

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

April 21, 2004

Mr. William C. Martin
Acting President
U.S. Olympic Committee
National Headquarters
One Olympic Plaza
Colorado Springs, CO 80909

Dear Mr. Martin:

We are writing to express our concerns about a rule change in taekwondo that encourages 12- and 13-year-old black belts to disable their opponents with kicks to the head. Sports medicine specialists have told us that this rule change poses unacceptable risks for children.

Taekwondo is a dangerous sport. The rate of concussions among youth participating in taekwondo competitions is three times greater than the rate among college football players. Taekwondo has the highest concussion rate for girls of any sport.

In recognition of these risks, the United States Taekwondo Union used to have “light head contact” rules that disqualified young teens who knocked out their opponents with kicks to the head. These important safeguards no longer apply, however. Under new rules that went into effect in 2002, 12- and 13-year old black belts are declared automatic victors if their opponent is disabled with a kick to the face or neck. According to the Committee on Sports Medicine & Fitness of the American Academy of Pediatrics, “sparring under these rules will doubtless lead to serious head injuries and other injuries.”

In your congressionally mandated role of overseeing Olympic sports, including taekwondo, we ask that you review the taekwondo rule change and its impact on the health and safety of child competitors.

Background

The United States Taekwondo Union is one of the 45 national governing bodies of the U.S. Olympic Committee. Under the Ted Stevens Olympic and Amateur Sports Act, the U.S. Olympic Committee has the authority to designate amateur sports organizations as governing bodies to carry out its mission to “coordinate and develop

amateur athletic activity in the United States.”¹ This authority was recently invoked on January 27, when the U.S. Olympic Committee demanded the replacement of the board of the United States Taekwondo Union because of financial irregularities. We are writing about a separate matter of health and safety.

The World Taekwondo Federation’s minimum age for international competition is 14 years of age in the calendar year of competition.² Previously, U.S. taekwondo competitors under the age of 14 were governed under the Junior Safety Rules. These “light head contact” rules provided:

- One point for a competitor who successfully made light contact to the face or neck without causing injury.
- A one-point deduction for a minor injury to the face or neck, such as bleeding or an abrasion caused by non-excessive contact.
- Disqualification when a kick to the face or neck resulted in the inability of the opponent to continue sparring because of injury.³

In 2001, the United States Taekwondo Union decided, without any apparent consideration of safety data, to change the rules applicable to 12- and 13-year old black belts.⁴ No longer guided under the Junior Safety Rules, these youth compete under the “full extent” of the World Taekwondo Federation competition rules that also apply to adults.⁵ These rules took effect during the 2002 U.S. Open Championships and provide:

- Two points for kicks to the face or neck that demonstrate “sufficient power and accuracy.”

¹ *Ted Stevens Olympic and Amateur Sports Act* (36 U.S.C. §220501).

² World Taekwondo Federation, *Rules: Competition Rules* (Sept. 23, 2003) (online at <http://www.wtf.org/main.htm>).

³ Stanford University Taekwondo Program, *Stanford University Spring Open: Scoring/Contact Rules* (online at <http://tkd.stanford.edu/spropen2002/index2/rules.html>).

⁴ The recent rule change also included changes for competitors 11 years old and younger. While previously governed under the Junior Safety Rules that allowed for light head contact as described above, youth under 12 are now prohibited from making any head contact under the “No Head Contact” rule.

⁵ Master Ji Ho Choi, *TKD Notepad: New Competition Rules*, Taekwondo Today (Spring 2002).

- One additional point for kicks to the face or neck that cause a knock down of the opponent.
- Victory if the opponent is disabled with a kick to the face or neck.⁶

Safety Concerns

According to medical and taekwondo experts, the new rules put children at risk of serious injury from head trauma.

It is well established that taekwondo competitors frequently suffer head injuries. More than one-third of all taekwondo competition injuries in youth involve the head and neck, the majority of which are a result of an unblocked kick.⁷ Almost two-thirds of these injuries are contusions or cerebral concussions.⁸ The cerebral concussion rate for these boys and girls is five per one thousand athlete exposures (an athlete exposure is equal to one match), three times as high as the rate for college football games.⁹ The concussion rate among girls is higher for taekwondo than for any other recreational sport.¹⁰

Pediatric sports medicine specialists have determined that dropping the age of full contact sparring to 12 years expands these risks substantially. Traumatic brain injuries, including concussions, are more common in young teens, and can cause permanent problems with cognition, movement, and sensation.¹¹ Young teens are also more likely to experience malignant brain edema syndrome, which can cause death within hours after a single blow to the head.¹² Because young teens develop physically at different rates,

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ W. Pieter and E.D. Zemper, *Head and Neck Injuries in Young Taekwondo Athletes*, *Journal of Sports Medicine and Physical Fitness*, 147–153 (June 1999).

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ J.O. Koh, J.D. Cassidy, and E.J. Watkinson, *Incidence of Concussion in Contact Sports: A Systematic Review of the Evidence*, *Brain Injury*, 901–917 (Oct. 2003).

¹¹ National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) in the United States: Assessing Outcomes in Children* (online at <http://www.cdc.gov/doc.do?id=0900f3ec8000f7c7>). Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI): Outcomes and Consequences* (Sept. 11, 2003) (online at <http://www.cdc.gov/node.do?id=0900f3ec8000dbdc&aspectId=A0400027>).

¹² Robert C. Cantu, *Neurologic Athletic Head and Neck Injuries*, *Clinics in Sports Medicine*, 37–44 (Jan. 1998).

the inclusion of 12- and 13-year old children in full sparring increases the chance of mismatches during competition and potential opportunities for harm.¹³

This increased risk is not theoretical: a Korean study published in March 2004 found rates of concussion in taekwondo were nearly twice as great for middle school students compared to high school students.¹⁴

The Committee on Sports Medicine & Fitness of the American Academy of Pediatrics wrote to the United States Taekwondo Union on August 12, 2002, to raise objections to the new rule. This letter stated:

The Committee feels that these rules changes are contrary to what we understand to be basic principles that instruction in taekwondo is meant to teach to young people, namely physical self-control and respect for other human beings. Sparring under these rules will doubtless lead to serious head injuries and other injuries. Furthermore, children and adolescents will grow to value the deliberate injury of others for their own benefit.¹⁵

The United States Taekwondo Union did not respond.

Dr. Jorge Gomez, a sports medicine specialist who serves on the American Academy of Pediatrics' Committee on Sports Medicine and Fitness, then wrote an article for the *American Academy of Pediatrics News* to warn pediatricians about the risks to children. According to Dr. Gomez, "the USTU clearly has placed crowd entertainment above the safety of the child competitor."¹⁶

Dr. Merrilee Zetaruk, a Canadian pediatric sports medicine specialist and a third-degree blackbelt in karate, has also spoken out about the new U.S. rules. She stated that the change "places winning above child safety, which is to be strongly condemned."¹⁷

¹³ Contestants are matched for weight, creating the possibility that competitors of different ages, muscle mass, and pubertal development will be competing against each other.

¹⁴ Jae O. Koh and J. David Cassidy, *Incidence Study of Head Blows and Concussion in Competition Taekwondo*, *Clinical Journal of Sports Medicine*, 72–79 (March 2004).

¹⁵ Letter from Dr. Jorge E. Gomez to Mr. Sang Chul Lee, President, United States Taekwondo Union (Aug. 12, 2002).

¹⁶ Jorge Gomez, *New Taekwondo Rules Put Youths at Risk for Head Injuries*, *AAP News*, 274 (Dec. 2003).

¹⁷ *Id.*

Dr. Zetaruk further noted that children may not be able to provide full informed consent to participate. Indeed, legal precedent suggests that taekwondo officials could be at legal risk in the event of injury. Courts have found that coaches may be responsible for injuries incurred by their athletes if there is evidence that the athlete was not prepared to accept the risks involved in the sport.¹⁸

We have also heard from Elizabeth Cerny, a certified taekwondo referee and black belt. According to Ms. Cerny, the new rule promotes physical harm by “encouraging competitors to increase the intensity of their attack.”¹⁹ She believes the change will lead children to become “desensitized to the pain and injury they inflict on others.”²⁰

Ms. Cerny is also concerned about the level of responsibility placed on inadequately trained referees regarding health decisions. Medical personnel are not present at all competitions, particularly those on a local or state level. Referees are required to make the initial medical evaluation concerning whether the competitor may continue after a knock down or whether medical personnel need to be consulted. According to Ms. Cerny, basic first aid training is not required for taekwondo referees.²¹

Other factors appear to increase the risks associated with the rule change. The new rules remove any transitional period between the “No Head Contact” rule for ages 6-11 and full sparring for black belts age 12 years and up. Without a transition period of junior safety rules that allow for light head contact, children may be left inadequately prepared to protect their head and therefore vulnerable to serious injury. Notably, the impact of the rule change may be difficult to assess given that there appears to be no system in place for tracking injuries incurred during competition.

Conclusion

Sports medicine research demonstrates that the “rules . . . of a particular game may significantly predispose athletes to concussion.”²² Given the susceptibility of youth to head injury and issues surrounding adequate informed consent, the recent rule change in taekwondo raises serious safety concerns. We request that you provide the following information:

¹⁸ See, e.g., *Kahn v. East Side Union High School Dist.*, 31 Cal. 4th 990 (Cal. 2003).

¹⁹ Letter from Elizabeth Cerny to Rep. Henry Waxman (Jan.16, 2004).

²⁰ *Id.*

²¹ E-mail communication from Elizabeth Cerny to minority staff, Government Reform Committee (March 2, 2004).

²² J.O. Koh, J.D. Cassidy, and E.J. Watkinson, *supra* note 10, at 913.

1. Why was the age of 12 chosen for an acceptable age for full sparring? Who was involved in the decision? What data was utilized to make this decision?
2. What is the current process of informing athletes and their parents of the risks of head injury in taekwondo?
3. Why does the United States Taekwondo Union not have a program to track injuries to athletes?
4. What preventive measures are being taken to reduce the risk of serious head injury? What safety measures are in place at competitions to ensure an adequate response to injuries?
5. What data are available nationally or internationally to support 14 years as an appropriate age for full contact sparring? How do 14-year-olds fare in international competition with regards to injury and competitiveness?

We also ask that the U.S. Olympic Committee conduct a full review of the rules and procedures in taekwondo.

We look forward to receiving your response by May 5, 2004.

Sincerely,



Henry A. Waxman
Ranking Minority Member
Committee on Government Reform



Jesse L. Jackson, Jr.
Member of Congress