

A Jūdō Champion Reflects on a Changing World

YAMASHITA YASUHIRO, INTERVIEWED BY KÔNO MICHIKAZU

KÔNO MICHIKAZU Just about everyone knows that jūdō is now a global sport, but like a lot of people, I must admit that I'm not sure exactly how many countries are actively involved. A few years ago, you wrote a book with Okuda Hiroshi, former chairman of Nippon Keidanren [Japan Business Federation] and Toyota Motor Corporation, called *Bushidō to tomo ni ikiru* [Living with Bushidō]. I remember reading that even Okuda was surprised to learn that as many as 187 countries were members of the International Jūdō Federation—the third highest number of any Olympic event [as of April 2005]. And Okuda was a devoted jūdōka in his student days. So perhaps it's not surprising that many Japanese people still need to be reminded of the fact that jūdō really is an international sport these days.

YAMASHITA YASUHIRO Yes, and if more people realized that, I wouldn't have to answer so many questions along the lines of: "Why do Japanese jūdōka lose to foreigners when jūdō is supposed to be a Japanese sport?" And maybe people would stop asking whether all the jūdōgi [uniforms] and mats used in competitions around the world are made in Japan. I mean, that's like asking if the baseball bats and gloves we use in this country are all imported from the United States. I think a lot of people in Japan still haven't really come to terms with the growth of international jūdō. People are still surprised to hear how popular jūdō is around the world: in Africa, the Middle East, the Americas, even in the little island states of Oceania.

KÔNO Of all the Japanese martial arts, why is it jūdō that has become so popular around the world?

YAMASHITA Becoming an Olympic event was definitely a big part of it. Jūdō was first included at the Tokyo Olympics in 1964, after which it became a regular part of the games. The number of people active in jūdō internationally grew steadily from that point on. Another event that had a major impact was when Holland's Anton Geesink beat the Japanese jūdōka Kaminaga Akio to take the gold in the open-weight category in the Tokyo Olympics. It was a vivid demonstration of the fact that jūdō was a sport that belonged to the whole world, and not just to Japan.

Looking back further, I think you can trace it all the way to the founder of jūdō, Kanō Jigorō [1860–1938]. Master Kanō traveled the world, teaching people

not just the techniques of jūdō but also the educational aspects of the sport and the philosophical principles that are the ultimate aim of jūdō as a martial art—to perfect oneself and make a positive contribution to society. He often sent his best students overseas and devoted himself to introducing jūdō to as many people as he possibly could. His aim was not simply to promote jūdō itself, but to introduce people around the world to the Japanese philosophy, values, and ways of thinking that were so important to him. The principles he espoused—of maximum efficiency and mutual prosperity—resonated with Pierre de Coubertin, the founder of the modern Olympic movement. Master Kanō was the first Japanese to be appointed to the International Olympic Committee, and in 1936 he successfully campaigned for Japan to be awarded the right to host the 1940 games [though as it happened those games never took place]. So Master Kanō made a major contribution not just to jūdō, but to Japanese sport as a whole.

I heard an interesting theory once about how jūdō came to be so popular overseas. After its defeat in World War II, Japan was in ruins. But within just a few years, the country made a full economic recovery. The world was amazed. People asked themselves: How did Japan achieve this? What was the secret behind the “miracle”? And apparently the conclusion they reached was that the mysterious driving force behind Japan’s recovery was to be found in our traditional martial arts—especially jūdō—and the strong spiritual foundation they gave to the nation. According to the theory, this was one of the reasons why jūdō became so popular around the world.

WRESTLING WITH CHANGE

KŌNO I get the feeling, though, that Japan’s position in the world of international jūdō has been fading a bit in recent years. I was particularly shocked at the Congress of the International Jūdō Federation in September 2007 when you ran for reelection as the director of education and coaching and lost out by a huge margin, by 123 votes to 61. There had been reports of stiff competition in the running for the position of IJF president between the incumbent Park Yong-sung and Marius Vizer, president of the European Jūdō Union. But it never occurred to me that someone like you, who has contributed so much to the sport, would lose out on reelection by getting caught in the

crossfire. But perhaps we weren't getting the full story. Did you have any inkling of what was going to happen yourself?

YAMASHITA I knew the election was going to be tough. My former teacher Satô Nobuyuki had just lost by a big margin in the presidential elections of the Jûdô Union of Asia. There were all kinds of political factors at play in that election: Vizer's jostling for position in advance of his own election, a voting bloc made up of the Muslim countries, and an influx of oil money. All these factors had a direct influence on the election I was involved in that September too. And then President Park resigned, realizing that things were going against him, and decided not to fly to Rio de Janeiro for the meeting—and that was decisive.



I was confident that I had made some kind of contribution to jûdô during my four years as director of education and coaching. I based my election prospectus on the declared objectives that had guided my efforts over the previous four years, namely, a commitment to the dynamic development of jûdô as an accessible sport and as one rich in educational potential. During that time, I organized meetings and seminars, compiled DVDs on important subjects in the jûdô world, and sent them out as promotional tools. We distributed recycled jûdôgi and mats to people in the developing world, and sent out instructors to stimulate interest. Through these efforts I was sure I had contributed at least modestly. And having seen something of the dictatorial approach that Vizer had

shown in the past, I knew I couldn't bring myself to support him.

So I decided to run for reelection, and I set off for Rio determined to do my best. But when the results came in, I'd lost in a landslide. During my entire competitive career, I never lost once to a non-Japanese jūdōka, but this time my opponent tossed me straight to the floor and won an easy ippon. I didn't mind losing too much on a personal level. That's just the way things go. But now I had lost, there was not a single Japanese representative on the Executive Committee, and I did feel a heavy sense of responsibility for that.

Without a representative on the committee, it's easy to fall out of touch with the latest developments. There's a real need for closer ties and better communication with the rest of the jūdō world at the moment—not just with Europe, but with Africa, the Asia-Pacific, and the Americas—and now Japan was going to be excluded from the conversation. It was the worst possible outcome.

But something unexpected happened the day after the election. President Vizer decided to appoint Uemura Haruki, president of the All Japan Jūdō Federation, to the newly created position of sports director. The position doesn't confer voting rights, but even so, it was just what Japan needed. We could still maintain our access to the latest developments in the jūdō world. I felt quite relieved when I heard the news.

WHAT'S WRONG WITH JŪDŌ TODAY?

KŌNO I don't know whether this is connected to the kind of political games you've alluded to, but there is a widespread sense that Japan is slipping in competitive terms too. At the Olympics in Athens, Japanese jūdōka were outstanding in both men's and women's events, winning a total of eight gold medals. In Beijing last year, we only won four. But it wasn't simply that the number of medals was down. A lot of spectators felt that a strange new kind of jūdō was becoming prevalent, something quite different from the jūdō Japanese people grew up with.

People felt that Japan was being left behind, and that this was why we weren't winning so many medals. A lot of the time, the athletes seemed to grapple and scratch at each other like two praying mantises without ever getting a decent grip on the jūdōgi, and it was impossible not to notice the amount of tackling going on, almost like wrestling. And when decisions were

passed down on bouts where there was no obvious winner, Japanese athletes often seemed to lose out to inexplicable decisions. I think a lot of Japanese spectators must have been shaking their heads and wondering, "What's wrong with jūdō today?"

Some commentators have begun to suggest that the sport is splitting into two versions: the traditional Japanese martial art and a new, foreign-dominated sport called "judo," which some Japanese writers have taken to spelling out in the Roman alphabet to distinguish it from the traditional Japanese version. And some people seem to think that this new version is on its way to becoming the de facto standard worldwide. What are your views?

YAMASHITA To tell you the truth, I don't really understand the distinction. I think it's something that has been dreamed up by the media; most jūdō specialists around the world probably feel the same way. At Athens in 2004 there were some wonderful bouts, some very impressive techniques on display, and no shortage of exciting contests that everyone enjoyed watching.

The Japanese jūdōka were outstanding, and put in some very impressive performances, gripping onto their opponents' uniforms and winning a succession of ippon victories. People understood that Japan was showing the world how jūdō should be done. They understood that this was real jūdō. I mean, they probably didn't like the fact that Japan was winning everything, but they were impressed by the displays that the Japanese athletes were putting on. Can things really have changed so much in just four years? I don't agree that some kind of inexorable tide is sweeping jūdō in a totally new direction.

But one thing I will say is this. Japan won eight of the fourteen gold medals on offer at Athens. Japanese jūdōka also won two silver medals, which means that a Japanese athlete made it to the final match in ten out of the fourteen weight categories. The highest number of gold medals Japan had ever won before was four—which gives you some idea of what an impressive feat it was. Just ten years before Athens, people were talking seriously about a day in the near future when Japan would win no gold medals at all—hard as that is to believe now.

But what happened as a result of this success? All the coaches of the stronger jūdō countries lost their jobs. Not surprisingly. Japan had really created a stir by performing so well. Next, they started to rack their brains for ways to win against Japanese jūdōka. What approach would give them their best chance of winning? The solution they eventually came up with was a strategy designed to

prevent Japanese jūdōka from fighting the way they wanted to—in other words, the new kind of jūdō you just alluded to.

I hear the same thing a lot: “There is something wrong with the rules of jūdō,” or “Why did they change the rules to make the sport like this?” But the people asking those questions have got it wrong. The rules haven’t changed at all. It’s just that we’ve suddenly been seeing more and more of this “strange” jūdō recently. In order to win against Japanese jūdōka, athletes from other countries have deliberately adopted a strategy of not allowing the Japanese to play to their strengths. And in a sense, you can’t blame them—it is a competition after all, and the idea is to win. But it won’t help the development of the sport.

What is it that makes jūdō attractive? It goes without saying: matches that conclude with a dynamic, dramatic ippon. It’s about daring techniques and spectacular throws. A lot of leaders from the world of jūdō came up to me after Beijing almost in a state of panic. “If things carry on like this, jūdō is finished,” they said. “This is just wrestling in jūdō uniforms.” “This approach throws away everything that’s good about jūdō.” In a sense, the new strategy was a success, insofar as it stopped Japan from sweeping the board again—but I think a lot of people were worried that if this style of jūdō became the norm, our sport would lose a lot of what had made it attractive, and no one would be interested in it anymore.

Because of all this, modifications were made to the rules for international competition after the Beijing Olympics. You are no longer allowed to go straight for the legs without taking hold of your opponent’s jūdōgi. And it’s against the rules to stay in a defensive, crouching position with your head held low to prevent your opponent from taking hold of your jūdōgi. In other words, the rules were changed to steer jūdō away from the wrestling-style sport it was starting to become and back to something like the martial art it used to be. One of the leaders in this movement was Uemura, the new sports director appointed to the IJF Executive Committee after I left. He said quite clearly what needed to be said from a Japanese perspective and got the results he wanted. It was a great decision for Japan. I really hope that jūdōka all over the world will take this opportunity to concentrate on polishing their ability to perform the traditional throws and will put everything they have into fighting hard but fair.

There’s one more thing I’d like to add on this. You often hear people in Japan claiming that only the Japanese jūdōka go for an ippon win, whereas the

non-Japanese try to win by accumulating points. But that's nonsense. And what's more, it's highly disrespectful to athletes from other countries. The fact is that the really strong competitors—whatever their nationality—win most of their victories by ippon. The data shows this quite clearly. I've been collecting data on this for about ten years as part of my research for a project on the science of jūdō. And what the statistics show is that even Japanese jūdōka lose by ippon against the strongest foreign competitors. The fact is that, even in cases where there is not much separating the two competitors, they compete head on and get beaten. They're not losing because they come up against "dirty" jūdō. I think some people have tended to take the self-justifying words of the Japanese jūdōka at face value after they have lost to a foreign jūdōka: "I was aiming for an ippon, but my opponent wasn't." They're interpreting everything according to their own simplistic and one-sided view of things, as if it's a case of "Japan against the world."

My basic attitude is that we're all friends. Many Japanese seem to believe that other countries are the enemy, that those foreigners are somehow different from us. But as far as I am concerned, all jūdō fans are companions. Of course you fight hard as opponents on the mat, but once the bout is over we're all friends, brought together by jūdō. Kanō Jigorō, the founder of our sport, believed the same thing: differences in the color of a person's hair or eyes or skin, or religion, or socioeconomic background . . . none of these things makes the slightest bit of difference.

Anyone who likes jūdō, who wants to improve, and who wants to grow as an individual through jūdō . . . we're all on the same side. There are no divisions between us. So I think it's wrong to criticize non-Japanese jūdōka. It shows a lack of courtesy and respect. I want Japanese jūdō to show more pride and to earn more trust and respect in the jūdō world. That is why I'm speaking up about these things now.

DISAPPOINTMENT IN BEIJING

KŌNO It's great news that the regulations have been changed. But to get back to the Beijing Olympics for a moment, I remember hearing talk about "strange" jūdō some time before the event itself. We knew from the media that athletes from other countries were trying to come up with ways to prevent the Japanese jūdōka from using their skills. In that sense, do you think there's a case for

saying that the Japanese team ought to have been better prepared?

YAMASHITA There were plenty of warning signs, and perhaps the response to those warnings wasn't all that it might have been. Jūdō is an individual sport where you are up against a single opponent. If you fight the same way as your opponent, you're sure to lose. You will fall into your opponent's trap. The important thing in this case is to figure out how to counteract the tactics of an opponent who is fighting in this new way and maneuver him into a position that works to your favor. You come up against all kinds of opponents, and you have to show your skill and strength against all of them. You need tactics. You have to understand where your opponent is strong and where his weaknesses lie. You need to confuse him, perhaps try a few less common techniques or throws. It is the same for tennis or any other sport where it's one against one.

KÔNO I agree. That would suggest that the Japanese lost because their opponents' tactics won out and stopped the Japanese jūdōka from fighting the way they wanted to. Do you think perhaps, after the overwhelming victories in Athens, that a bit of pride or complacency might have crept in?

YAMASHITA I don't think arrogance or pride is quite the right word. Sometimes you think you've given it your all, but what happens if your opponent comes back at you even harder? It's the same in business. You might think you're working as hard as you can, but if your competitor is prepared to go without sleep to produce even better results, what are you going to do? I remember something that one of the Japanese team members, Suzuki Keiji, said when he lost: "I tried as hard as I could to counteract their tactics." And he did—but it made no difference to the result. I don't know whether this was due to a lack of foresight or a misunderstanding of the situation on the part of the team; perhaps the problem lay more with the way they put their plans into action. The coaches and team manager did all they could. They knew they were up against it, but for some reason or other it wasn't enough. Often you don't realize these things until it's too late.

KÔNO How was it in your case when you were still competing? I'm sure everyone used to put in an extra effort against you when you were the undefeated champion.

YAMASHITA Well, my opponents were certainly no idiots. They all tried their hardest and came at me with everything they had. But I had tactics of my own . . .

The first thing you do when you step onto the mat is to exchange bows. And

then your eyes meet your opponent's. Most of the time, the outcome of the bout is decided there and then. The moment you look into an opponent's eyes, you really let him have it, show him how serious you are. The instant you step up onto the mat, you are a challenger. It doesn't matter if you're the defending champion: The moment you go into a defensive mode, it's all over.

You need to make up your mind that you seize that position again with your own hands. You bring all that fight, that aggression, that determination to the forefront of your mind, and launch yourself at your opponent with everything you've got. If you do it properly, your opponent will forget everything when he sees that look in your eyes. Whatever thoughts he has in his mind just fly away, and he loses his sense of pace and control.

KÔNO It's not as simple as just putting pressure on your opponent, is it?

YAMASHITA It can't be just for show. It's an accumulation of everything you've been practicing. You train hard with focus and determination, you build up your physical strength and your technique—and all of that comes together for this one bout. Until the moment I stepped up onto the mat, I'd be warming up with a relaxed expression on my face. But the moment I stepped up for the bow, my expression would change completely.

When I was young, I used to think it was important to go into a bout as if you were going to kill your opponent. This is a fight with rules. It's kill or be killed. That's the spirit you need to have. People used to ask, "How come you win such major bouts when you're always smiling?" But I used to get exactly the opposite reaction too: "When it's time for the bout, Yamashita has a look in his eyes like he's ready to kill." I think both views were right, in a way.

YAMASHITA THE TEACHER

KÔNO You were definitely in your element in that world of competition. I think it was probably that sense of determination that allowed you to achieve so much: nine consecutive victories as All-Japan Champion, World Champion three times running, no losses against non-Japanese jūdōka, undefeated for eight years running, and 203 consecutive victories. But since you retired from competition and became an instructor, you have tended to stress the educational, developmental side of jūdō, rather than simply competing to win. I'm sure the way you coach the Japanese team is quite different from the attitude you take

with the students at Tôkai University, your alma mater. But if I had to point to one aspect of your approach that is always the same, it would be the belief you have always had that the individual athlete is the lead actor. The important thing for you is to do what you can to help bring out each person's talents.



YAMASHITA Most jûdôka are past their peak by their early thirties. But you've still got most of your life ahead of you at that point. So although it is important to win when you're competing, it is not everything. The enjoyment you get from jûdô is a great thing to be able to look back on in your forties and fifties. It's not my job to push my philosophy or my way of doing things onto people. Instead, I ask myself, "What does success mean for this person?" "What can I do to help this person realize his or her dreams?" I think it's important that people don't just have a brief golden moment in their prime and then fade away. They should polish their skills and continue to develop as they get older. What I try to do is to help people to learn to live that way through jûdô.

I turn 52 this year, but the main business of my life is still ahead of me. I'm always looking for new challenges. The question for me is always: What can I do now, at this moment of my life, to carry forward the mission I have been given? Once you become a mere bystander or observer, you're finished. I think it's important to live an independent, self-aware life. For now my immediate aim is to work toward a society in which there is a sparkle in children's eyes, one in which they can pursue their dreams. I want to use jûdô and other sports to provide children with a healthy upbringing and education. Next, I want to

continue to make whatever small contribution I can to activities that will bring Japan and the world closer together. Jūdō is growing in popularity throughout the world, and many people overseas appreciate what makes jūdō special. Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin is a well-known jūdō practitioner and fan; like him, lots of foreigners have come into contact with Japanese culture by studying jūdō, and have come to feel affection for Japan as a result.

In 2006 I founded a nonprofit organization called Solidarity of International Jūdō Education, with the aim of promoting jūdō overseas. We send recycled jūdōgi to developing countries and use jūdō in cultural exchange and educational activities. My role is to introduce Japanese culture and Japanese values to the world. Next summer we're planning to build a "Japan-China Friendship Jūdō Hall" in Nanjing, following on from an earlier project we sponsored in Qingdao. Around the same time, I will travel to Israel and Palestine, where jūdōka Inoue Kōsei and I will give jūdō lessons to children and lecture on the concept of wa, or harmony.

Back when I was still competing, I always tried to be positive, moving slowly but surely toward my ideal of the kind of jūdōka I wanted to be. And I still try to take the same approach to life now, more than 20 years after I retired. We have inherited the spirit of jūdō from Master Kanō and all the others who went before us. And the practice of the way is a road that has no end.

Translated from an original interview in Japanese. Interviewer Kōno Michikazu is former editor in chief of Chūō Kōron.