



WHAT ARE WE TRYING TO DO?

by Bill Montgomery

At some point every judo instructor should be asking, *What is it that I am trying to accomplish?* For many, each class is a mindless process of seoi nage and kesa gatame, etc., etc. Little or no thought is given to where it will all lead. Just do judo and things will fall into place. With the best of intentions, some develop elaborate schemes for reinforcing behavior. These schemes become so meaningless that they do not reinforce anything—the children know they are false. Others choose to treat children like *little adults*, but they are not adults and should not be treated as such. For those of you who have decided that one of these two categories fits you and you know your approach works, read no further. This little piece is not about the one answer, it is about investigating and evaluating your own program.

Educators know that humans learn differently at different ages. Schools have been broken into elementary, middle and high school. Within these divisions, further separation is made. In most judo classes, the luxury of splitting participants up by age is not always possible. Sometimes separate 12-and-under, and 13-and-over classes are possible. In some situations 5-7 year olds are mixed in with 12 year olds; not a good plan—but it may be necessary. As a coach you should at least familiarize yourself with how these groups learn differently. You can study about these in any education text. It is not necessary to become a certified teacher, but it is helpful to be aware. It may also be helpful to understand the four basic ways that people learn. With these tools in tow, you might well improve your actual sessions.

Athletic skills are not built in static environs. Though basic body position can be taught statically, movement needs to be introduced quickly. Allowing body position to be developed statically does not further one's judo. Initial movements are not going to look like a 4th dan. Hopefully, they will logically develop toward that. Within 20 – 30 minutes your charges should be engaging in some kind of controlled randori . . . this in their first class. We want to involve them in the process from the very beginning. Putting artificial barriers up only grows problems down the road.

Recently I have heard various short pieces on National Public Radio about youth sport—soccer, baseball, over-participation, etc. There is an interesting phenomena occurring. Across the board coaches are being told to back off on very prescriptive instruction and *allow children to play the game*. These other organizations are finding that over-emphasis on developing “athletes” takes away from the end result. Children that are regimented in sport tend to drop out at 11-13 years of age. On the other hand in countries where the “play” is emphasized, better athletes are developed and they seem to have more of them. In many instances, this play is done in the absence of adults; in our rush to assist, we sometimes cause more problems than we solve! In judo we probably need more coach involvement, but it should be almost invisible. Having a plan is great, but it must allow students to progress largely on their own. The instructor guides, leads, cajoles . . . and every once in awhile interjects some specific instruction. ***Too much instruction is just as bad as no instruction.***

If the above is true and I believe it is, what can we do? First, we need to agree on a goal. For this piece the goal is to develop “on-going skills.” In other words, to introduce skills, throws if you will, that can be used as building blocks. There are no bad throws, just poor methods of utilizing them. Let's look at the weak sisters, or brothers if you will, and how they become dead-end skills.

In my opinion the following moves become dead-end in most dojo: koshi guruma, tani otoshi, soto makikomi and leg take downs. Taken alone, nothing is wrong with any of these. From time to time they have all been used to some success at the international level. The weakness comes when a youngster achieves initial success with one of these moves and does not integrate it into a broader base of skills. Let me take one of my pet peeves: Tani otoshi, or as done by an 8 year old, *fall on your bottom and hope you can pull the person over your leg*. There is seldom any direction taught for the throw, no functional body position, and little attention to when it is done. Just “fall on your bottom and pull the person over” (I might use this myself for the first time this is taught). The child is successful with this move until they are about 12 years old. They now attempt this counter and their opponent switches on them and bounces their head off the mat. No fault of the opponent, they simply reacted to an ineffective counter, with an effective reaction. The child continues trying to make “the move work.” It has worked in the past; it should work again. The coach offers no real functional help, for he/she is also lost. What to do?

Do not allow this kind of pattern to develop. Make sure that your classes have a plan for the long haul. Well-planned sessions can benefit a wide range of players. If this kind of situation does arise you must take positive steps to eliminate the weak skill and replace it with others. (I know how difficult this can be, I am going through it right now with a 10 year old boy. He is making progress but sometimes it is crushing to watch him fall back into the same old traps.) You may need to disallow a move, substitute another for it or switch sides . . . and be honestly positive. Kids recognize insincerity even if we do not.

Though I have geared this piece toward children the same is true for teens and adults. The skills you teach today should benefit the player at 4th kyu and still be viable when they are 4th dan. If you are not planning in this manner, you are shortchanging your students.

--Bill Montgomery, USJA Coaching Education Committee Chair

NOTE: Many of the ideas I have asserted here are not my own. I have been influenced by a wide variety of people over my 50 years in judo. If you wish to explore texts which cover some of these ideas, go to USJA Coaching Manuals for Level I, II and III by Dr. Chris Dewey. Dr. Dewey has codified a wide range of information within these three manuals they are a great resource. If you can find it, Judo For The West by Geoff Gleeson is excellent. For straight educational information you might do best to get with a teacher in your club or someone you know. Successful Coaching, by Rainer Martens is a fine general approach to coaching. Ron Angus of Canada, and Steve Scott of Kansas City have both published excellent books, and there are many others, so investigate!