



**JAPAN KARATE ASSOCIATION / WORLD FEDERATION
INTERNATIONAL SHOTOKAN KARATE FEDERATION**

**GODAN EXAMINATION REPORT
MAWASHI-GERI**

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Summary

This report is about **mawashi-geri**, a roundhouse kick that is widely used in Shotokan karate, both in the traditional martial art, and in sports (competition) training. First, we will introduce a few general aspects of karate training, and focus on two important points when working on leg techniques. Then, we will discuss how to prepare for mawashi-geri through specific stretching exercises and educational drills, and the various steps involved in executing the kick. Also, we will discuss mawashi-geri training as such, with respect to striking surfaces, targets, range and advantages in sparring. The report will conclude with important points to remember and errors to avoid.

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MAWASHI-GERI

1 Introduction

Shotokan karate as we practice it is a martial art based on the use of all the weapons of the human body. These weapons are mainly the arms and legs. In general, using the lower extremities is more demanding and strenuous than using the upper limbs. However, for good balance, any karate practitioner should develop both equally. Personally, I like working on leg techniques, which is why I chose to talk about *mawashi-geri* in my report. I selected this technique because it is my favorite, and also because I like to use it in sparring. In this research, I will discuss how I execute and teach this kick.

To begin, it should be specified that mawashi-geri is a circular snapping kick. **It combines the power of the hip rotation with the snapping motion of the leg.** It can be aimed at any level: jodan (temple, ear, jaw, neck), chudan (ribs, solar plexus, kidneys, abdomen), and gedan (thigh, knee, shin and groin). It can be used to reach over an obstacle such as a chair or table, or to bypass an opponent's guard. Flexibility in the pelvis and hips make it easier to learn and execute. Just as in gyaku-zuki, correct use of the hips through proper rotation is essential. It will, for that matter, determine the effectiveness of this kick.

My subject will cover six (6) areas:

- *General aspects of karate training;*
- *General aspects of leg techniques;*
- *Preparing for mawashi-geri;*
- *Practicing mawashi-geri;*
- *Important points to remember;*
- *Errors to avoid.*

2 General Aspects of Karate Training

In general, karate techniques owe their effectiveness to the transfer of kinetic energy at the moment of impact. **This energy will be optimized through proper technical training**, which is a strong point of Shotokan karate. To that effect, each technique must travel along the **proper path, using great speed and maximum kime**. The path is either linear or circular, and proper muscle work is required to perfect it. As for speed, the key element is to relax. For kime, which may be defined as the maximum amount of energy that can be produced, it is the result of tensing all muscles in the body at once, in the shortest time possible. To do this requires maximum energy, good spirit, and a high level of concentration. There are three major ways to generate kime in karate: through vibration, rotation and translation. For all arm and leg techniques, the initial impulse is generated from the hara. It is then transmitted to the arms and fists for the upper extremities, and to the legs and feet for the lower limbs. The entire process is controlled by the musculoskeletal system.

3 General Aspects of Leg Techniques

Before I talk about mawashi-geri as such, I would like to emphasize two important points about kicking techniques. Unlike arm techniques, which are executed with both feet on the ground, there is only one supporting leg when kicking. The supporting leg must be firmly planted on the ground to maximize the effectiveness of the technique. Also, the knee of the supporting leg must be bent to provide good balance, especially at the moment of impact. The other important point is that, with leg techniques, there is no concept of withdrawing the opposite leg, such as hikite with arm techniques. For example, when you punch gyaku-zuki with the right arm, there is an opposite action with the left arm. This is the action/reaction principle. These two points are fundamental and demonstrate the difficulty associated with practicing kicking techniques. The slightest error during their use can be fatal in sparring. This is one of the main reasons why I use educational drills during class.

4 Preparing for Mawashi-geri

Any physical activity, whether it is a sport such as hockey or a martial art such as karate, should begin with a proper warm-up. This should be a series of general exercises aimed at preparing the body for a more vigorous workout. **The warm-up is essential to karate, since movements are usually very abrupt**. It is all the more important when training in leg techniques, since the whole pelvic and lower back region are solicited to a considerable extent¹. No matter which leg technique I teach, I start off with specific stretching exercises followed by educational drills, and finish off with the step-by-step execution of the kick.

¹ It should be noted that 80% of the population complains of back pain at one time or another. This often results from improperly preparing for the task to perform.

4.1 Specific Stretching Exercises

When teaching new techniques, especially those using the lower extremities, it is beneficial and educational to begin with specific stretching exercises. They improve flexibility and make the learning process easier. This report shows specific exercises for **mawashi-geri**. This is not a comprehensive list, but rather a sequence I use when I teach. The following exercises are included:

- 1- Ankle flex (photo 1);
- 2- Ankle stretch (photo 2);
- 3- Quadriceps stretch (photo 3);
- 4- Buttock stretch (photo 4);
- 5- Hamstring stretch, step 1 (photo 5);
- 6- Hamstring stretch, step 2 (photo 6);
- 7- Pelvis stretch, step 1 (photo 7);
- 8- Pelvis stretch, step 2 (photo 8);
- 9- Calf muscle, hamstring and lower back stretch (photo 9);
- 10- Torso twist (photo 10)
- 11- Hip rotation (photo 11).

The two first exercises, i.e. ankle flex (photo 1) and ankle stretch (photo 2), are aimed at providing good elasticity and mobility to the ankles. Flexing is beneficial for striking with the ball of the foot (koshi), whereas stretching helps in striking with the instep (haisoku).



Photo 1 Ankle flex



Photo 2 Ankle stretch

Stretching the quadriceps (photo 3) and buttocks (photo 4), the third and fourth exercises in the sequence, requires proper preparation, since these are the driving muscles that initiate the kick. After a good mawashi-geri practice session, it is just as important to stretch them once again.



Photo 3 Quadriceps stretch



Photo 4 Buttock stretch

The fifth and sixth exercises solicit the hamstring muscles (photos 5 and 6), which are used to withdraw the kick. When properly stretched, they make it easier to withdraw the leg in a snapping motion, which is a key point in this technique. Hamstring stretches should also be repeated after working on mawashi-geri or any other leg technique. During my karate training, which will reach the 30-year mark in the fall of 2004, I noticed that most leg injuries when kicking are to the hamstring muscles. They therefore require special attention.



Photo 5 Hamstring stretch



Photo 6 Hamstring stretch

Pelvis stretches, the seventh and eighth exercises, are important for the first part of the technique, i.e. chambering the leg (see section 4.3.1). They improve this step tremendously, which is critical in executing this kick. Once the leg is properly chambered, half of the work is done.



Photo 7 Pelvis stretch



Photo 8 Pelvis stretch

The last exercises, i.e. the calf, hamstring and lower back stretch (photo 9), the torso twist (photo 10) and hip rotation (photo 11), are of general interest. They solicit various muscle groups at the same time, and nicely round out the sequence.



Photo 9 Lower back stretch



Photo 10 Torso twist



Photo 11 Hip rotation

In my opinion, this series of specific stretching exercises is a good way of preparing the body for the second and third part of the training, i.e. educational drills and step-by-step execution of the kick.

4.2 Educational Drills

Educational drills include the three following steps: (1) raising the leg to the side and bending the supporting leg, (2) pivoting forward and back while keeping the leg bent, and (3) extending and withdrawing the leg.

4.2.1 Raising the Leg to the Side and Bending the Supporting Leg (Photo 12)



Photo 12 Raising the Leg to the Side and Bending the Supporting Leg

The purpose of the first drill is to learn **how to chamber the leg properly**, which is the initial step and will determine the proper execution of the technique. To make it easier once the leg is in position, you grab the ankle and raise the knee as high as possible, while keeping the body upright. In this position, you work on your balance, a vital factor in all kicks. Moreover, this exercise improves flexibility of the pelvis and hips, which is extremely helpful when practicing this circular kick.

4.2.2 Pivoting Forward and Back While Keeping the Leg Bent (Photos 13 to 15)

The second drill is to work on **hip rotation** since this is what will generate most of the power in the kick. As in the previous step, working on balance is emphasized, due to the rotating motion of the hip, which is an added difficulty.



Photo 13 Starting Position



Photo 14 Pivoting forward (leg bent)



Photo 15 Pivoting back (leg bent)

4.2.3 Extending and Withdrawing the Leg (Photos 16 to 18)

The third and last drill completes the execution of the technique. The important point is to **snap the leg**, as this will generate striking power that is added to that of the hip rotation. When practicing this step, the concept of balance is at its peak because of the snapping motion of the leg.



Photo 16 Starting position



Photo 17 Extending the leg



Photo 18 Withdrawing the leg

These three drills, which I work on when I teach mawashi-geri, are aimed at bringing the leg to travel the proper path. You might say that it is a way of educating the legs.

4.3 Step-by-Step Execution of the Kick

There are three steps in executing this kick: (1) chambering the leg, (2) rotating the hips and snapping the leg, and (3) returning the leg to the ground.

4.3.1 Chambering the Leg (Photos 19 and 20)

As mentioned in item 4.2.1, **chambering the leg is instrumental in the proper execution of the kick.** At this stage, the knee of the striking leg is higher than the ankle, and does not extend beyond the body's front line. The ankle is almost parallel to the ground. The heel must touch the back of the thigh, if possible. In this position, the body is upright and the knee of the supporting leg is bent to provide good balance.



Photo 19 Starting position in zenkutsu



Photo 20 Chambering the leg

4.3.2 Rotating the Hips and Snapping the Leg (Photos 21 to 23)

For this kick to be effective, the hip rotation must be very quick. When the hip movement is initiated, the leg is snapped with maximum speed. This snapping motion is essential for the following reasons: **maintaining good balance, preventing the opponent from grabbing the leg, and transmitting the maximum shock wave to the opponent.** The striking power of this kick depends on the combination of rotating the hips and snapping the leg². Upon impact, the striking foot must be at a downward angle, the knee of the supporting leg must be bent, and the foot of the supporting leg must be firmly planted on the ground. Otherwise, the technique will be much weaker.



Photo 21 Starting position



Photo 22 Rotating the hips and snapping the leg



Photo 23 Withdrawing the leg

4.3.3 Returning the Leg to the Ground (Photos 24 and 25)

The returning motion is done along the same path and must be **well controlled**. I always tell my students that the leg should be placed rather than dropped on the ground. When returning the leg, the knee remains up high in case the kick needs to be repeated, should the opportunity arise in sparring.



Photo 24 Keep the knee up high



Photo 25 Returning to the ground

² In snapping kicks (keage), the speed ratio should be of 3 to 7, where 3 is the speed of firing out the kick, and 7 the speed of withdrawing the kick.

5 Practicing Mawashi-geri

Now that we saw how to prepare for mawashi-geri and the step-by-step execution of the kick, we will have a look at how to practice it. Although mawashi-geri can be done from various starting positions (heisoku-dachi, hachinoji-dachi, heiko-dachi, etc.), the most commonly used stance is zenkutsu-dachi. Personally, I like kokutsu-dachi because it contributes to the proper execution of the first step of the kick, i.e. chambering the leg.

To begin, the kick should be practiced slowly and completely, since this type of exercise provides the advantage of improving balance and increasing muscle tone in the legs. It is also a good idea to practice with an obstacle in front of the kicking leg, to learn how to chamber the leg properly and execute the kick along a circular path. This will help to perfect the path of the technique. Also, practicing the kick with an elastic band is beneficial, especially for the snapping motion when withdrawing the leg (hiki-ashi).

Mawashi-geri is a kick with several striking surfaces and targets. It may be used at close, medium or long range, and there are many advantages to using it in sparring.

5.1 Striking Surfaces and Targets for Mawashi-geri

Mawashi-geri can be executed using five striking surfaces (photos 26 to 30). They include the ball of the foot (koshi), instep (haisoku), shin (sune), knee (hiza), and thigh (momo).



Photo 26 Ball of the foot (koshi)



Photo 27 Instep (haisoku)



Photo 28 Shin (sune)



Photo 29 Knee (hiza)



Photo 30 Thigh (momo)

The ball of the foot and instep are mainly used at the chudan and jodan levels when sparring at long range, as opposed to the shin, knee or thigh, which are mostly aimed at the gedan level when sparring at close range. As for the targets, they are numerous: temple, ear, jaw, neck, ribs, solar plexus, abdomen, kidneys, groin, thigh, and knee.

The ball of the foot is mainly used in traditional karate. It is mostly directed at the chudan level, i.e. the ribs, solar plexus when the opponent is standing sideways, abdomen, and kidneys. It may always be used at the jodan level (temple, ear, jaw, and neck), but to do so requires great flexibility in the pelvis and legs. The instep is mostly aimed at jodan targets (temple, ear, jaw, and neck). It is very popular in competition, because it reaches farther and is easier to control. In this case, we refer to it as the competition-style mawashi-geri. At the chudan level, it is frequently directed towards the floating ribs and kidneys. The shin is used to strike the knees, thigh, floating ribs and abdomen. This striking surface is common in Muay Thai. The knee and thigh can be used to strike the opponent's thigh, floating ribs, abdomen, and side of the arms.

5.2 Distances for Mawashi-geri

Since mawashi-geri travels along a circular path, it can be more easily used in close- or medium-range situations, compared to a kick with a linear path such as mae-geri, yoko-geri kekomi or ushiro-geri, which are more effective when the leg is fully extended. When sparring at close range, mawashi-geri will be more commonly performed with the front leg, which is called kizami-mawashi-geri. At medium range, either the front or rear leg may be used, depending on the situation. If you kick with the front leg, you will have to slide forward on the supporting leg to be within the proper striking distance. The rear leg is most appropriate for kicking at long range.

5.3 Advantages of Using Mawashi-geri in Sparring

Mawashi-geri is useful when sparring at close range or in hand-to-hand combat, because it is difficult for an opponent to see the kick coming due to its circular path. Also, targets to the side can be reached, which is impossible with a linear kick such as mae-geri. In this situation, either the front or rear leg may be used, although kicking with the front leg will be quicker and practically impossible for the opponent to block.

At medium or long range, this kick can readily be combined with the arms and legs. It can therefore be used to fire out quick combinations, which is vital in sparring. Also, due to the hip rotation, which provides greater reach than mae-geri, the body is well positioned with respect to the opponent, who has a harder time to reach out with a counter blow. Here are a few sample combinations:

1) Gyaku-zuki jodan — mawashi-geri chudan (medium range)

The gyaku-zuki jodan is used to conceal the mawashi-geri chudan.



Photo 31 Gyaku-zuki jodan



Photo 31 Mawashi-geri chudan

2) Mae-geri chudan — mawashi-geri jodan same leg (medium range)

The mae-geri chudan is used to lower the guard, creating an opening for mawashi-geri jodan.



Photo 33 Mae-geri chudan



Photo 34 Mawashi-geri jodan

3) Mawashi-geri jodan — yoko-geri kekomi chudan same leg (medium range)

The mawashi-geri jodan is used as a feint to raise the guard, creating an opening for kekomi chudan.



Photo 35 Mawashi-geri jodan



Photo 36 Yoko-geri kekomi chudan

4) Gyaku-zuki jodan — mawashi-geri chudan — uraken jodan (long range)

Techniques to follow an opponent who is moving back.



Photo 37 Gyaku-zuki jodan



Photo 38 Mawashi-geri chudan



Photo 39 Uraken jodan

5) Mawashi-geri chudan — uraken jodan — oi-zuki chudan (long range)

Techniques to follow an opponent who is moving back.



Photo 40 Mawashi-geri chudan



Photo 41 Uraken jodan



Photo 42 Oi-zuki chudan

6) Ushiro-geri chudan — mawashi-geri jodan — gyaku-zuki chudan (long range)
Techniques to follow an opponent who is moving back.



Photo 43 Ushiro-geri chudan



Photo 44 Mawashi-geri jodan



Photo 45 Gyaku-zuki chudan

Many other combinations could be used in sparring with mawashi-geri, such as:

- Kizami-mawashi-geri chudan — uraken jodan — oi-zuki chudan;
- Kizami-mawashi-geri chudan — kizami-zuki jodan — gyaku-zuki chudan;
- Kizami-mawashi-geri chudan — ushiro-geri chudan — mawashi-geri jodan — gyaku-zuki chudan;
- Kizami-zuki jodan — gyaku-zuki jodan — mawashi-geri chudan;
- Gyaku-zuki chudan and, when withdrawing the punch, kizami-mawashi-geri chudan or jodan.

6 Important Points to Remember

Important points to remember include the following:

- 1) The body should remain upright when chambering the leg;
- 2) In a chambered position, the knee should be higher than the foot;
- 3) In a chambered position, the heel should touch the back of the thigh;
- 4) Proper hip rotation with snapping motion of the leg;
- 5) The knee of the supporting leg should be bent;
- 6) The supporting foot should be firmly planted on the ground;
- 7) Upon impact, the striking foot should be at a downward angle;
- 8) The return of the leg to the ground should be controlled.

7 Errors to Avoid

The most common errors that occur when practicing mawashi-geri include:

- 1) Moving the upper body or arms when initiating the kick (signals to the opponent);
- 2) Leaning the upper body forward when chambering the leg (upsets balance);
- 3) The knee of the chambered leg is lower than the foot (leads to an incorrect path);
- 4) The knee of the supporting leg is straight rather than bent (upsets balance);
- 5) The heel of the supporting foot is raised when striking (upsets balance);
- 6) The striking foot is at an upward angle upon impact (reduces effectiveness);
- 7) Insufficient hip rotation (reduces effectiveness);
- 8) Excessive hip rotation (upsets balance and creates vulnerability);
- 9) Letting the leg drop after the strike (upsets balance and hinders striking consecutively).

8 Conclusion

In closing, it should be remembered that mawashi-geri is a circular snapping kick that combines the power of the hip rotation with the snapping motion of the leg. To be effective, it must travel along the proper path using great speed and maximum kime. When executed, the knee of the supporting leg is bent, and the supporting foot is firmly planted on the ground. When it hits the target, the striking foot is at a downward angle. It is a useful kick in sparring, since it can be aimed at different targets, including sideways, at close, medium and long range, and it can readily be combined with other arm and leg techniques.

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