



Episode 451 – The Problem with Martial Arts Judging | [whistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com](http://whistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com)



### Jeremy Lesniak:

Hello everyone and welcome to [whistlekickmartialartsradio](http://whistlekickmartialartsradio) episode 451. Today, we're talking about judging, referees, and competition. I'm Jeremy Lesniak, your host for the show, the founder here at whistlekick and I love being a traditional martial artist. I love it, I love it all and that's why we do what we do here at whistlekick and if you want to check out all we do is we do a lot more than the show, go to [whistlekick.com](http://whistlekick.com) see everything we got going on there including the products that we make. There's a store and if you make a purchase somewhere in the store use the code `PODCAST15` that'll save you 15% off anything no matter how much it is. But if you want to know more about this show, there's a separate site [whistlekickmartialartsradio.com](http://whistlekickmartialartsradio.com) and at that site you're going to find transcripts and links and videos and a whole bunch of other episodes, tons of stuff. And while you're there you can sign up for the newsletter which will keep you spun up on everything we've got going on at whistlekick. There's original content in there, we just love making stuff for all you. We bring the show twice a week, we bring you plenty of other content it's all over the place. So wherever you want to follow us YouTube, Facebook, twitter, Instagram, podcasts, our website, Martial Journal there's a ton going on out there so check it out. Now why do we do it, why we do this show? Everything we do is in service to the traditional martial arts community and the goal of the show is to connect, educate, and inspire traditional martial artist the world over.

I've had a number of conversations lately about referees and judging standards and competition, people asking my opinions and I thought you know, let's just put it all out there. I spent a decent amount of



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time in a chair, as I say one of refereeing, and I've learned a lot. There's a lot to think about and unless you've been a parent and a promoter and a coach and a referee and a student and an instructor, it's really hard to understand the full complexity of all this. Now, I've never been apparent but I have been all of those other things. So I understand a lot of the dynamic of what's at play so let's dig in and see if we can bring some clarity to a very complicated issue. Now why does this come up in the first place? Why do we even have to discuss competition and the judging that happens there? Well, because it's often identified as problematic. It is something that people complain about constantly and doesn't matter whether it's large tournaments are small tournaments, even in-school tournaments. People inherently struggle with the subjective opinions of others. And that subjective word is pretty important. If we go to Olympic weightlifting meet, you don't see a lot of controversy there people don't generally complain about the judging. If you lift more than I do, you win. Pretty straightforward. It is darn close to objective as you can get. But if we look at a martial arts competition, a traditional martial arts competition which typically has forms, maybe a variety of categories of forms, maybe there's some breaking in there. There's usually some kind of sparring in nearly every way you can slice these divisions. They are completely subjective with the exception of some breaking divisions, they're subjective. Once in a while you get some breaking stuff that's objective, how many boards are concrete blocks that I go through versus what you did, but beyond that, it's subjective. How you perform your form versus way I do mine that subjective. Point sparring is subjective.

Now there have there been plenty of efforts to address this and if you want to look at an organization that has put a tremendous amount of time into trying to deal with it, it's Olympic tae kwon do. The electronic sensors and everything, it's an attempt at objectivity but it certainly doesn't solve that problem. Talk to someone who's high-level in that space and they will probably give you an ear full. The quality of judging or as I honestly prefer to call it, refereeing, goes back to the choices for the referees. Now let's take a small tangent here, why do I like the term referee versus judge? A referee is someone who is expressing their opinion and helping out. Judging, the word judgment, I just don't like the way that word sounds. Where do we see that word? We see it in the judicial system, comes from the same thing, judge judgment. There is an implication of authority there that I just don't like how it sounds. They're not football judges, they're not basketball judges, they're referees. A referee is doing their best to hold to the regulations of the circuit or competition that they are assisting with. And I think that word choice alone is a pretty good indication of why we have a hard time. How many referees out there are actually passing judgment? Watching a form that they know nothing about. The rules stipulate that they should be scoring based in a certain way but they choose to do it their own way. Happens all the time. Why does it happen all the time? In part because of how we select referees. Which is complicated by the way we have to select referees. If you've been to a martial arts competition you likely have seen rings that are not being used or rings that are running with fewer than the standard number of referees. For example most of the competitions I attend were looking for five referees in each division, but in most divisions it is acceptable to have three referees. Most of the time and there's some nuance here that we could get into, five people presenting their opinions is going to be closer to fair or more fair than three,



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right? More opinions it should even out right? But if there are enough people to sit in chairs, there aren't enough referees and that leaves us with the decision and if you've never promoted an event, you may not know the tension this decision. Do I run this division, Do I have this ring continue with fewer than the number of referees I would want? Thus making the competition take longer and frustrating people, or do I move ahead with it knowing that it might be not quite as fair because of the reduced number of judges, sorry referees.

And that decision happens all the time. Because let's face it, very few people want to go to a competition to referee. Referees are sometimes criticized publicly, sometimes parents and competitors will take issue loudly with them. It can be a very boring job, there's no money in it, so why do people do it? They do it because they're trying to give back and quite often those that are trying to give back are playing a bit of a quid pro quo game. They're hosting their own competition and they need referees in their chairs at their events. So it creates this group that travels around on weekends and they help each other out and much of the time that works quite well. But what happens when you get a bad egg in their which happens I'm going to say frequently, not all, but there's generally somebody in that mix multiple people. So you end up with a bad egg who promotes an event in order to thank people encourage people to come referee at their event, they're helping to referee at other events but nobody really wants them to be refereeing yet because of the way most martial arts competition economies are set up, it's all about following the circuit and helping each other and scoring points and everyone generally get something out of it. The promoters makes money, the competitors hopefully learn and have a good time. But the referees they're not paid. They're thanked, sometimes they're fed. But if you consider it in the same way that you would any kind of other even semi-professional endeavor, doesn't work. And why doesn't it work? Because of the sheer number of people needed to put on the event and the margin, the amount of profit it is built into that competition .

I've run the math on this and for most competitions in order for referees to be paid even minimum wage, it would require doubling, if not tripling, entrance fees. For those of you objecting to that rough math, I suspect there are a lot of expenses that you are unaware of including insurance and the cost of venues and sanctioning fees and things like that. Now, I've only hosted one tournament but I've been behind the scenes and understood what it takes for years. Most martial arts competitions make very little money, something to be aware of. So let's imagine were at this competition and there are some divisions waiting to go and maybe there are two or four referees and the promoter or the head referee says you know I'd really like to have another person this ring and they find someone and they say hey could you help us out? Recognize it in the most competitive circuits, not saying most by numbers but most by the circuits themselves most ranking circuits that I am familiar with do not have a requirement for some kind of certification to be referee. Let's get him in a chair and they do their thing. How many referees have even reviewed the official standards of the tournament or the circuit that they're refereeing for? I'm to say most have not and that creates a problem. In fact, I would say that creates all the problems. It's a lack of experience and understanding and disagreement on how things should be done which is fairly inherent to all lot of the cultural issues we have within martial arts. This is a lot of



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complaining or maybe observing the problems. So what's the solution? I'll be honest I don't have a good one. Matter what solution we propose, it has a substantial roadblock. If we want referees to be certified and have some kind of experience requirement, how do we get them that and how do we encourage them to spend their time doing so? Do we pay them or where does that money come from? If we insist on having a certain number of high-ranking and experienced officials in each division, we have to accept that were going to have fewer divisions running simultaneously and competitions will run that much longer. Some competitions already run two plus days to add a third or maybe a fourth, now that becomes cost prohibitive because of the venue and a number of other logistical things that cover in event spending more time.

I've seen a lot of people complain about the choices that referees make yet they've never referee division. And it doesn't mean that you shouldn't complaint, it doesn't mean that you don't disagree. But it does mean if you haven't experience the pressure of running a ringer being a corner referee in a ring, you may not understand how fast things move. How many different directions things are being torn in. The next time you're watching something an event, I want you to sit down and watch someone say do their form someone that you don't know and I want you to observe it from start to finish without being distracted by anything else going on around you. It's very difficult. Competitions tend to be loud they're chaotic, there are multiple rings running at once. And I think that at the end of the day, this is what we're going to have to do. I think we have to get down to running one ring at a time. That requires doing a lot of things and 95% of people are can be good with it, which is why doesn't happen. So who knows? I'm not saying that's a solution, I'm saying that something I'd like to see tested. Maybe somebody out there will be brave enough to give it a whirl.

If anybody out there is listening and they feel that they can solve this challenge, I would love to partner with you. This is something that I think would make the martial arts would better so hopefully, there's a grand idea that I've missed and I want to hear from you. Email me [Jeremy@whistlekick.com](mailto:Jeremy@whistlekick.com). If you want to give us a hand make a purchase or share an episode leave us a review, don't forget the code PODCAST15 if you make a purchase. If you got a guest suggestion, go to [whistlekickmartialartsradio.com](http://whistlekickmartialartsradio.com) fill up the submission form there if you want to follow us on social media, @whistlekick everywhere you could think of. Thanks for let me ramble a bit today, this is some stuff that's been on my mind. I hope it was helpful, hope you learn something and I look forward to everyone's feedback. Until next time, train hard, smile and have a great day.