

Judo in Britain

With the intention of establishing a jiu-jitsu school in England, Mr E W Barton Wright sponsored a visit in 1899 of a team of Japanese judo experts. The project failed but those who stayed took to the stage to earn a living. Best known among them was Yukio Tani, who toured music halls offering challengers £1 per minute for every minute they lasted beyond five and £50 if they defeated him. The prize money was rarely (if ever) paid. Over the following decade or so many Japanese "showmen" performed on stages around the country performing frivolous tricks linked with jiu-jitsu. For all their showmanship, these men were very capable jiu-jitsu players. Their real contribution to the growth of judo outside Japan was made in the books they published and the instruction they gave.

Tani remained in England after his compatriots had returned home and in 1920 was formally appointed chief instructor to a new club for "the study of systems developed by the samurai" The Budokwai. Neither he nor the club's founder Gunji Koizumi, could have foreseen that they were creating an institution soon to become the most famous judo school outside Japan.

Tuition was given in judo, kendo (swordsmanship) and other aspects of Japanese culture; Tani continued as instructor until a stroke forced him to retire in 1937. Koizumi was to European judo what Kano was to world judo. He first came to Britain in 1906 and after a few years in the USA he returned to open the Budokwai as a cultural centre and social club for the Japanese community in London. The official opening took place on 26 January 1918 and within four months the membership had grown to 44 including 2 Englishmen.

The Budokwai educated several generations of judo men at a time when genuine judo clubs were few and far between. For many years it was the only authoritative source of Kodokan judo in Europe. The link had been forged by Jigoro Kano during an extended visit to Britain in 1920.

Koizumi's vision for the growth of judo on an international basis began to materialise in 1948. On 24 July that year the British Judo Association (BJA) was established as the representative national body; four days later a meeting under the chairmanship of Trevor Leggett, the most senior non-Japanese player in the world, approved the constitution of a European Judo Union (EJU) to represent judo in the continent of Europe. Three years later still, the International Judo Federation (IJF) was created as an inter-continental body with overall control of judo.