



What is Judo?

Many people have a pre-conceived notion of what they believe judo to be which is well wide of the mark. Judo bears no resemblance whatsoever to the martial arts it is so often associated with. Here we examine what judo was, is and the benefits it can offer its participants in sport and day-to-day life:

Judo has its roots in the early feudal days of Japan where local warlords ruled and fought for supremacy with rival lords, each one vying for the title of supreme leader of Japan (Shogun) ju jitsu, as these fighting arts were called, had many styles with masters who would open specialized schools for their own art, many becoming famous for their skills and abilities. Judo was developed in Japan by Dr Jigoro Kano towards the end of the 19th century. It involved the removal of techniques that killed and maimed and by modifying others and introducing a method of breaking ones fall, a system of unarmed combat was formulated that allowed the loser, for the first time, to pick oneself up and try again. With these dangerous elements removed, judo (gentle way) was born.

Judo now has evolved from being a martial art into one of the world's most popular sports. Since its inclusion in the 1964 Olympic Games judo has progressed rapidly and is without doubt the world's most popular combat sport. Judo is however much more than a sport, it is also seen to be effective as an educational system in both physical and moral spheres.

Judo training is an ideal form of physical exercise and it serves as a great cardiovascular workout, which improves stamina, general health and overall fitness. Physical strength is improved as a direct result of trying to control one's own movement and dictate the movement of the opponent. As well as enhanced power; a judo player will also improve their flexibility and for the same reasons the balance and posture of a player will also be enhanced. Physical co-ordination can be seen to develop dramatically from participation in judo and coincidentally, reflexes and mental reaction time are improved. The moral benefits of judo are a direct result of the transition from martial art to what Kano termed "Do" or "way of life". Kano added a strict code of ethics and a humanitarian philosophy to his system. His judo instructors and students were expected to be outstanding examples of good character and honest conduct. Combat outside of the training hall or behaviour that brought shame to the school would lead to suspension or even expulsion. Kano's ultimate concern for the well being of both the individual and the community is reflected in his teaching methods and one of judos' guiding principles is "mutual benefit and prosperity". Kano believed that the diligent practice of judo should lead to the realization that one could not progress at the expense of others; only mutual prosperity offered the key to any real progress in human life. These principles still underpin the sport today and this can be seen from the respect shown between rival exponents, especially so at the highest level of competition.

Judo is an ideal sport for all ages, males or females and attracts very many disability groups. Confidence and self-esteem are enhanced as a player progresses through the ranks and the very nature of the grading system ensures that the next goal is always realistic and achievable, although with effort. The grading system also ensures that regardless of their skill level all judo players can actively compete with players of similar ability and hence they have a reasonable chance of emerging victorious in a competitive environment.

Because of the potentially dangerous nature of the sport, strict discipline is essential and great importance is placed on safety, hygiene and etiquette. Safety is controlled by the contest rules, which are constantly updated to exclude harmful actions – this allows judo to be practiced in a spirited manner without undue risk of harm or injury. Hygiene is essential due to the close physical contact between players and judo etiquette instills respect and modesty. In short, politeness, good manners and improved social skills go hand in hand with common decency and a healthy respect for other participants. Contest judo is derived from the same techniques that were traditionally used in Japan to kill or severely injure opponents on the battlefield – these techniques have been refined and modified and contest rules have been applied to make them safe. Punching, kicking and gouging for example are not allowed, the object of the contest being to throw the opponent largely onto their back with considerable force and speed – to score "Ippon" and ending the contest.

Great emphasis is placed on mastering the several methods of breakfalling since this gives players the confidence to participate with commitment and to fully execute the technique. It is also possible to score ippon by pinning the opponent to the mat for a period of twenty-five seconds or to affect a submission by an arm lock, choke or strangle. In addition to the sought after 'ippon', smaller scores are given for less successful throws and the hold-downs are effectively broken before the twenty-five second limit.

There are even benefits in defeat though, as the sport lays great emphasis on discipline and self-control: it is rare indeed to see a player ungracious in defeat at any level from club training to international competition. A handshake almost always follows the traditional courteous rei (bow) at the end of a contest and the defeated player, though perhaps disappointed with the result, remains respectful of the winner.

Judo has also been seen to actively reduce bullying, bullies can only get away with their reigns of terror in relatively uncontrolled environments but, within the disciplined confines of a dojo (training hall), removes them from their position of power. At the same time they themselves learn discipline and self control, quite often losing to players who were previ-

ously a victim of their bullying, this gives them a new perspective and a newfound respect for such each other. A useful spin off from judo training is that by its very nature judo is an ideal form of self-defense, however it must be remembered that no system can ever be regarded the complete self-defense. Judo players often find that physical intervention is never needed since they are not easily intimidated and assailants frequently back down when they observe the confident, calm nature of their target. Because of its close contact judo helps to develop a keen awareness of danger, however should the worst come to the worst and a judoka be forced to physically defend their self, it can offer better self-defense training at close quarters than any other sport.

Judo also offers a great social scene; many clubs meet up regularly away from the dojo at functions, dinners, parties, some organize an annual 'club camp'. Judo draws people from all walks of life and social backgrounds. More than one hundred years after Dr Jigoro Kano the founder of judo said, "Judo is a teaching for life itself and with it we learn to overcome the pitfalls and obstacles of everyday living" his words still ring true. A man of great vision Kano summed up judo by saying "it is the way to most efficiently use ones' mental and physical strength. By training, one should discipline and cultivate the body and spirit through the practice of techniques of offence and defense, thereby to master the essence of judo. And, by these means, it is the ultimate goal of judo to build oneself up to perfection and thereby benefit the world."