

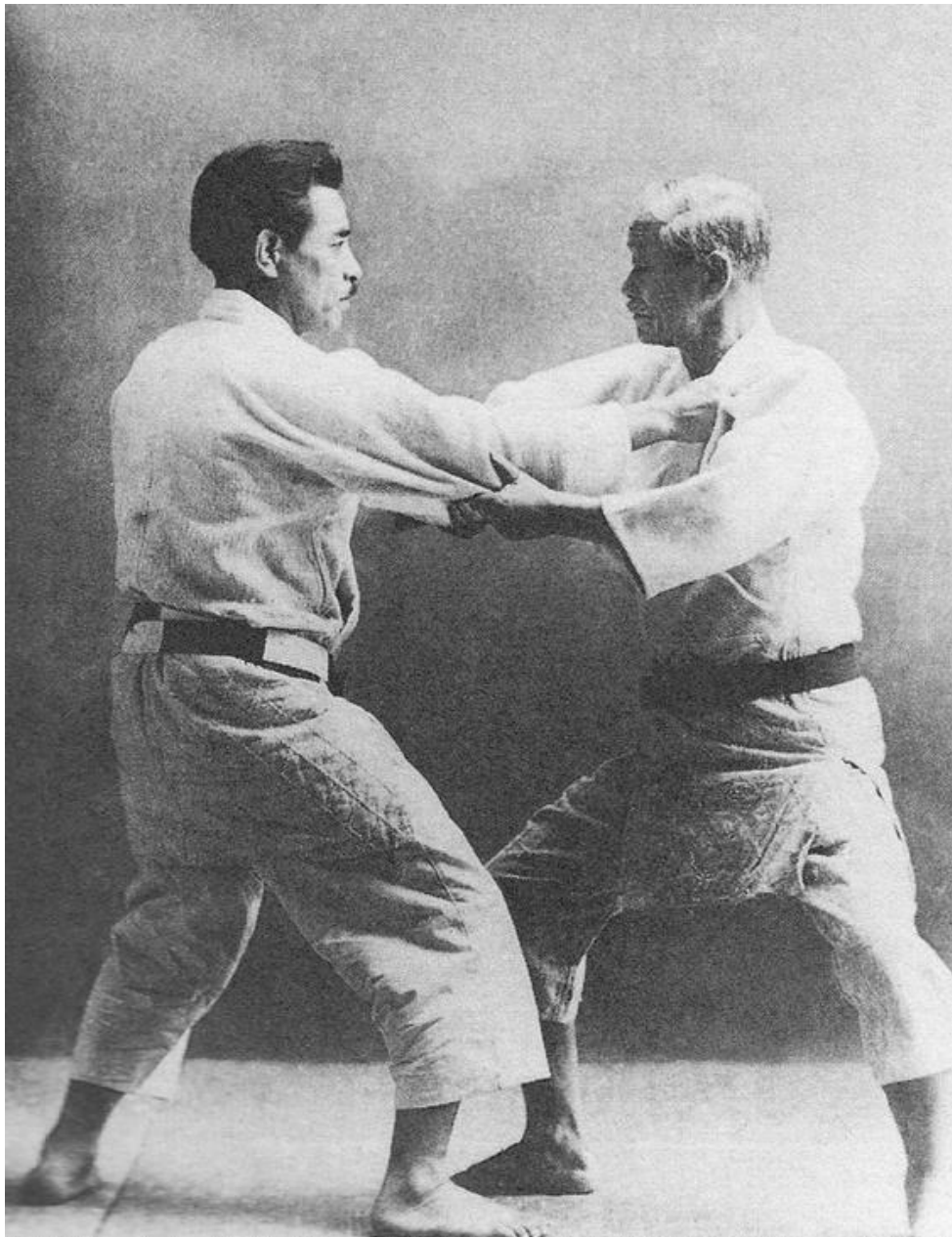
A Brief History of the Origin and Development of Karate Gi

Karate gi, commonly known as a kimono, is a unique uniform for karate practice and competition. It consists of three parts: UWA-GI (the jacket), ZUBON (the pants), and OBI (a long belt wrapped twice around the jacket). Most gi are made of bleached or natural cotton. The uniform is very simple and practical, ensuring free and comfortable movement. It has no pockets, buttons, zippers, or any other sewn ornaments or accessories.

The gi forms part of the history and tradition of karate. It appeared at a particular time for this Japanese martial art, and evolved into the forms we know today. The history of its emergence and transformation is fascinating. It is an important part of identity for not only the discipline of karate, but also its individual styles and schools.

The karate we know today was taking shape at the end of the 19th century on Okinawa, and was disseminated in Japan in the early 20th century by master Gichin Funakoshi. Originally, practitioners wore traditional clothes – various forms of kimono and wide hakama pants. Everybody practiced in their suit, without there being a standard. This changed when around the 1890s the martial-art system of judo evolved from Japanese jujitsu. It was the first Japanese full-contact martial art to be developed based on grips, throws, sweeping, choking and pinning.

Its founder was Jigorō Kanō. He was the first to codify judo techniques and lay the organisational and regulatory foundations of competition. Training was held on tatami mats to cushion the falls. Jigorō Kanō also noticed that the traditional kimono was not best suited to practice, and introduced the judogi. This white uniform consisted of a thick-fabric jacket with an applied collar that made grips possible. The sleeves, instead of being attached to the garment, formed an integral part of the jacket. All this was accompanied by strong white pants and the belt.



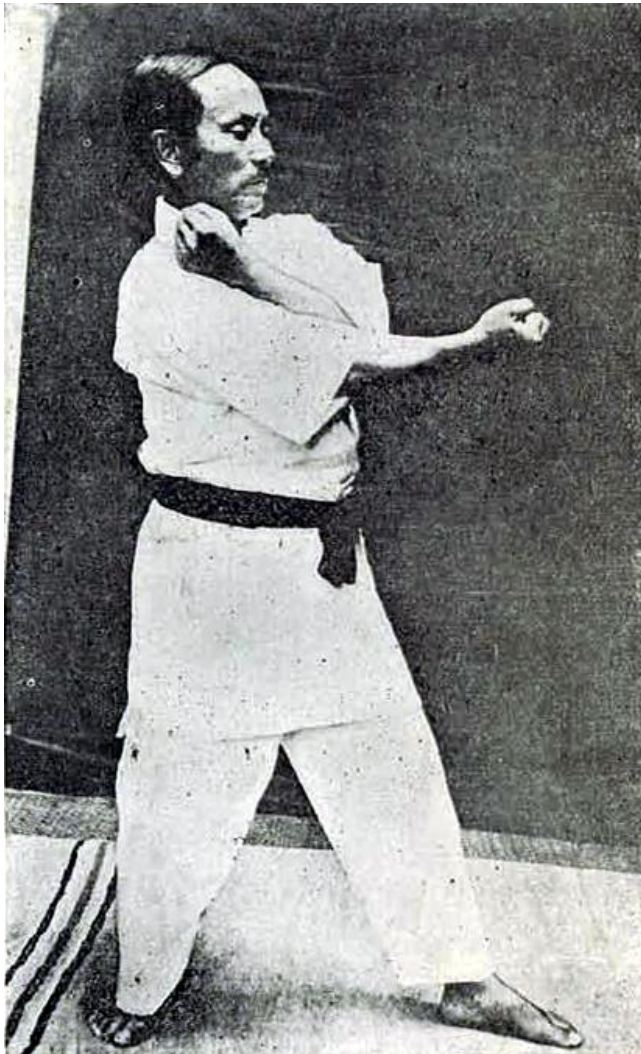
Jigorō Kanō and Kyuzo Mifune demonstrating judo techniques, dressed in judogi.

Jigorō Kanō also introduced a system of student and master ranks which not only reflected the level of expertise of the practitioners but also showed who the instructor was and who the trainee. Some authors believe judogi to be a modified version of the jacket/coat which was used by Japanese firefighters in the 19th century. Despite the similarities in the cut and form, it is very difficult to verify this today.



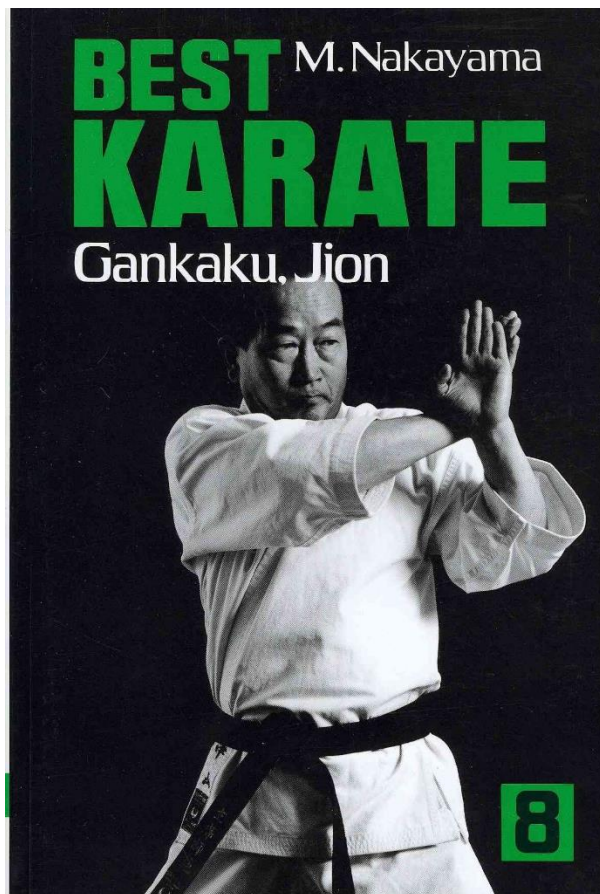
Hikeshi hanten (fireman's jacket), 19th century, Honolulu Museum of Art

In 1920, master Funakoshi demonstrated karate techniques at Kōdōkan, the main school of judo. Inspired by the ideas and organisation of this discipline, he introduced the system of ranks and belts and adapted the practice uniform from judo to karate. Whereas judogi was perfect for grips, throws and tugs, it was not entirely suitable for practicing karate – a dynamic discipline based on kicks and punches. The jacket was too thick and heavy, limiting the rapidity and precision of movement. As time passed and techniques developed, further adjustments would become necessary. Funakoshi's son Gigō introduced high dynamic kicks into the sport. For this, pants had to be loose, so as not to restrict the legs.



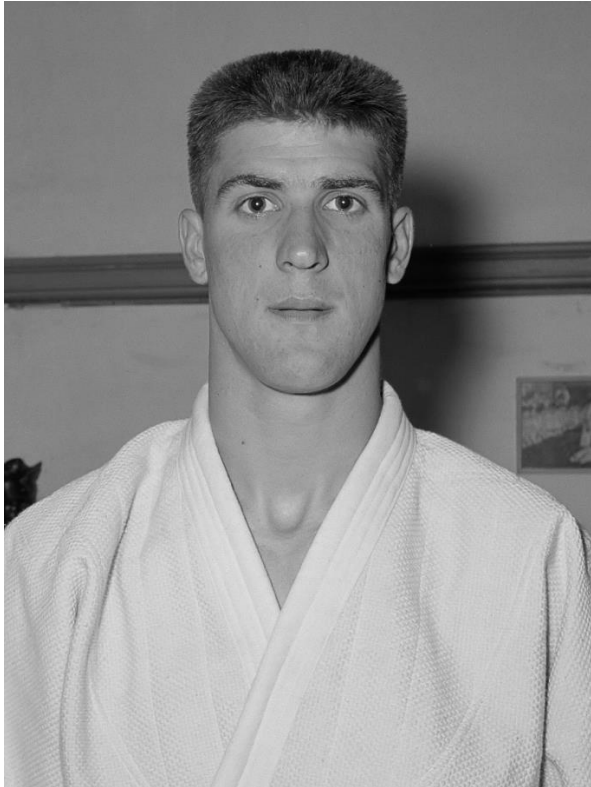
Gichin Funakoshi demonstrating kata techniques in a karate gi.

In 1958, Shizuo Sugiura, a martial arts enthusiast working in the clothing industry noted that it is precisely a lighter and more tailored uniform that is needed to practice the dynamic techniques of karate. The same year saw him establish Tokaido, a company which is currently operated by his sons. Tokaido manufactures one of the best karate gi and, to this day, is the pioneer and leader on the karate uniform market. Sugiura went on to supply uniforms to the instructors of the newly founded Japan Karate Association (JKA), and improved the designs directly based on the practitioners' feedback. At the same time, the JKA helped to popularise the brand and the product. In the 1970s, the instructors demonstrating karate techniques in Masatoshi Nakayama's series of "Best Karate" textbooks were wearing karate gi manufactured by Tokaido.



Masatoshi Nakayama on the cover of his book, wearing a Tokaido uniform.

The dawn of the 1960s saw a certain breakthrough in popularising Japanese martial arts. In 1960, it was decided that the 1964 Summer Olympics in Tokyo would include the first ever judo competition, in Men's Open category. It was dominated by the Dutch judoka Anton Geesink, who demolished his opponents.

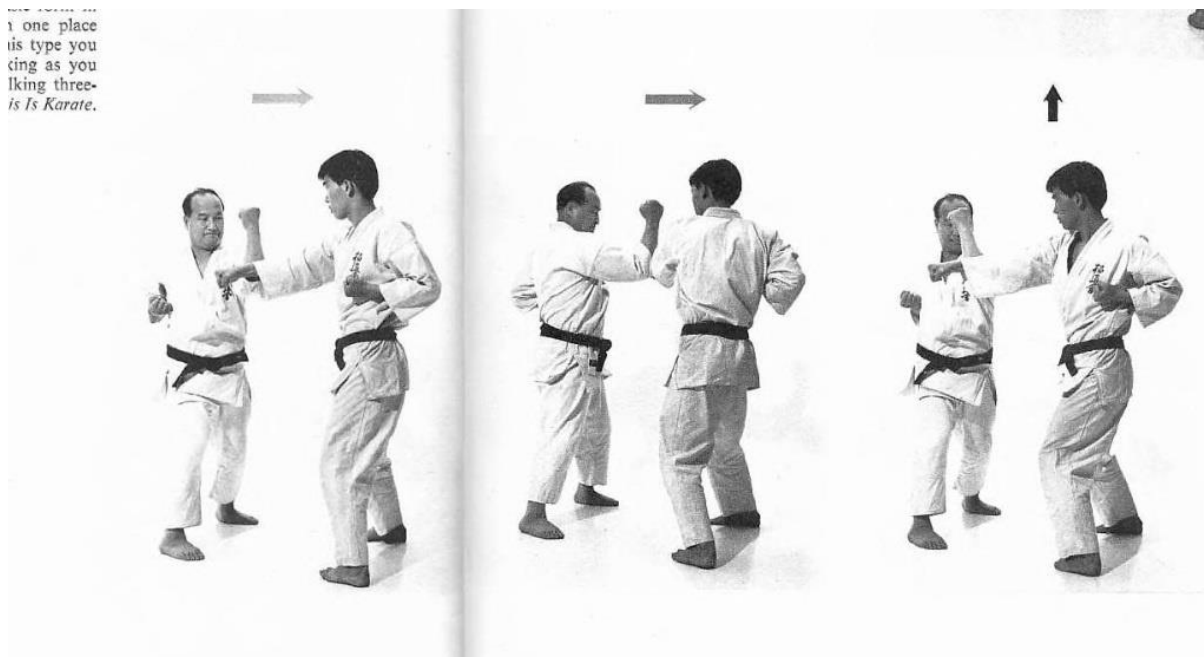


Anton Geesink dressed in the braided judogi jacket (1956)

This contributed to the propagation of judo worldwide, and also gave the impetus for karate to grow. It evolved in many directions, including full-contact karate, pioneered by the legendary master Masutatsu Oyama.

The system for real, full-contact fight that later evolved towards knockdown karate competitions was established at the start of the 1960s and became popular in many countries of the world. Practicing this style of karate requires a uniform which is slightly different in parameters to the one needed for traditional non-contact karate. The standard in this style was set by the Japanese company Isami which developed a uniform consisting of a jacket, made out of reinforced 13-ounce 100% cotton canvas fabric, and 10-ounce cotton twill pants.

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Masutatsu Oyama's instructors demonstrating karate techniques in the 1973 textbook "This Is Karate" were wearing karate gi manufactured by Isami (see photo above).

What is characteristic of this suit is longer pants which fall below the ankles, and a jacket with three-quarter sleeves. The manufacturing process uses high-quality fabrics and likewise involves high-quality sewing. 100% unbleached creamy ivory cotton, which whitens with each wash, became the top standard and a dream for every Kyokushin Karate student, especially since Masutatsu Oyama practiced in Isami uniforms. The only fault was and is the fact that after the first wash, the cotton shrinks by 8 to 12% lengthwise and breadthwise. Buying a gi from Isami involves guesswork, as you need to bear in mind you are buying a gi with excess fabric that shrinks after the first wash.

Today's sportswear for Japanese martial arts is highly specialised and standardised, governed by very strict provisions. For example, judogi sizes are precisely set in centimetres, so that the competitors are able to grip their opponents' sleeves or collars in such a way as would not be possible with a properly tailored suit. The parameters are checked before the fight, on judokas, using a special measuring device (sokuteiki).

C1.10 Judogi Size

The judogi and belt size is controlled by sokuteiki (see picture 9).



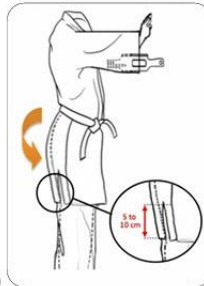
Picture 9

Jacket (see picture 10)

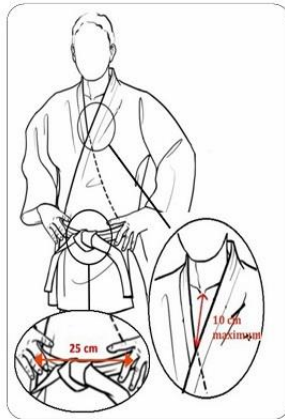
The "skirt" must cover the buttocks completely (plus 5 cm to 10 cm).

With the arms level, the SOKUTEIKI must slip inside entirely and smoothly inside the sleeves.

The judogi sleeves must cover up the full arm including the wrist bone (head of the ulna).



Picture 10



Picture 11

The distance of the crossing points of the jacket, at belt level, must be at least 25 cm (see picture 11). The belt should be worn just above the hip bone and be tied tightly.

- The thickness of the lapel side must be less or equal to 1 cm.
- The width of the lapel side must be 4 cm.
- The distance between the sternum top and the lapel crossing point of the jacket vertically must be less than 10 cm.

WKF (Olympic) karate uniforms evolved in a similar fashion. A lighter, more tailored suit, made out of a breathable mix of cotton and polyester, is used in kumite, or sparring; a wider suit made out of heavier fabrics, usually 100% cotton, is used in kata. Uniforms in international competitions must be officially certified by the World Karate Federation. The certifications are issued once every four years, in Olympic cycles; one of the certified companies is the renowned Tokaido.

Looking from a bird's eye view at the history of uniforms in martial arts – from the jacket inspired by firefighter uniforms to the modern judogi, where Pantone white and blue colours are used to distinguish between the fighters – we can see the evolution that happened over time. The uniforms are simple and natural, and thus never lose their appeal.

Inspired by the living symbolism, I have created a uniform which draws on these values, made out of 100% non-bleached cotton. Getting rid of the natural colour of cotton involves a chemical

process, where a substance – usually chlorine – bleaches but also weakens the fibres in the knitwear. Furthermore, bleaching is never consistent, and the fabric has to be dyed white as well. Dyed cotton becomes grey with time, whereas the natural ivory colour turns white with every wash.

We offer a reinforced, heavier canvas jacket, and lighter twill pants. What sets us apart from our most esteemed competition, and their natural cotton products, is the fact that our gi are factory washed, and so the cotton fabric is already shrunk by 8 to 12 percent.



Karate Outfit Gi

Practitioners of full-contact karate can therefore enjoy a product which is tailored to their height and silhouette. We have managed to honour the best standards of excellence in clothes and, at the same time, do away with obvious faults, thus bridging history, tradition and modernity.

Sensei Piotr Szeligowski 4th Dan

WeltSport company, Switzerland

The photos come from publicly available Internet resources and from my own.