

COACHING SERIES

*"The technique should create the breath,
not the breath create the technique."*

Ady Gray

Breathing In KATA

A coaching perspective

Understanding natural breathing,
performance breathing in
Kata.



Ady Gray
England Head Kata Coach

Why Breathing Matters in Kata

Breathing is an important element of karate performance. In kata, breathing supports power, rhythm, control and efficiency of movement. However, breathing should remain natural and appropriate to the technique being performed. The aim of this document is to help athletes and coaches understand how breathing works in high-level karate performance and how it is interpreted within WKF competition.



The Science of Breathing in Sport

During explosive movements the body naturally exhales. The diaphragm and abdominal muscles create intra-abdominal pressure which stabilises the spine and allows efficient transfer of force through the body. This principle is seen across many sports where the sound of breathing is simply the result of air being expelled with force from the lungs during powerful movement.

SEEN ACROSS SPORTS

- ⚡ Boxing punches
- ⚡ Tennis strokes
- ⚡ Weightlifting
- ⚡ Sprint acceleration

“The technique should create the breath - not the breath create the technique.”

ADY GRAY - ENGLAND NATIONAL HEAD KATA COACH

Natural breathing in karate is not a conscious act – it is the byproduct of efficient, relaxed and powerful technique. When athletes breathe correctly, it enhances every aspect of their kata performance.

How Breathing Supports Performance

Correct breathing in karate integrates with the body's biomechanical system to maximise power, control and efficiency. The four key pillars below show how breathing directly affects the performance of the Kata



Power

Core stabilisation for force transfer



Relaxation

Reduces tension between movements



Timing

Rhythm and movement synchrony



Kime

Focus and control at point of impact

Slow vs Explosive Techniques

Slow / Controlled Movements

Quiet, controlled breathing
Nasal or gentle oral inhalation
Steady diaphragmatic rhythm
Minimal audible sound
Supports relaxation and flow

Example: Empi, slow transitions in Unsu, preparatory stances

Explosive Techniques

Sharp audible exhalation at kime
Natural, not forced or exaggerated
Breath occurs AT the technique
Intra-abdominal pressure created
Supports power and stability

Example: Gyaku-zuki, Mawashi-geri, combination sequences

Breathing should occur naturally as part of the movement

The breathing should never be artificially created or exaggerated beyond what the movement requires

Understanding the boundary between natural performance breathing and excessive breathing is critical for both athletes and coaches preparing for WKF competition.



ACCEPTABLE

Natural breathing in WKF kata

- ✓ Natural exhalation during techniques
- ✓ Audible breathing during explosive moments
- ✓ Breathing follows the rhythm of the kata
- ✓ Appropriate to the style of kata
- ✓ Breathing supports the technique
- ✓ Never becomes the focus of performance

The Key: breathing supports technique. It should never become the focus.



EXCESSIVE

Warning signs to avoid

- ✗ Deliberately loud breathing throughout
- ✗ Continuous forced breathing unrelated to movement
- ✗ Breathing used to exaggerate perceived power
- ✗ Distracts from the technical performance
- ✗ Breathing becomes a performance feature

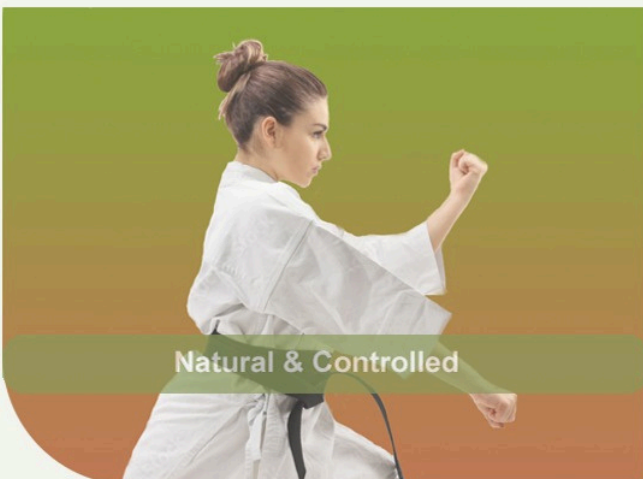
Excessive breathing replaces authentic technique with theatrical sound.

Technique



Coach's Key Insight

If breathing appears unnatural, the underlying cause is usually a technical or relaxation issue – not a breathing issue itself. Address the root cause.



Natural & Controlled



Avoid Exaggeration

Use this checklist during kata evaluation to assess whether an athlete's breathing is natural, appropriate and supportive of their technique. Each item represents a key

BREATHING OBSERVATION CHECKLIST Athlete: _____

Does breathing match the speed of the movement?
Slow movements = quiet breath. Explosive techniques = sharper exhalation.

Is audible breathing only during explosive techniques?
Breathing should not be audible throughout the entire kata.

Does the athlete remain relaxed between movements?
Look for shoulder tension, jaw tension, or held breath as warning signs.

Does breathing support kime and stability?
Exhalation at kime should feel connected to the technique, not separate.

Does breathing appear natural rather than exaggerated?
If it sounds theatrical or forced, it is likely excessive.

Is breathing a result of technique — not the cause of it?
The movement should generate the breath, not the other way around.

Coach Notes

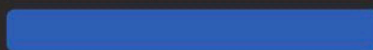
If breathing appears unnatural, identify whether the issue is: (a) technical – poor kime or inefficient movement, (b) tension – held breath or shoulder tightness, or (c) habitual – copying other athletes. Address the root cause, not the symptom.

EVALUATION SCALE

Natural / Excellent



Acceptable / Minor Issues



Excessive / Concern



Coaches frequently observe these breathing errors in kata. Each mistake has a clear correction strategy. Use this as a reference when identifying and addressing athlete.

MISTAKE 1

Forcing loud breathing to appear powerful

MISTAKE 2

Breathing before the technique at kime

MISTAKE 3

Holding breath during transitions

MISTAKE 4

Shoulder tension from poor breathing mechanics

MISTAKE 5

Copying breathing patterns from other athletes



Coaching Corrections



For Forced / Theatrical Breathing

Use the Silent Kata drill. Remove all audible breathing and focus on relaxed, efficient movement. Breathing will return naturally when technique improves.



For Timing Issues

Isolate individual techniques. Practise relaxed inhalation on the preparation and a sharp, natural exhalation precisely at the moment of kime.



For Tension and Held Breath

Perform kata slowly with deliberate focus on continuous breathing. Identify where breath is held and address the underlying tension in that movement.



For Copying Other Athletes

Educate the athlete on the biomechanics of natural breathing. Help them develop their own authentic breathing pattern based on their technique.

These three drills are designed to develop natural, efficient breathing in kata. Each drill targets a specific aspect of breathing mechanics and should be incorporated into regular training sessions

1 DRILL 1 — Silent Kata

Objective: Remove artificial breathing and encourage relaxation

Athletes perform the full kata while attempting to keep all breathing completely silent throughout the performance. This forces the athlete to relax the body and remove any deliberately exaggerated breathing patterns.

Expected Outcome:

Athletes discover that natural breathing returns automatically when technique is efficient and the body is relaxed. Forced breathing disappears.

2 DRILL 2 — Explosive Technique Training

Objective: Connect exhalation precisely to the moment of kime

Athletes perform individual techniques in isolation, focusing on a relaxed inhalation during the preparation phase and a sharp, natural exhalation at the exact moment of kime. Repeat each technique 10-20 times.

Expected Outcome:

Athletes develop a clear, instinctive connection between technique execution and natural exhalation, improving both power and authenticity.

3 DRILL 3 — Rhythm Training

Objective: Synchronise breathing with the rhythm of the kata

Perform the kata at a significantly reduced speed, focusing entirely on matching the breathing pattern with the timing and rhythm of each movement sequence. The coach calls out breath cues during the performance.

Expected Outcome:

Athletes develop an intuitive sense of when to breathe, creating a seamless integration of breath and movement that enhances the overall quality of the kata.



Coach Tip

Incorporate all three drills progressively. Start with Silent Kata, then Explosive Training, then Rhythm. Review after each session.

How WKF Judges Evaluate Breathing

WKF judges are not judging the sound of breathing itself. They are evaluating the quality of the technique and the overall performance of the kata. Breathing is assessed only in the context of how it affects the overall presentation.

If breathing appears exaggerated or distracts from the performance, it will negatively affect the overall evaluation. Judges look for efficiency, control and authentic karate at the highest level.

FINAL COACHING PRINCIPLE

"Let the movement create the breath – not the breath create the movement."

ADY GRAY — ENGLAND NATIONAL HEAD KATA COACH

Key Takeaways for Coaches



Natural breathing enhances

Efficient technique produces authentic, natural breathing that judges recognise as high quality



Exaggerated breathing distracts

Theatrical breathing draws attention away from technique and negatively impacts scores



Address root causes

Unnatural breathing signals a technical or relaxation problem.
Fix the technique, not the breath



Use the three drills

Silent Kata, Explosive Training and Rhythm Training develop authentic, competition-ready breathing