

Judo - for the forty-somethings

My script regarding the “history of Judo” is not so much about Jigoro Kano, but more about my thoughts and findings when commencing to practice such a physical sport as judo at the age of “forty-something”.

My entry into judo was probably the most common route for someone of my age, being via my children. I introduced my six year old son to the sport primarily for the discipline and the exercise, (not self defence so much – these days a running club would be more appropriate training when confronted by an armed mob!), and on the third or fourth session watching him from the sidelines with a nice cup of tea and a newspaper, I was encouraged to give it a try for myself. Now, I must admit that the common sense part of my brain cried out “No Way!”. The thought of being thrown to the ground with force did not seem as appealing to me as a nice cup of tea, maybe with a biscuit, and a newspaper. However, as my brain sent the message to my mouth to make my polite excuses, I heard myself say “yes that sounds great, please slam me on the mat” or words to that effect.

I was actually on the brink of becoming a forty-something when I first stepped onto the dojo to commence my first judo training session. At this point I must make it clear that I had never had the urge to learn any martial arts. I had never heard of Jigoro Kano. I knew none of the techniques and when I watched the Olympics on TV and judo came on I would switch channels. As learning curves go, I was so far down I couldn’t even see the line, let alone the curve.

Being of that certain age, (and in possession of a degree of sound mind), I knew that I had the power to say “no” if I didn’t like it. I could walk away. My parents were not watching me from the sidelines insisting that I get stuck in. I would be letting no one down if I made a swift exit off of the mats and sat back down with my lovely hot tea and biscuit. This was my safety net. This is why it is different for forty-somethings, we can abandon an idea very easily without someone else’s permission. With such a powerful tool at our disposal, the world opens up to a myriad of opportunities – to try something new – why not – what is the worst that can happen?

Now, I thought that I was reasonably fit. Certainly fit enough to roll about on the mat for a while and fall over a couple of times. What happened in that following hour would make me ache in areas that I did not know I could ache in, for the following three days. I wouldn’t have minded so much, but for most of the time all I did was fall over. Not thrown, not even pushed, but a voluntary fall to the floor. For forty years I had practiced the art of standing. I had the “not falling over” bit mastered. The last time that I fell over with any kind of force was when I was nine, copying other kids sliding on ice, which on my first attempt the top of my body seemed to go faster than my feet were sliding and over I went smashing the glass on my wrist-watch in the process. I have never attempted the “run and slide” again. So, thirty-one years or so later, to voluntarily throw yourself to the floor was such a weird concept to me, akin to putting your hand in fire or running toward a cliff edge. We had all learnt from a very young age not to do these things.

The following week came the throws. How easy it looks. How nicely the person lands. The name of the throw was heard and instantly forgotten. They all sounded the same. You watch it twice, maybe a third time. It is now my turn. Memory delete. It is gone. I can't remember what to do with my feet, where my hands should be, to turn left or right and least of all remember to turn my head. What a mess! Thank God for the patience of many of the higher graded judokas.

These things come with practice. Lots of practice. Even after lots of practice I have found that you reach the stage where the throw you are attempting can be vaguely recognised – most of the time.

Injuries will occur. I don't know when it was that I lost the ability to bounce. Probably nine. I am still practicing falling over. Falling safely is the most important thing to learn in judo, in my opinion. Once you can break-fall without thinking how to, you can start to be thrown without that fear of breaking something. It's the fear that causes you to stiffen which in turn causes you to become hard to throw and inevitably results in a painful landing. At forty-something, the recovery from aches and pulled muscles takes a little longer. Toes, fingers, knees and shoulders along with a stiff neck seem to be the areas that I suffer with mostly.

But here is the strange thing. I go back. From one training session on a Saturday morning to two training sessions to three per week. The aches still occur, but I look upon this as a good thing – I am working hard. The injuries are occurring less often but you must accept that the risk is ever present. The frustration of not being able to perform a technique is a constant reminder that judo demands years of practice – not months. I was once told that if I were still practicing judo after six months I would be hooked. I have been – well and truly. I have the books and the DVDs and for the first time I set my alarm clock to get up and watch the judo at the Olympics in Beijing.

How much of this is due to my desire to learn more about the sport and the concept behind Jigoro Kano's Kodokan judo, which is far more than just the physical aspect, and how much is to do with the camaraderie that can be found certainly within the Blackwater Judo Club and the encouragement and patience of the teachers passing on their knowledge and experience, I do not know. Certainly a combination of these and more. Physically and mentally I have benefited from practicing judo, noticeable even after such a short time.

In summary, my first year of judo has been exhausting, painful, frustrating, invigorating, enjoyable, stimulating and has become an addiction. For me it is what life is about. Pushing yourself to see just how far you can go. Grading measures your technical improvement whilst competing, (which for a novice forty-something is not so enticing), measures your ability to use the techniques in combat. I don't know how far up the grading ladder I am capable of achieving, but I do know that I will crack on and we'll see where that takes me.

My advice to a new starter listen, take it slow, always practice with the highest grade willing to help you and make sure that you thank them for their patience, enjoy the experience, give it your best and above all.....**learn to break fall.**