

Safety, Synergy, and Success: Why the Vladivostok "Azuma Cup" Rules Represent the Future of Kudo

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On May 30, 2026, the annual "Azuma Cup" was convened in the port city of Vladivostok, a location of historical significance for the international development of Kudo. For the author, who was raised in Vladivostok and currently operates the Sendai-Chuo Branch in Japan, this event represented both a personal return and a professional evaluation. While this traditional tournament has been held annually in Vladivostok for many years, its status was elevated three years prior when the Russian Ministry of Sports officially designated it as a "National Tournament," making the 2026 event the third iteration under this prestigious national classification.

With the objective of making the Azuma Cup into a major international event, the Russia Kudo Federation, upon receiving official approval from the Kudo International Federation (KIF), extended invitations to multiple member nations. However, due to contemporary geopolitical challenges and scheduling conflicts with concurrent regional sports events, international participation was restricted to athletes from South Korea, Belarus, and Serbia. Under the regulatory framework of the Russian Ministry of Sports, a tournament must feature competitors from a minimum of 11 nations to be officially classified as an "International Tournament" within the state registry. Consequently, the Azuma Cup did not meet the quantitative threshold required to secure official international status this year. Nevertheless, the Russia Kudo Federation continues to exhibit a strong commitment to this goal, actively proposing the integration of the Azuma Cup into the official KIF event calendar to facilitate international status in the future. As a member of the KIF International Department, the author observed firsthand the strength and sincerity of their organizational commitment.

The event demonstrated significant scale, convening approximately 300 competitors from various regions of the Russian Federation. Within the Russian sports administration framework, the Ministry of Sports enforces strict regulations prohibiting children under the age of 12 from participating in official competitions. To accommodate this regulatory framework while fostering youth development, the federation organizes non-competitive "sports festivals" designed to provide introductory competitive experience in a modified, safety-oriented format. Official tournament competition is strictly restricted to participants aged 12 and older. The junior divisions are systematically categorized into age groups (12–13 years, 14–15 years, and 16–17 years), with further subdivisions based on the Physical Index (height plus weight). The 2026 tournament comprised approximately 60 adult competitors and 250 junior athletes. Matches

started at 09:00 and proceeded continuously across two competition mats until 24:00. Executing an event of this magnitude within a single day requires substantial administrative capability; the discipline and organizational precision demonstrated by the refereeing staff and organizers reflected a highly developed operational standard within the Russian Kudo community.

A primary subject of interest among international branch chiefs and instructors concerns the regulatory framework governing junior competitions in Russia. In the Russian Federation, junior competitors aged 12 and older engage in bouts permitting full-contact facial strikes and unrestricted throws and ground fighting. To mitigate injury risk for younger athletes, techniques such as the uppercut and backfist are prohibited for competitors under the age of 16. This specific restriction was implemented following a longitudinal empirical analysis of injury data collected over many years. Aside from these targeted modifications, the competitive rules align with the Under-19 and adult divisions, utilizing a two-minute match duration and restricting ground fighting to two 20-second periods. Competitors under the age of 16 are also required to use specialized protective gloves developed and certified by the Russia Kudo Federation. This unified rule structure ensures that junior practitioners systematically develop technical proficiency within a comprehensive Kudo system. Because the junior rules align consistently with adult rules, athletes experience a seamless transition between age categories, thereby avoiding technical discordance while maintaining the structural integrity of Kudo as a comprehensive martial art.

While skepticism regarding the safety of full-contact facial strikes in junior divisions persists within several international branches, empirical observations of the Vladivostok tournament indicated no evidence of severe concussions or possibility of long-term cranial trauma among the participants. Conversely, it could be argued that overly restrictive junior regulations—such as those currently applied internationally for the Under-16 age division that limit strikes and throws—may inadvertently diminish the technical distinctiveness and dynamic progression of the sport. Highly restrictive rule structures often result in artificial match dynamics, potentially confusing both competitors and spectators regarding the core identity of the martial art. Furthermore, a substantial divergence between youth and adult competition rules can impose significant cognitive and physical stress on athletes who, upon reaching the age of 16, must abruptly adapt to an entirely different competitive environment. In contrast, the methodology employed in the Russian Federation—which integrates a structured young athlete development process, rigorous referee education, and specialized safety equipment—enables young practitioners to develop continuously under a singular, cohesive competitive framework, thereby establishing a comprehensive technical foundation prior to reaching physical maturity.

The observed safety record is highly dependent upon the rigorous standards of the refereeing panel. Russian referees prioritize competitor safety through proactive match management. Rather than waiting for a competitor to sustain a significant knockdown, officials promptly award a "Koka" point upon the delivery of a clean, decisive strike to the head. Similarly, during

ground fighting, a "Mikomi Ippon" (technical submission) is declared immediately upon the securing of a joint lock, preventing potential musculoskeletal injury. Throughout the tournament, only three knockouts were recorded (all three in the adult division), all of which resulted from high-kick techniques rather than punches to the head; no instances of concussion or acute disorientation from hand strikes were observed. These outcomes suggest that the KIF and its member branches may benefit from a re-evaluation of international junior rules. Introducing structured facial strikes and unrestricted throws, while simultaneously enhancing referee certification programs and safety protocols, could serve to align global practice with the core technical principles of Kudo.

The Russia Kudo Federation allocates substantial resources toward referee education. In compliance with the guidelines established by the national Ministry of Sports, the federation operates a structured domestic certification system alongside the KIF licensing framework. Referees are classified into four distinct categories and must undergo annual recertification. This process requires candidates to pass a rigorous theoretical examination. The national licensing committee maintains a repository of 127 theoretical questions and 19 practical, situational scenarios. Candidates are evaluated on 10 random theoretical questions and two practical scenarios, with a minimum passing threshold of 70%. This standardized educational protocol ensures that officials possess a comprehensive understanding of the competitive rules and high-level match-management capabilities. Consequently, while minor subjective variances in judgment naturally occur, the tournament was free of critical refereeing errors or contested outcomes.

An analysis of the technical standards indicates that Russian competitors exhibit high levels of physical conditioning, structured training methodology, and a highly refined competitive style. Russian competitors heavily emphasize boxing fundamentals, demonstrating advanced footwork, precise distance control, and refined linear combinations, representing a significant evolution away from historically wider, looping strikes. Although their strategic offense is primarily hand-centric, their kicking arsenal remains highly dynamic, incorporating spinning back kicks, jump kicks, and wheel kicks. Furthermore, the absence of throw restrictions facilitates the execution of complex judo-based shoulder throws directly from clinching positions, showcasing a seamless transition between striking and grappling ranges.

The author's affiliation with Daido-Juku commenced in 1991, coincident with the establishment of the first international branch in Vladivostok. Consequently, the 2026 tournament coincided with the 35th anniversary of Kudo's introduction to the region. The pre-tournament assembly convened numerous pioneer members who have contributed to the regional foundation of the sport since 1991. This gathering provided an invaluable opportunity to reconnect with long-term colleagues, former training partners, and early competitive opponents. Discussions centered on historical reflections, including the legacy of the late Grandmaster Takashi Azuma, and the initial participation of Russian athletes in the All-Japan Championships. Sincere appreciation is extended to the administration of the Vladivostok branch and the Russia Kudo Federation for

their hospitality and organization of this commemorative event.

In the capacity of Branch Chief of Sendai-Chuo and as a member of the KIF International Department and KIF International Instructor, the author remains committed to fostering bilateral relations between the Japanese and Russian Kudo organizations, as well as the broader global community. Ongoing efforts will be directed toward preserving and developing the legacy established by Grandmaster Takashi Azuma and advanced by Jukucho Kenichi Osada. It is projected that the observations compiled in this report will provide a constructive perspective on the structural efficacy of the Russian training and regulatory systems, thereby contributing to the ongoing discussion regarding the future development of Kudo on an international scale.



A photo from the opening ceremony held after approximately 150 matches had been played, with only the semifinal matches and beyond remaining