**THE FUTURE OF JUDO: Recruitment & Retention Practices**

*by Mark Lonsdale*

A topic of constant and pressing concern in the judo world is “growing judo**”** or, at a minimum, bringing participation back up to former local and national levels. If we allow the downward trends to continue, Judo could cease to be recognized as an international sport, or the National Olympic Committee could rule that the numbers do not justify the cost of funding or fielding a judo team.

Fortunately there are individuals and clubs that are doing something right, evidenced by growing memberships and a very real sense of ‘judo community’ within their clubs. Unfortunately there are all too many others that appear to be dying or have simply closed their doors. The same is true on the international stage where national judo organizations have seen approximately 30% fewer registered members than in the previous ten or twenty years.

Here in the United States, clubs that were once thriving have shrunk to fewer than eight or ten active judoka. Others have membership numbers that are inflated by loyal but inactive members, but it is the nightly activity on the mat, combined with a positive atmosphere, that convinces the walk-in visitor to try judo. A healthy and active club, with a couple of dozen judoka of different belt colors, including black, is more impressive than three white belts and a yellow belt under the tutelage of a brown belt. This is not to belittle the dedication and contribution of that brown belt, but prospective members want to see a number of active judoka of their own age that they can identify with, under the watchful eye of a respected and competent black belt instructor (or red & white belt).

So when and why did judo participation begin to diminish?

Readers that remember the arrival of highly commercialized permutations of taekwondo (TKD), some thirty years ago, will recall how kids and parents were attracted to the colored belts, rapid promotions, and the fact that black belts were awarded to very young juniors. And what parent would not want the bragging rights of having a ten year-old black belt in the family – even if it came at a high price?

The resulting interest in TKD, Bruce Lee Kung Fu, and Chuck Norris or Ed Parker karate, made the rigidly traditional world of judo less attractive. Back at that time was when the judo community should have taken a long, hard look at retention policies and practices. But in addition to losing young judoka to high school sports, such as football, baseball, basketball, and swimming, clubs began losing students to the other more colorful martial arts – even though they were considerably more expensive. This is further proof that we have historically undervalued judo tuition.

Today is no different, except now we are competing with Thai kick boxing, Brazilian Ju Jitsu (BJJ), Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) and cage fighting. So a common discussion, at both the club level and national level, is how do we stay relevant and grow judo?

This brings us to the subject of recruiting and retention. But just as *teaching* and *coaching* judo require different skill-sets, *recruiting* and *retention* are two quite different animals. Where recruitment is essentially a matter of marketing, retention is driven by the quality of judo being taught and practiced at the club level.

**RECRUITMENT**

Recruitment is the process of getting new students in the front door each year, to offset the inevitable losses out the back door. Looking at the statistics from one national survey, annual turnover in judo clubs can range from 25% to 85% depending on how well the club is run. The two most common reasons for quitting judo are “lost interest; it was boring” and “there was no structure to the training.” These two reasons accounted for 42% of annual turnover followed by “decided to focus on another sport” (>9%) and “too much emphasis on competition” (>6%). Not surprisingly, no one quit judo because of the cost.

A look back at medieval history teaches us that, in time of war, it was the lord or baron who brought the most soldiers to the battlefield in defense of the king who was held in the highest regard. Could this have application in judo? If there were to be a valid reason to award Dan-grade promotions for contribution to the sport, other than by competition, kata and technical testing, then it should be for recruiting. Any instructor who can recruit a hundred judoka each year, or retain 85% of the active membership, deserves recognition. “Time in grade” means nothing if it is not devoted to advancement in teaching, coaching, kata, refereeing, or national development.

The future of judo is not the *Rokudan* or *Shichidan,* who may have become complacent about recruitment and runs a club with only ten members, but the enthusiastic instructors (*Shodan to Yondan*) who start new clubs, actively recruit new members, attend courses and clinics, teach good judo, and retain a high percentage of his or her students. The foundation of club Judo is undoubtedly the young black belts and brown belts that turn up every night to lay mats, pass on their knowledge, compete in *shiai*, and encourage the next generation of judoka.

So if recruitment is every bit as important to growing judo as teaching good judo, where does a newly minted black belt or assistant instructor learn about recruiting?

Recruiting strategy is a skill that can be taught, and in reality, should be a topic of discussion at every national and regional development conference. But the actual recruitment must be implemented at the local grassroots level – a task that could be delegated to any club member who has experience in marketing, advertising, or building websites. Unfortunately all too many clubs have become accepting of the downward trends and complacent about aggressive marketing and promotion.

The judo instructors that have been successful at bringing in new members have used their own initiative, plus considerable time, energy and personal funds, to actively get out there and hustle. If your club has decreasing membership, ask yourself, when was the last time that you spent an entire day visiting local schools, recreation centers, or businesses to promote judo? Or how often do you write articles for local magazines and send press releases to the local newspapers? If the answer is never, then the lack of interest or growth in judo in your area is self-evident.

In the pre-internet era we advertised in local papers, printed fliers, put up posters at schools and in shop windows, and sent out direct mailers – and it worked. As a young assistant instructor I helped my *sensei* build a club from 30 students to over 200 in a two year period. How? We visited elementary schools and high schools doing demonstrations anywhere we were welcomed. And every time a club member did well in competition we sent a press release to the local newspapers.

But with the aid of today’s internet technology, marketing and advertizing have become easier. Guerrilla marketing (at little to no cost) is driven by web sites and social networking tools such as My Space and Facebook. Facebook in particular has become a significant part of many young people’s daily lives (and many not so young).

So before we discuss policies and practices at the national level, the next question becomes, how do we retain the students we have already recruited?

**RETENTION**

Meeting recently with two overseas national judo federation representatives, I was told that they had a 40% turnover rate per annum in judo. This equates to losing four out of ten members every year. Nationally, they did not seem to have trouble bringing in new members each year, but the type of judo being practiced in many clubs was not holding their interest. Clubs that were more progressive and practicing ‘age-appropriate’ judo were having greater success with retention.

One problem with retention, that we have already discussed, is complacency. This is true in many sports and evident when a club or national governing body simply accepts the downward trend and does not try to reverse it. How long do you allow a plant or tree to wither before you make an effort to water it? The answer should be at the first indication of ill-health, when the edges of the leaves begin to turn brown, not when it is almost dead. That should have been twenty years ago with judo.

To reverse a downward trend it is necessary to have formal policies, procedures, and processes that target recruitment and retention. But before attacking the problem, it is necessary to collect and tabulate accurate numbers and statistics so that trends can be tracked – both positive and negative. At the club level, success in recruiting and retention is evidenced by the number of judoka on the mat; but at the national level, all these memberships need to be totaled and tracked. The best way to do this is to send out an *Exit Survey* to every club and individual who fails to renew his or her membership.

The first question, before formalizing a retention strategy, is why are we losing judoka? The next question is, are we doing everything we can to improve retention?

To better understand why people quit judo, it is necessary to have some form of survey tool that will help track individual reasons. This should be at the club level and at the national level. As an example, if you try to cancel your insurance or cable TV, the provider will want to know why, so that they can attempt to better meet customer needs in the future. With judo, we need to survey all former members that fail to renew to find out why. A brief online survey could ask if they left because of loss of interest, relocation, no clubs in close proximity, work commitments, other sports, injuries, costs, some problem with the club or instructor, or lack of progress, etc.

Only once we gain a clear picture of why members fail to renew, can we make an effort to retain their membership in the sport. It may be as simple as young judoka who stopping coming to the dojo because he didn’t have a ride. Finding another member to pick him up on the way to training would solve that problem. For the judoka who is not interested in competition (over 85%), it may be a matter of adjusting the emphasis in club training to cater equally to the non-competitors. Or it may be that the 6 PM training time is not convenient, falling right on the family dinner hour. Consider earlier junior training sessions directly after school.

As with recruitment, a retention strategy must be driven by the **age of the target membership**. Each age group, to include kids, pre-teens, teens, seniors, and masters, has different needs and expectations from judo. In general, 85-90% of participants do judo for recreation, with only 10-15% involved in competition. Less than 2% rise to the elite player status, and yet they benefit from all the national funding.

Beginning with adults, very little is being done in the area of senior development and retention for non-elite judoka in the United States. Seniors, particularly brown belts and black belts (S*hodan to Sandan*), are the primary driving force in judo at the club level. They are the assistant instructors and instructors who bear the brunt of the burden, but as they age their needs and expectations change. This is where the national organization must provide the options of moving from senior competition judo into teaching, coaching, refereeing, kata, and masters. Each of these can and should be developed as a retention tool through access to regional and national senior clinics, camps, and multi-level certifications.

Juniors, on the other hand, have different expectations. They want to have FUN in a safe, non-threatening environment, as do many adults. They want to be challenged, rewarded for their effort, and have regular attainable promotions. Be assured, getting those colored belts, stripes and grading certificates is a big deal for both the students and the parents. And at the end of the year, clubs should give out awards for attendance, attitude, sportsmanship, most improved, and helpfulness with club activities such as laying or sweeping the mats (*tatami-waza*).

Teens are the biggest challenge in retention for judo clubs. For every teen that stays in judo, usually because they have been successful in competition, a dozen others are lost to a myriad of teenage distractions and social engagements. Judo clubs also lose successful competitors to high school football, baseball, basketball, hockey, swimming and even golf, when their coaches see the athletic potential in these talented young people. And those sports all offer the possibility of a college scholarship or a lucrative career in professional sports.

This is where the club must work to make the teens’ experience in judo so enjoyable and fulfilling that they remain active in judo, even if they pursue other sports at the same time. A judo coach also needs to be creative, suggesting that the judoka play one sport in the summer or winter and come back to judo when they can. In making an argument for the parents, you can explain all the added costs of football, baseball, and hockey gear, or even cheer uniforms and camps, compared to the relative low cost of judo. A junior judo player only needs a white judogi. For serious competitors the big cost is travel to tournaments – but those are the same for any championship sport.

The very affordable monthly fees and low initial cost is one reason that judo is popular in middle- and lower middle-class communities, and inner city areas, where parents may not have an extra thousand dollars to spend on football or hockey gear. But if their son or daughter demonstrates real potential in local judo competition, then the cost of tournaments and travel could become a burden. So this is where the clubs and regional governing bodies need to be creative and aggressive in fund raising for team travel.

There should also be regional development committees to promote and assist athletic development of young competitors. It would be a sad day for judo if a talented young judoka did not have the opportunity to reach his or her full potential, just because their parents, or the sport, lacked the financial resources to take them to the nationals or beyond.

**NATIONAL GOVERNING BODY (NGB) SUPPORT**

While winning more medals at the World Championships and Olympics would undoubtedly have a positive influence on U.S. judo, particularly through media coverage and television exposure, the true metric for measuring the effectiveness of the NGB, in any sport, should be membership growth and retention. Increased membership equates to increased interest and activity at the grassroots level, and increased revenue stream for future development. Increased numbers also attracts increased sponsorship, so that a healthy and growing organization becomes a self-propagating enterprise.

Therefore national recruiting drives should be an integral part of the strategy for growing judo in the United States.

To attack this in an effective and businesslike manner it is necessary to have formal policies and procedures, at both the national and regional level, focused on recruitment and retention. It is not sufficient to simply have a stated position of “supporting growth in judo” – the NGB should be pushing a toolbox of strategies and practical methods to help clubs realize that goal.

An NGB should have short and long term goals for both recruitment and retention, but again, it will require significant effort at the club level to make those goals a reality. The NGB can supply the guidance and national level advertizing, but the clubs still have to be prepared to follow through by turning development strategies into operational realities. For example, if the NGB sends out a new recruiting poster, it has no value unless the clubs actively push these out into the community.

So the next question becomes, what does a recruitment and retention strategy look like?

Without writing a comprehensive strategic growth plan, which could be detailed in a later article, the following is the type of guidance that can be pushed down from the national level to regions, clubs and individual instructors. These are simple, practical and effective ways to generate interest and grow membership.

Recommendations to new or struggling judo clubs and instructors: -

**RECRUITING**

1. Take a listing in the local Yellow Pages under *Martial Arts;* hard-copy and online editions.
2. Canvas your club, to include members, volunteers and parents, for anyone with experience in marketing, advertising or IT, willing to use their skills to help promote judo and the club.
3. Set up a club web site. When anyone in your area Googles “judo,” your club should be top of the list of options. Currently, some clubs do a very good job of maintaining websites while others have nothing. So not surprisingly, the clubs with good websites are often thriving.
4. Set up a club Facebook page (which costs nothing), with links to information on judo and national organizations. Social network sites are a critical component of the pre-teen and teen world. Getting judo onto these sites creates discussion, interest, and a modern, positive image.
5. Have club members set up their own judo Facebook pages to further promote the sport. The more times your club name is posted on various social networks, the easier it becomes to find on Google.
6. Print Judo Club business cards for your instructors, coaches, administrators and volunteers.
7. Have instructors and members place inexpensive fliers on every public notice board in the community – to include schools, libraries, community centers, gyms, places of employment, shops, etc
8. Ask local shopkeepers to put up posters for the club in their front windows. Keep the posters small (letter or legal size) so as not to take up too much window space.
9. Write articles for school magazines and local newspapers.
10. Send out regular press releases concerning any club activities such as promotions, and particularly wins at competitions. Local newspapers have space set aside specifically for local sports news and human interest stories.
11. Facilitate local newspaper coverage of demonstrations, fundraising events and interviews with club members who win at competitions. Be sure to have high resolution images from the tournaments to go with the story.
12. Ask every member to bring a friend to judo for an introductory free class. Have an annual “bring a friend to judo” event at the start of each semester.
13. Two or three times a year advertise an open house at the club where the general public can come to watch demonstrations and learn about judo.

**RETENTION**

1. If necessary, change the way you are doing judo to make it more age-appropriate, fun, interesting, and challenging. Juniors will always be the future of judo, but maintaining a core group of seniors is also critical to growth.
2. Develop social activities, fund-raising events, and judo camps to further develop a sense of community within the club.
3. Host high performance clinics the competitors; and clinics related to coaching, kata and refereeing for non-competition members.
4. Network with other clubs for informal team *shiai* and training clinics.
5. Contact all former students and encourage them to come back to judo. The simple act of reaching out may be all that it takes for some to realize that they are valued members of the “judo family.”
6. Survey former members and parents that did not renew, to find out why they decided to quit judo. Ask if they intend to come back. Ask seniors if they intend to enroll their children in judo.
7. Be sure to get **email addresses** on all members. Email is undoubtedly the easiest and cheapest way to send out information, draw feedback, and encourage membership renewal. Email shots should not be annoying or overwhelming (spam) but short, simple, polite and informative.
8. Set up self-defense clinics as a vehicle to introduce more people to judo. These can be targeted at women only, mothers and daughters, businessmen, or for emergency services personnel. Self-defense, as with judo, could also be promoted as a tool in a local school’s anti-bullying program.

Now, not everyone will agree with all of these, or you may feel that some do not apply in your area; but if you don’t at least make the effort to employ a few of these tactics, then you are dropping the ball. Unless of course your club is fortunate enough to have a long waiting list of students beating down the door to join – in which case you just need to expand the dojo or add more classes.

**CONCLUSION**

The clubs that are enjoying success in growing judo seem to be those that are teaching age-appropriate judo and have a social aspect to their activities. They have departed from purely traditional judo and have adjusted their teaching and training methods to better suit the age and expectations of their judoka. They have also created a sense of belonging or “judo community.”

But nothing encourages new membership more than an enthusiastic instructor teaching good judo. When a visitor of any age walks into the dojo, the atmosphere and activity on the mat should inspire them to join up, or at least give it a try. Parents should see a clean dojo and well run training session, with disciplined and respectful juniors having FUN. They should want their children to benefit from what we already know – that judo is the best sport on the planet. Adults and seniors should also find a healthy non-threatening training environment, where they can enjoy their workouts and, if they want to, test their competitive skills in *shiai*.

When parents or visitors speak to the instructor, they should find a positive and sincere individual who takes the time to thank people for their support and works tirelessly for the benefit of the club.

But most importantly, everyone should have the opportunity to grow in judo!

*Mark Lonsdale is an active judo instructor, USJA &USJF certified coach and a former national and international judo competitor. Mark develops training programs for military& law enforcement; lectures on teaching methodology; and has taught diving physics & physiology and instructor development in the UCLA Department of Kinesiology.*

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