

COACHING JUNIORS AT COMPETITION: What Can You Do on Match Day?

by Mark Lonsdale

Coaching juniors can be far more rewarding than coaching elite athletes, since there are none of the big egos and bad attitudes; just a lot of fun with the odd tears of disappointment (hopefully theirs not yours). But coaching mat-side at a tournament is very different to coaching in the dojo. In the safety and relative serenity of the dojo, the coach can talk directly to his or her judoka, making suggestions and subtle modifications to techniques and tactics. Club training is where the coach can work with a competitor, or team, on their techniques, competition tactics, and even review video of other competitors. The coach also has the ability to video the team doing randori for additional player analysis.

At the novice and junior levels, this training should focus on doing good judo with lots of commitment to big attacks; not the scrappy tactics, competition grip fighting, and negative judo often seen at the senior levels.

However, at a tournament, those same players who were calm and collected in the dojo may become nervous and distracted. For the coach, this makes effective communication under the stresses of *shiai* extremely difficult. Competitors will be focused on their next fight, their opponents and, in all likelihood, will not hear anything the coach says from the sidelines. This can be attributed to stress-induced tunnel vision and auditory exclusion.

Changes in IJF rules have also restricted mat-side coaching at international tournaments, except when the referee has called *matte*, creating a break in the action. This is to restrict those out of control, red-faced coaches who insist on bouncing out of their chairs and yelling incessantly at their players. But USA Judo (USJI) has not adopted this rule at the local or national levels.

So what can a coach do at a tournament that hasn't already been covered in training?

Barring any nagging injuries, if the athlete has followed the coach's training program religiously, then he or she should be going into the competition at their physical, technical, tactical and psychological peak. That may be a lot to expect of novices and juniors, but they should still be drawing confidence from the coach's advice, preparations, and presence. They should be arriving at the *shiai* organized and eager to fight, not nervous and apprehensive.

There is no arguing that match performance is directly influenced by pre-tournament training and preparation. Nothing prepares the athlete more, mentally or physically, than knowing that they have done everything humanly possible to prepare for the competition. But be assured, the competitor is still looking to the coach for moral support and guidance on the big day.

Suggestions for coaching novices and juniors on match day:

1. Have a game plan built on a solid approach to competition and based on past experience. Peak your athletes early so that they can taper the week prior to competition. This will help with muscle recovery and prevent injuries.
2. Sweat all the details long before match day; ensure paperwork is in order; and know the current competition rules. Don't forget your coaching credentials and be sure to attend the pre-match referee & coach briefing.
3. Nervousness is contagious, so by being organized and confident your players will also feel calm and confident. You are the professional that they look to for guidance.
4. Establish a routine for your player or team that begins with selecting their judogi and packing their gear bags the night before the competition. Then arrive early; don't be late for

registration and weigh-ins; ensure players re-hydrate after weigh-in; and allow time for taping, warm-ups and stretching.

5. Motivate & energize your players during warm-up time. Again, reassure your player that he or she has done everything necessary to prepare for this competition.
6. Treat each player as an individual. Different players have different needs and personalities. If your player needs to talk, then talk to them. If they prefer to quietly focus or listen to music, then give them that time and space.
7. Know what you are trying to achieve. Emotions are powerful forces, so try to channel the athlete's emotions accordingly. Select your words of advice and encouragement carefully, using positive affirmations in the form of **Do's** not **Don'ts**.
8. Keep advice simple and focus only on what is effective. Match day is too late to introduce new ideas or techniques. (At the last *shiai* I attended I saw a father in the parking lot trying to teach his six-year old *soto-maki-komi*, a technique the kid had not learned in the club.)
9. Study the draw and encourage your players to study their opponents. Time doing reconnaissance is never wasted. Ask questions such as, "What do you think about your next opponent?" "Have you noticed any weaknesses?" "Do you have a plan?"
10. Make small adjustments for each opponent. You don't have time to make major changes to how your player fights, but you can remind them of the strengths and weaknesses of their next opponent.
11. Just be there for your player (mat-side). If the player is well trained and well prepared, then the coach is only needed for moral support. Be a supportive face in an emotionally-charged setting.
12. The coach can make notes on his or her player's performance for review back at the dojo. For example, if the player continually loses to *osaekomi-waza*, then there may be a need to work on *newaza* avoidance or escapes. If a player is accumulating *shidos* for non-combativity or false attacks, then that too can be addressed in training.
13. Never belittle a player's performance on the mat. It probably took a lot of courage just to step up to the line.
14. Save the critiques for back at the dojo, and know how to turn a loss into a positive learning experience. "Listen, your attacks were strong in matches 1 & 2, but what could you could have done better in the semi-finals?" or "You didn't seem comfortable when your opponent took a left-handed grip. Would you like to work on that this evening?" A final word on competence and professionalism....

Competence comes from studying judo, teaching, coaching, and athlete development.

Professionalism is how you go about applying that experience and knowledge. If you aspire to coach at the nationals, or internationally, then get into the habit of dressing and acting like a professional, even at the local junior *shiai* level. Shorts, flip-flops, t-shirts and ball-caps are out. Slacks and a golf shirt with the dojo or team logo would be ideal; clean jeans are acceptable, as are team track suits (sweats). A coach should also set an example for his players by being polite and respectful with the officials and referees, and by following the appropriate mat etiquette.