

A History of Judo

Judo is one of the most well known martial arts and sports in the world today, with thousands of styles, teachings and techniques all in existence. The sport has millions of competitors, with numerous competitions and events, as well as an Olympic representation, meaning that judo grows ever more popular. A sport this size, surprisingly, had fairly small and humble beginnings.

Judo was founded by a Japanese teacher, Jigoro Kano. Kano was a small child, who was both weak and frail, and due to his size, constantly picked on by bullies. To combat this, he initially tried to study the martial art jujutsu, but had difficulties in finding a teacher willing to take him on. Nevertheless, he continued when he went to university to study literature at the age of 18, he continued with the sport, eventually coming to the attention of Fukuda Hachinosuke, who emphasised the importance of technique to Kano, and helping to lay down the initial principles of Judo. Unfortunately, Fukuda became ill and died around a year later. Kano gained a new teacher, called Iso Masatomo, who focused more on kata style techniques and their importance. Through much practice, Kano became a master of this style, and an instructor as well. Unfortunately, Masatomo also took ill, and Kano moved on from his instructor.

At this point in his life, Kano developed such a proficiency in martial arts, he was even devising his own techniques, such as the 'uki goshi' floating hip technique. Kano had numerous new ideas, and had the inspiration to focus on a reformation of the entire art of jujutsu, basing new techniques on scientific principles, and with a focus on the development of the mind and the body. Kano took nine students with him, to study his new form of jujutsu with him, at a Buddhist temple. This temple, is now strongly linked with the founding of judo.

Judo was originally known as Kano Jiu-Jitsu or Kano Jiu-Do, but it was also still referred to generically, simply as Jiu-Jitsu. The word Judo itself has the direct definition of 'the way of gentleness,' with the 'ju' part, coming from the martial art Jujutsu, meaning gentleness. The definition of 'the way of gentleness,' is reflected in the art of judo itself, through by the indirect application of force upon an opponent, using their own strength against them, for example, allowing their momentum to throw their opponent forwards. Kano saw that jujutsu was an inferior art, as an inefficient, non-linked group of techniques, and he hoped to improve Judo and its efficiency by replacing strength-based techniques with those that relied on the redirection of the opponent's force. Kano even saw Judo as a means of self government, and incorporated it even into his everyday life, to increase its efficiency, and to show the application of judo beyond the confines of the dojo.

Initially, there was still very little distinction between judo and jujutsu. Upon teaching judo, Kano still received teaching advice from a jujutsu teacher. Upon further development though, and with Kano using techniques and styles from numerous different martial arts (e.g. the throwing techniques of the Kitō-ryū and the choking and pinning techniques of the Tenjin Shin'yō-ryū) Judo began to become more and more distinct and different to jujutsu.

The Kodokan were a group of Kano's own judo organisation, growing from just a dozen in 1882, to over a thousand dan-graded members by 1911. The Kodokan focused on both summer and winter training, in order to ensure the endurance of the pupils through both extreme heat and cold.

The Kodokan constantly moved around the world, growing in number, and fame. Eventually, they settled at an eight story 1200 mat facility.

When looking at the principles and key aims of Judo, these were first presented in 1888, when Kano and Reverend Thomas Lindsay gave a speech on the subject, looking at judo, as a martial art where strength was conceded to, and used against an opponent, rather than being directly fought against. Kano later also specified many other ideals, including efficiently using physical and mental energy, and that the art of judo strongly focused on 'perfecting the self.'

In March 1922, Kano introduced the Kodokan Bunkakai, a judo based, cultural association, in which Kano made many speeches, promoting the ideals of judo to the members of this society. Here, Kano gave a speech about the two types of judo, Randori and Kata. He described Randori as, 'practised under conditions of actual contest. It includes throwing, choking, holding down, and bending or twisting the opponent's arms or legs. The combatants may use whatever tricks they like, provided they do not hurt each other, and obey the general rules of judo etiquette.' Whereas he claimed Kata was, 'a formal system of prearranged exercises, including, besides the aforementioned actions, hitting and kicking and the use of weapons, according to rules under which each combatant knows beforehand exactly what his opponent is going to do.'

Kano lived his life teaching and promoting judo, but he made his living as an educator and teacher. He had a degree in political sciences, and economics, before attempting to make numerous changes to the schooling system itself, such as setting up a program to help Chinese students study in Japan. Kano also had a strong role in the International Olympic Committee, and became Japan's spokesman for their 1940 Olympic bid.

In 1934, Kano stopped giving public exhibitions due to failing health. Nevertheless, Kano continued attending important Kodokan events such as the kagami-biraki (New Years' ceremonies) whenever he could, and he continued participating in Olympics business.

In May 1938, Kano died at sea, while on board the NYK Line motor vessel MV Hikawa Maru. Because the Japanese merchant fleet of the 1930s used Tokyo time wherever it was in the world, the Japanese date of death was 4 May 1938 at about 5:33 a.m. JST, whereas the international date of death was 3 May 1938 at 8:33 p.m. UTC. The cause of death was officially thought to be pneumonia. During the 1990s, there appeared allegations that Kano was murdered by poisoning rather than dying of pneumonia, due to Kano's opposition to Japanese militarism and many others who also opposed it are known to have been assassinated.

Judo continued to grow even after Kano's death. Instead, during the 1950s, judo clubs sprang up throughout the world, and in 1964, judo became an Olympic sport in the Tokyo Olympics, and was reintroduced at the Munich Olympics in 1972.

In 1938, Kano was awarded the prestigious 'Order of the Rising Sun,' one of the few non-politicians, royalists or military leaders to receive it.

To conclude, despite fairly humble origins, Kano ended up as one of the most influential and impressive people to have ever lived, a pioneer in many things, not just Judo and its principles, promoting peace throughout the world. Kano, even in his later years, and in poor health, managed to make deep impacts upon the world, and change a generation. I believe, personally that Kano was one of the most world changing people, to ever live.

Robert Mashadi