

FROM PRINCIPLE TO PURPOSE: Teaching & Coaching Judo

by Mark Lonsdale

In the past few decades I have had the good fortune to train with some of the best judo instructors, coaches, and teams from several countries. These have included national coaches from France, Japan and the United States. Through all that training and the inevitable poundings, I have tried to remain open to new ideas and methodologies as they relate to judo development. While I am a judo traditionalist at heart, as a professional trainer and educator I have been strongly influenced by modern teaching methodologies and studies in kinesiology.

Professor Jigoro Kano's principles of maximum efficient use of energy, or *Maximum Effect with Minimum Effort* (*Seiryoku zenyo*), and *Strive for Excellence* (*Jika-no-kansei*), are as valid today as they were when coined. But Kano did not have the tools that we now have for sports analysis, psychological inventory of the athlete, or an appreciation for training options such as Plyometrics (for developing explosive power). In addition, due to underpinning social paradigms, the development of Western students is very different from our Japanese counterparts who benefit, at some levels, from a more disciplined educational system, with judo as a mandatory form of physical education.

So in looking at judo in the United States, what I have found encouraging in recent years are the positive effects that modern teaching methodology and performance sports physiology have had on the sport. We can leave the IJF judo politics and rule changes for another discussion.

One can compare the judo text books we used thirty years ago to the ones we have today, to realize considerable research and development has gone into this sport that we all live and love. While *Kodokan Judo* and *The Canon of Judo* are still classics that should be in every instructor's library, new books such as Hayward Nishioka's *Training for Competition Judo*, and Neil Ohlenkamp's *Judo Unleashed*, are far more representative of modern judo.

Stepping back from international level athletic development, it has been interesting to see how coaching skills and styles have evolved at the local and regional levels. Granted, there are still all too many mat-side coaches whose red-faced lack of talent is exemplified by screaming "go harder" or "get out" from an *osaekomi* – often to a junior competitor who is so overwhelmed by the match that he or she hears nothing (stress induced auditory exclusion). Then there are the individuals that I hesitate to call a coach, who demonstrate no knowledge of the rules, and then berate their players for losing as they come off the mat – shattering the aspirations of a potential future champion, or just breaking the spirit of a kid having fun.

But it is not all doom and gloom out there in Judo America. More and more coaching clinics, run by dedicated individuals such as Hayward Nishioka, Bill Montgomery, Joan Love, Jimmy Pedro, and Pat Burris, to name but a few, are raising the overall awareness and skills of instructors and amateur coaches throughout the United States. Granted, we are still behind the curve in coaching development when compared to countries such as France, but we are moving in the right direction, even if it seems somewhat slowly.



Mark demonstrating a strangle on Yoshi, a senior instructor visiting his New Zealand dojo from a Japanese University.

So what is coaching? Before looking at modern coaching, we should define exactly what a coach is. This in itself is a subject not without controversy, so the following is my humble opinion – but with substantial agreement from other informed individuals and coaches.

One coach, for whom I have considerable respect, made the statement, “Every coach should be a teacher – but not every teacher can coach.” The ensuing discussion defined a judo teacher as the instructor or club sensei who teaches judo. The role of the instructor is to teach the technical aspects of judo to the limits of his or her experience. For most, this would include all the Kodokan techniques up to *shodan* level. In addition, if that sensei or club participates in competition, the instructor will develop a limited repertoire of basic competition techniques and tactics. This allows him or her to better prepare club members for low to mid-level competition (*shiai*).

A coach, on the other hand, focuses on full-spectrum athlete development specifically for competition. This will still include teaching at the club level, but with the view of improving a judoka’s probability of success in competition. “Full-spectrum” means the coach is not only involved in teaching technically sound judo, he or she is also competent in sports development, physical training (cardio, flexibility & strength), biomechanics, nutrition, sports psychology, communications, scouting, taping, and most of all, competition judo rules, tactics and match preparation.

So this begs the next question – can the instructor and coach be one in the same person? Definitely, but it requires two distinctly different skill-sets along with expanded areas of expertise.

TEACHING

“Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire.” - W.B. Yeats

Traditional teaching, in the academic sense, had the school teacher reading facts from a text and the students taking copious notes – a form of rote learning. Modern teaching, even in the classroom, requires far more interaction with the students; activities to make the learning process more interesting; and holding the students more responsible for actually absorbing the material. The U.S. education system still has a long way to go to be on par with other rapidly developing countries, but there are a small percentage of highly motivated teachers making serious headway to meet this challenge. The same is true in judo.

The traditional form of teaching judo is **Show & Tell**, followed by endless repetitions. I say “endless” because as a white belt I learned *osoto-gari*, but will continue to include it in my practice and *uchi-komi* until the day I physically cannot walk onto the *tatami* (hopefully another 30 years). But I have also built that technique in to a ‘family’ of other dynamic combinations and counters.

Back to the traditional dojo, the instructor gets the attention of the class, demonstrates a new technique – hopefully explaining the three components of balance breaking (*kuzushi*), entry (*tsukuri*), and execution (*kake*). He or she then has the class pair up and practice. The sensei will move around making corrections, or if he sees that the group did not grasp the first demonstration, they will stop the practice and demonstrate the technique again, making the appropriate correctional points.

In modern teaching, the preferred method is termed **Whole-Part-Whole**. Demonstrate the whole technique or sequence; break it down into parts for practice; and then assemble all the parts for the whole, or execution. The instructor is also using three methods of teaching – visual, auditory and kinesthetic. Then light *randori* is added to turn principle and practice into practical application.

Another useful teaching method is termed **Guided Discovery**, or **Decision Based Learning**. This is somewhat similar to the older **Building Block** method of teaching, also called **Crawl – Walk – Run**, which allows the student to continue building on basic foundational skills, or **Trial & Error**, which works but takes much longer to achieve results.

With **Guided Discovery**, more responsibility is placed on the student to self-analyze and find the best path or solution. It also allows the instructor to present multiple options and for the student to pick the best answer. This decision based process significantly improves retention because it engages the brain as well as the body.

For example, Guided Discovery works well in teaching combinations or sequences of attacks. The student makes an attack, and the instructor asks, “now what would you do if your opponent (*uke*) does this?” The student should look to see where *uke* has placed his leg and/or balance, and then comes up with the best techniques to follow-up the attack sequence. The same works for counters and *ne-waza* escapes or turnovers. The student is constantly challenging him or herself and building on past experience.

Repetition has been a traditional part of teaching martial arts, from long before judo existed as a sport, and is still an integral part of modern training. Every school teacher is taught the old adage of, “Tell them what you are going to teach them – Teach them – Then tell them what you taught them.” The concept is to deliver critical information in at least three different formats to ensure the students grasp the subject.

In traditional judo we first learn the technique; next we practice the technique (*uchi-komi and nage-komi*); then we apply the technique (*randori*). The endless *uchi-komi* is not to learn the technique but to drill the movement into muscle/nerve-memory so that it can be executed automatically based on the cues presented. Conscious thought process is simply too slow for *randori* or competition, where techniques, attacks and defenses must be pre-programmed to be effective.

So how does modern judo teaching differ from traditional? First, we have learned that static *uchi-komi*, while it still has a place in training, does not prepare the judoka for *randori* or competition, both of which are dynamic activities. Next, we have learned that single technique attacks seldom work. Successful attacks must be sequenced into chains of feints and techniques based on how the opponent reacts to each attack.

At the junior level, we have also learned that FUN is the driving component of child development, learning, and club membership retention. This is very different from the more serious and rigid dojo behavior of old-time traditional judo training. Today we want those 8-year olds coming back, so the traditional and still important elements of judo – respect, learning and discipline – need to be augmented and balanced with fun, games, physical and intellectual challenges, and attainable promotions.

Now, some *dojos* are purely recreational clubs and always will be so – often because the sensei was not a successful competitor in their formative years, or there are no active competitors or coaches in his club. But there are clubs that are heavily focused on competition, and this is where we depart from teaching purely Kodokan techniques.

COACHING

“Hard work beats talent when talent doesn’t work hard.” – Unknown

An effective coach must be a teacher, trainer, mentor, motivator, psychologist, program manager, and even the proverbial shoulder to cry on. A professional coach becomes integral to a competitive athlete's daily routine and life. It is not unusual for athletes to spend more time under the watchful eye of their coach than with their own friends or parents. On a personal note, I left home at eighteen to train in France at the renowned Racing Club de France (RCF) and National Sports Institute (INS), under French National Coach, Serge Feist. This took me away from my family and other interests for nearly two years, with the RCF judo team becoming my surrogate brothers and the coach substituting as a father figure.

The relationship between coach and athlete often begins in one of three ways:

1. The instructor has a promising young judoka in their dojo, who is already winning at the local level, so suggests they work together to prepare for the Nationals. But it is important that the coach first ask the athlete what their aspirations are and if they want to be a national level competitor. Some may not.
2. A young, motivated judoka wants to get to the next level, so approaches a well known coach in his area and asks for assistance. Now it is the coach's turn to explain to the athlete what that entails in terms of commitment, time and costs.
3. A judoka makes the national training squad and is put under the guidance of the national coach. But again, the coach must first ascertain the athlete's commitment to judo before committing national training resources.

In the first two, the commitment between coach and athlete could be as little as a few hours each week, to as much as several hours daily of strength, technical, and tactical training. In my case, the French coach had seen me fight in New Caledonia and invited me to train at Racing. My training with the French national squad was six days a week, two to three times a day. Competitions were actually a welcome break from training. Add to this the necessary travel and expenses of fighting on the competition circuit, nationally and internationally, even at the junior level, and the commitment becomes significant.

Now, just as the judo instructor can only teach to the limits of his or her technical ability, a coach can only coach to the limits of his or her coaching experience and expertise. And this is where national level judo coaching clinics become important. But the aspiring coach must ensure that an advertised clinic will teach the necessary coaching skills to take him or her to the next level, since not all clinicians share the same concept of what skills a judo coach needs.

The problem here is that a one or two-day coaching clinic will not give the applicant the skill-sets to immediately function as a national level coach – immaterial of what the certificate indicates. Becoming a professional, or at least competent coach, is a multi-year endeavor. Every topic covered in a judo coaching clinic needs to be researched, studied, understood and then applied to your daily or weekly coaching programs.

A single topic such as sports psychology, as it applies to mental preparation for competition, could fill several volumes and take weeks to really appreciate, but will be covered in a coaching clinic in a one or two-hour block of instruction. What the clinician has given is the direction for additional research on your own time. For example, at a recent judo coaching clinic I met a sports psychologist auditing the program, so have been in touch with her by email ever since, exchanging ideas on athletic performance as it relates to mental preparation. In reality, I have spent ten times as many hours discussing psychology with her as in the coaching clinic.

The same applies to scouting, developing competitive profiles, and amassing statistics. A competition coach needs to come fully loaded with stats on all the other competitors in the same age and weight division as his or her fighter. This topic is covered in some depth in the better coaching clinics, but still needs to be refined and integrated into the aspiring coach's tool box. It is also extremely time consuming to video and profile a dozen or more fighters. For a progressive judo coach, a laptop computer, digital camera and cam-corder have become the essential tools of the trade.

Two words that I use quite often in instructor development programs are "professionalism" and "competence." When I say professional, I don't necessarily mean being paid, but that as an instructor or coach you are performing in a professional manner. How you act and dress, what you say, and the depth of your knowledge and experience should mark you as a professional in your chosen activity. Being competent at the level that you chose to teach or coach is a matter of self-analysis, self-motivation, and constantly striving to improve your own knowledge-base, skill-sets, training materials, programs, curriculums, and methods of delivery.

Athletes with national level aspirations deserve more than just a willing volunteer. Similarly, judokas with championship potential deserve more than a dojo sensei with no experience in, or passion for competition. A coach must be as passionate about developing winning athletes as the athlete is about taking gold. The caveat here is that the athlete is more important than the winning. The coach should be focused on developing a well-rounded young person, not just an arrogant, selfish, egotistical medal seeker.

CONCLUSION

If there is to be a conclusion to this discussion, it is that the individual must be honest with him- or herself as to their current levels of competence as either a teacher or a coach – or both. If you aspire to be respected as either, you must constantly work to elevate that level of competence. Attend any judo, coaching or referee clinics that you can, knowing that even if you don't learn from the scheduled clinician, you will invariably learn from the other like-minded participants. And yes, serious coaches **MUST** attend the referee clinic prior to each tournament, if for no other reason than to learn the latest changes in the IJF rules and local interpretations. You owe that to your players. The last thing you need is a *hansoku-make* because you did not train or brief your player



Mark Lonsdale with Rick Littlewood, 8th Dan, his former coach in New Zealand

on the latest leg-grab, ankle-pick, or cross-grip ruling.

So sign up for the next coaching clinic in your area, and keep in mind that if a tree is not growing, then it is probably dying. So the choice is **Grow or Die!!**

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