

Randori by Bill Myers

A few years ago, I decided to try a traditional ju jitsu class. The instructor's website talked about the style of ju jitsu and also about randori. It seemed a little strange to me that there would be randori, but that was the most interesting part to me, so I started going to class. For the first hour and forty minutes of the two hour class, we did warm-ups and went through techniques. Here's a technique example: Sit in seiza across from your partner. He puts his left hand on your right shoulder. Put your right hand on his right elbow, slide the hand up until your wrist is on his elbow. Now pivot your body and using your right hand as a driving force, push his elbow to the ground. He will submit on the way.

From the description, it sounds a little like a standing armlock. There were dozens of techniques just like this that we did. Some were similar to judo things I had done, while some weren't. Then came the fun (and funny) part of class. At the end, the instructor asked who was interested in randori. A couple of us, who knew what we were doing would participate, but the rest just sat and watched. It was like spending an hour on bicycle lessons, then being asked if you wanted to do boxing on unicycles. Yes, there was some connection, but not enough.

At another judo club I visited, we went through the warmup, uchikomi, randori sequence. Less than half of the people wanted to do any randori. Some of the people who were doing it were pretty rough – I had my shoulder dislocated – so the people watching were rightfully a bit fearful, but in addition, I think they didn't have any foundation in randori.

Here are some things to keep in mind about randori:

- If your students sit and watch other people doing randori, that's a hint that they don't know what they're doing or feel out of their element.
- If you don't like what you see your students doing in randori, then either you haven't shown them the things you want them to do or they haven't gotten the point yet. At least part of the problem may be yours, the coach's.
- Tell them. Show them. And make it part of the training during the rest of the class so that there's a connection between randori and their techniques. Moving techniques must be part of regular practice. Have them practice throws against partners moving in different directions.
- Randori is supposed to be practice, not a three minute competition at the Nationals. It's hard to get most people to improve their judo if they're worrying about getting hurt, getting thrown, constant grip-fighting, and giant counters that look and feel painful because most are done poorly and improperly.
- There's a difference between randori and hard randori. Hard randori is for training for competition and is fun for two people who are ready for it. It's not for beating up inferior players. It's not great for getting in lots of attacks because people worry about counters. Randori is about practicing lots of attacks, making judo flow, setups, combinations, and not worrying about counters.
- Randori isn't about winning, it's just practice. You can't practice if you don't participate and it doesn't count as practice if you don't try to do something during it. Whether it's skillful avoidance or attacking, having a goal in randori can help. Set a goal of at least one throwing attack every 15 seconds. When I work with kids, I tell them that if they don't attack me by the time I count to 5, then I will start attacking. They usually start attacking.

- When I want to see more attacking judo, I forbid my players from using big backward counters. Nothing causes hesitant judo more than being countered by a big uranage.
 - Stiff arms don't belong in randori. If your students don't know how to use body movements instead, teach them. Skillful avoidance is much less tiring than stiff arming and in the long term, helps improve judo.
 - Ego gets in the way in randori more than it should. I remember reading something from Isao Okano who said (paraphrased), "I am often thrown in randori, because I'm concentrating more on my own throws than what my opponent is doing."
 - Safety counts, too. Make sure that people aren't overmatched. Black belts tend to be safer than white belts, but people are still more intimidated to work with them. Size and age disparities can be serious liabilities for your players and potential lawsuits for you, the instructor. Don't be afraid to pair people up or rearrange who's playing with whom.
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