However, they did not let other people know about their "secret" technique that would reveal their weakness. So, for the kata they incorporated Mikazuki geri instead of Mawashi geri, the latter which exposes the groin area too much. Then, the readers might ask, "But doesn't Yoko geri expose the groin area too?" You are correct in your observation, and that is why the old Okinawan kata did not have Yoko geri. As a matter of fact, Yoko geri in Heian Nidan and Yondan were Mae geri when the Heian kata was created by Itosu sensei (one of Funakoshi's sensei) in the late 19th century. Check out the Heian or Pinan kata by Shito ryu and other Okinawa Shorin ryu. Their kicks are still done with Mae geri and not Yoko geri.

Now, let's get back to Mae geri and Mawashi geri. I would like to touch upon a very important subject of why Mae kekomi and Mawashi kekomi have been forgotten. The answer is that the popularity of tournament kumite has resulted in the negligence of these kicks. So how did tournament kumite impart such an influence on kicking techniques? It is a complex and sensitive subject but I will do my best to shed some light on this neglected matter.

There are two obvious reasons and they both come from how our kumite is judged in non-contact kumite. A kick is not judged whether it is effective (waza ari) because it knocked down an opponent but rather by how it looks (this is the key word) to the judge. Some tournaments are rougher than others and the hansoku rule may not be strictly enforced in these tournaments. But generally, a knock down will be regarded as a chui (warning), or in the case where the receiver is knocked out, a hansoku (foul). It is obvious that such a kick definitely does not get a scoring point. A kick (or a punch for that matter) in non-contact kumite must not have physical contact in order to get a score.

So, you cannot thrust your Mae geri into your opponent's midsection or his chin to get a point. If you hold your leg up to keep your Mae kekomi but not touching your opponent, your opponent can easily grab your leg and take you down very quickly. Because of this reason, you are forced to snap back (not because you want to have more impact), which means your kick must be keage. Although it seems silly, unfortunately it is a natural and unavoidable evolution.

Then some of you may ask, "Then why is Yoko kekomi widely practiced?" That is a very good question. Out of the three most popular kicks (Mae geri, Mawashi geri and Yoko geri), Yoko geri is the slowest kick because of the body mechanics involved. Since it takes the longest time to execute, most competitors do not choose to use it in a tournament. I have seen some competitors stand in a kiba dachi-liked stance and try a Bruce Lee style side stepping kick. Unfortunately, that style results in a very visible kick and does not really work like it looks in a Hong Kong movie. For this reason we do not see Yoko kekomi or keage too often in tournaments. This may sound contradicting, but because it is not a popular kick in tournaments, Yoko kekomi was not voted out of our regular training. It is amazing but sadly it is true.



Another big reason for voting out kekomi is the risk of getting hansoku (foul) in tournament kumite if a good kekomi is executed. If you make a connection to chudan or more effectively to jodan, I do not need to further explain the consequences. It is very effective if you use Mae geri kekomi in a de-ai situation, but often that technique is called as a “push” and you will not get a point. So, competitors will use keage (in a strict sense a wrong technique) even in a de-ai situation. That kick will not knock the opponent down but you will use it as you can gain a point.

Mawashi kekomi to the side of head is very effective but again there is no reason for a competitor to take the risk and try this kick if he can get a score using keage. First of all, Mawashi kekomi to the head is much more difficult technically than Mawashi keage to score on the head (linguistically keage is a wrong word as it means “kick upward” but we will disregard this language technicality), so why take the chance to miss getting a score? But more dangerously there is a risk of actual contact. In this case, you will knock your opponent down for sure and lose a match by hansoku.

It is interesting to note that in full contact tournaments Mawashi kekomi is used very frequently, actually more frequently than Mae kekomi. This is not because Mae geri kekomi is less effective. I will explain why below.

Full contact competitors throw either jodan or gedan Mawashi geri kekomi. It is obvious why they aim at jodan, but non-contact practitioners like us must know why gedan Mawashi geri kekomi is popular in full contact. In order to knock someone down by a kick (this is how you score a point) you need to really kick into the side of a knee or the thigh. A snap kick cannot do the job so kekomi must be used. The reason why Mae geri is not used frequently in full contact is because of the close ma-ai. Their fighting distance is much closer than that of non contact styles since jodan punches are not allowed in their tournament rules. The competitors actually get into a distance so close that they cannot even throw a full, extended punch let alone Mae geri. But if one is flexible one can still do Mawashi geri despite the close distance. In addition, even if an attacker were able to connect a Mae kekomi to chudan, he would not be able to produce sufficient speed and power from such an insufficiently short distance when compared to Mawashi geri, which has more distance as it is thrown from the side of his body. As a result, Mae geri is not a favored technique in full contact tournaments.

In conclusion, I want to emphasize that kekomi is a very effective keri from the traditional martial arts perspective, and Mae geri kekomi and Mawashi geri kekomi must not be excluded from our regular kihon and kumite training. I hope that not all practitioners will formulate their training to only satisfy the techniques needed in tournaments. There is a much broader range

of real karate techniques out there. Isn't it a shame if we allow the tournament rules to limit our training and hold back our quest to master these other techniques?

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