

Makiwara

Definition

The makiwara is a padded punching board used to toughen the hands and strengthen the wrists to result in more powerful hand techniques. With careful and diligent training and practice with a makiwara, the hands can become true weapons. The literal translation of makiwara breaks the word into two parts: *maki* which best translates to “roll up” or “wrap”, while *wara* translates to “straw.” The traditional makiwara is a “striking post” consisting of a bundle of straw wrapped with coils of rope and fastened to a board which has one end buried in the ground to make it immobile.

Background

The exact origin of the makiwara is unknown, but the consensus is that the origin is most likely on Okinawa. One of the strongest and most vocal proponents of the use of the makiwara in karate training was Master Gichin Funikoshi.

Funakoshi wrote,

"The most popular way of training with the seiken (fore fist or traditional karate punch) is to make use of a makiwara, a thick post covered with rice straw. The makiwara also, incidentally, may be used in strengthening the sword hand (shuto, knife hand), the elbows, and the knees. I think I am in no way exaggerating when I say that practice with the makiwara is the keystone in the creation of strong weapons." (p 118, Karate-Do, My Way of Life)



At the right Master Gichin Funikoshi is using a traditional makiwara in his daily training. (This makiwara is an example of the *tachi*-makiwara – see below.)

Funakoshi also wrote,

"The seiken is truly the life of karate-do, and the karate-ka cannot neglect the constant training of his fists, not even for a day. Without a powerful fist, your kata and kumite will lack authenticity and your movements will be no different from dancing.

"To a certain extent, basics and kata are helpful in strengthening your fists. But in either case, you are only punching air so there is no resistance or response, and never having had a chance to test it, you cannot really have confidence in your punch. This is where the makiwara plays an important role.

"In karate-do, the makiwara is used to strengthen not only the fist, but to practice use of the sword hand, elbows and feet. The explosive power behind the karate strikes and kicks can be attributed to training with the makiwara."

Types of Makiwara

1. *Tachi*-makiwara: The “standing” makiwara. This is possibly the most traditional makiwara and employs a flexible board with one end firmly embedded in the ground or solidly fastened to the floor or wall.

Funikoshi describes how to make an inexpensive makiwara from materials readily available to everyone in rural Okinawa or Japan.

“About seven feet tall and about six inches in width, the wooden makiwara is stuck firmly in the ground until the top of it reaches roughly to the height of the practitioner’s shoulders. Then rice straw is wound around the upper part of the stave to a thickness of about two or two and a half inches; the straw is secured by thin ropes. At first ... I recommend that initially a towel be wrapped over the straw.” (p 118, Karate-Do, My Way of Life)

While Funakoshi mentioned wrapping the upper part of the post with straw, usually a pad of straw, about 12 - 15 inches long and 4 - 5 inches wide, was made by bending the straw stalks and wrapping the stalks with $\frac{3}{4}$ - 1 inch diameter rope. This pad was then secured to the post by thin ropes at the top and bottom of the pad. This seems to be similar to the pad on the makiwara that Funakoshi is using in the picture above.

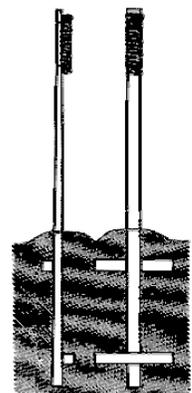


At the current time, rice straw is not the easiest material to obtain, so the pads are more similar to a small focus pad, approximately 2” to 4” thick using closed cell foam rubber covered with canvas, synthetic leather, or leather.

The most usual *tachi*-makiwara employs a flattened wood post with the thicker end embedded in the ground. The post can readily be made by from a 4 inch by 4 inch by 8 feet long post. When selecting the post at the lumber yard, try to get one that has the fewest knots and with the grain of the wood as straight as possible running the length of the post. In order to have some flexibility, the post needs to be tapered so what will be the top end has a thickness of $\frac{1}{2}$ to $\frac{3}{4}$ inch. It is a straightforward procedure to measure and mark the desired thickness at one end of the post and draw a slanting straight line to the opposite side at the other end of the post. With one straight cut using a circular or table saw, cut off the designated portion, and the post takes the final form.

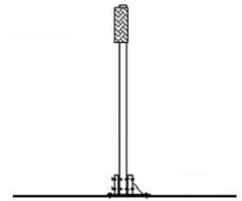


The heavy end of the post will be buried in the ground to a depth of 3 or 4 feet. The top, thinner, end of the post should be about at the top of your chest. To help stabilize the post, two pieces of 2” by 4” board approximately two feet long should be fastened with screws to opposite sides of the post. The top of the post should move about 5 or 6 inches without too much effort. Position the striking pad near the top of the post at a height such that the center of the pad will be at the height of your solar plexus when you are in a “good punching stance.”



The makiwara needs to be flexible in order to operate properly. In general, it is better to be too flexible than not flexible enough. The flexibility of the board absorbs enough of the impact to eliminate the need for thick padding, so the covering of straw, leather, canvas, foam, or rubber protects the board almost as much as it protects the practitioner's hand. For maximum flexibility, and ease of construction, a 1” x 4” board can be used for the post. This may be the best way for one to start using a *tachi*-makiwara.

Weather and climate conditions can prevent one from using the makiwara embedded in the ground outdoors. Indoors the makiwara post will obviously be shorter and will need to be firmly anchored to the floor or to the wall with a sufficient offset to accommodate the flexing of the post. Ideally, the bracket holding the post should be anchored in a concrete floor, but objections to this method by the building owners are quite understandable. To satisfy these concerns the bracket can be attached along a side of a half sheet of plywood, 4 feet by 4 feet. The weight of the practitioner standing on the plywood sheet while using the makiwara will provide all the necessary force to keep the makiwara in a sturdy position for the practice. The makiwara attached to the plywood base is also portable, so can be moved to another location if desired.



2. *Ude*-makiwara: This is very similar to the *tachi*-makiwara except that it uses a cylindrical post with the padding completely encircling the top of the post. Often the post has two perpendicular slots sawed into the top and filled with foam rubber to soften an impact. This type can be punched from any direction and can also be used for practicing a variety of strikes and kicks that could not be used on a flat post. The disadvantage of the cylindrical post is that it is not very flexible and the practitioner is more likely to incur injuries.



3. *Age*-makiwara: The traditional *age*-makiwara was a tightly packed bundle of rice straw wrapped with rope. The bundle was approximately 24 inches long and 12 inches in diameter. The modern *age*-makiwara is usually a smaller padded board or focus pad that is suspended from the ceiling with a rope, similar to a boxer's speed bag. If space is limited, or one doesn't want the pad flying around after an impact, its motion can be restricted by using a bungee cord fastened to the bottom of the pad and to the floor. It is mostly used for kicks and elbow strikes. (The *age*-makiwara can also be a *tachi*-makiwara mounted upside down, with its base securely fastened into the ceiling.)



4. *Tou*-makiwara: Another specialized form of makiwara is called a *tou*. It is a bundle of cane or bamboo stalks tied together with a straw rope which is used for nukite (finger strikes). Striking a regular makiwara with your finger tips is dangerous and should not be done.

5. Makiwara boards:

- a. Wall mounted - These usually consist of a pad, covered by canvas and anchored to a board. A variation has horizontal slots cut into the base, and is called clapper makiwara.



Both of these types are quite inflexible, and the only 'give' is from within the pad. When these boards are anchored to a wall, the assembly can 'give' very little - with most of the give within one's hand! This version of makiwara is not traditional and frequently damages the wall behind it when struck repeatedly with proper force. It cannot teach how to drive through one's target with good form because the depth of the strike can't be more than a half inch or so.

- b. Portable makiwara board: These are small striking boards that can be taken anywhere. They are simple in construction such that anyone can make one, but are not to be used for hard strikes, as one does with the *tachi*-makiwara. For example, the practitioner might sit cross-legged on the floor with this makiwara in the lap and practice knife-hand or hammer-fist strikes. If a screw eye is inserted into an end of the board, it can be hung, is essentially an *age*-makiwara, and can be used either punching or kicking. Put another screw eye into the bottom

of the board, and it can be fastened to the floor or ground to restrict its motion after striking. While these portable boards are used for low impact punching, regular use will toughen and strengthen the hand and wrist.

Construction:

Materials:

- a. A 2" x 4" board 12" to 24" in length.
- b. Rope to wrap the board (Any type of rope. Hemp will be firmer on impact, while a cotton or synthetic composition will be softer. The length of rope needed will depend on the diameter of the rope. For example, if one uses 3/4" rope, approximately 16 feet of rope are needed to wrap 12 inches of board.)
- c. Two U-shaped nails for securing the ends of the rope to the board.

Wrapping the board:

- a. Fasten one end of the rope to the narrow, 2", side of the board with one of the U nails.
- b. Start wrapping the rope. **IMPORTANT: Keep tension on the rope while wrapping. The rope must be tight against the board and must have extremely tight alignment of the coils against each other.** When the board is completely covered, nail the end of the rope to the side of the board.

Conclusion:

The makiwara is a training tool for the karateka. Properly using the makiwara, the karateka can learn proper punching technique, stance, weight transfer, and hip rotation. One must remember when working with a makiwara that it will always win. If you punch it too hard, too early in your training, you very well might damage a knuckle, but the makiwara will still be there waiting for you the next time! Initially just slightly push the pad with the punch, taking care to get everything in order. With practice the pad can be struck harder, but always keep your priorities straight, and do not let your enthusiasm get the better of you. The important point is not how hard you hit the makiwara, but how many times. Repetition is paramount.