

GRIPPING & GRIP FIGHTING (KUMI-KATA):“No Grip – No Throw”

by Mark Lonsdale

Watching the 2012 Grand Slam in Paris, it was disappointing to see how many competitors lost their grip while trying to execute an attack or throw. In addition, there were very few wins by clean *Ippon*, so for the spectators it made for scrappy judo that was not at all interesting to watch.

So why are world-class athletes losing their grip on the attack? Haven't they had years to develop grip-strength and more effective judo techniques? Didn't their coaches drum into them, “No grip – No throw!”

Here are a few possible reasons:

1. Players have been trained to attack off one grip, which is a valid tactic, but it still requires a good strong grip to complete the throw.
2. Less experienced players are unable to get their ideal grip so they make half-hearted attacks in an attempt to “get lucky” or avoid *shido* for non-combativity.
3. Weaker players are intimidated by their opponent's grip fighting skills and allow themselves to be dominated, so they never establish their favorite grip.
4. In a rush to “grip & go” players are more concerned with looking aggressive to the referee than being effective.
5. Competitors are making “low risk attacks” with no intention of throwing their opponent, possibly because they are already a *Yuko* up on the board and are just running out the clock.
6. After making an attack, the player knows that it is safer to drop to all fours (flop & drop) than risk being countered. Again, low risk attack tactics but ugly judo.
7. The player simply has a weak grip and needs to spend more time climbing rope.

Unfortunately, at the club level and at junior competitions, young judoka are emulating the tactics they have seen their senior counterparts using on the international stage. And no matter how many penalties the IJF creates for non-combativity or false attacks, the so-called elite judoka continue to engage in negative judo. The overall result is a whole new generation of young competitors doing ugly judo and mostly ineffective attacks.

If an aspiring young judo champion concentrates too much on scrappy grip fighting, and not enough on getting a good grip, followed by a solid attack and clean *Ippon*, then he or she will not develop as a well rounded, successful fighter. This does not mean that the judoka should not be trying to dominate their opponent with an advantageous grip. It just means that once a player gets the grip he or she wants, they need to attack immediately. They also need a toolbox of good techniques to finish the job. Or, if the opponent has superior gripping skills, then they need to have a number of attacks and counters that will work against unorthodox grips.

Dojo *randori* is the best time to work on getting a good grip and making big effective attacks, or trying new techniques. It takes hundreds of genuine attempts, not half-hearted false attacks, to develop the necessary timing and neuro-muscle memory for a successful technique or combination. This begins with *nage-komi*, followed by light *randori*. But the more time a club level player wastes fighting for the ideal grip, the less time he or she will be actually making attacks or doing good judo. (See the May 2012 issue of *Growing Judo* for an article on Good Judo.)

On average, a player will spend 25-30 seconds fighting for a grip before making an attack. Then immediately after the attack, the action stops until the *hajime-matte* cycle begins all over again. Actual attacking judo could account for less than 10 seconds out of each minute. So at the club level, judoka must focus on getting a grip as quickly as possible and make multiple attacks, in multiple directions, to derive any benefit from the training.

A good lesson can be learned from watching championship spring-board divers trying to learn a more difficult, but potentially winning dive. The divers will put on full wetsuits for protection, knowing that they may hit the water badly at least a dozen times. They cannot approach or attempt the new dive timidly or half-heartedly. They must commit 100% to the sequence, without fear of failure, accepting some short term discomfort for the long term gain.

The same is true in judo. Judoka should have no fear of being thrown or countered in dojo *randori*, but instead focus on attempting their full range of favorite techniques (*tokui-waza*). That is the purpose of *randori* -- to take risks, make mistakes, and learn from those mistakes.

In addition to *randori*, most serious competitors will supplement their training sessions with forty or fifty *nage-komi* to hone and perfect their techniques. And if this can be done on the move, it is that much better for developing timing and direction. Another option is *half-randori* where only one partner attacks to further develop confidence and timing.

It will then be up to the coach to advise the young judoka when it is time to practice good judo, and when it is time to pull all the other high-performance competition tactics and techniques out of the bag. Grip fighting is one of those tactics, but too much grip fighting and not enough good judo will hinder development, resulting in numerous *shidos* and very few wins by *ippon*.

Remember “No grip – No throw.”

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