

What Style Do You Take?

For those of us that have taken multiple martial arts over our lives (Karate, Kung Fu, Ju Jitsu, etc), this question always comes up when you tell someone you practice a martial art. Like religions and politicians, martial arts come in many flavors. Periodically I get someone ask me what style of Judo I practice. Here are my thoughts on the style of Judo question and I hope this helps to bring some understanding about Judo to everyone.

Judo as we know it has been an adaptation of many different fighting styles leading up to the classification of Kodokan Judo in 1882. At that point, Jigoro Kano was teaching Kano Ju Jitsu/Judo in Japan and had studied many styles such as Kito-ryu Jujitsu. Kano was teaching his style of Judo to all students that were on the mat. Take a moment and think about one thing seriously. "Did the techniques that Kano taught his students work for all of them just as they worked for him?"

Seriously now, I can't believe that they would. Can you imagine how boring Judo would be if all techniques worked for everyone the same way? The style of Judo that each player learns is also taught and adapted to his or her body-type, mental framework, and many other factors. In learning Judo from one or many instructors, we are taking what is being demonstrated and shaping it to fit our own uniqueness.

In other martial arts, this has led to the naming of numerous styles. A group would be split for some reason and then to show their separation, each would take on a distinguishing name such as we see in the styles of Kung Fu or Karate. Judo does not have a "Northern-style" or "Newaza-style" or any myriad of other geographically named styles. Judo is just Judo and is also called Kodokan Judo. Some have commented that some show a "European-style" or a "Cuban-style" but that is the style of play where they come from and not a different art. It is still Kodokan Judo.

As it turns out, it is just not practical to have a Mifune-style of Judo along with a Kotani-style or Ryu of Judo in addition to the foundation of Kano-Ryu of Judo. If we look at it from the player's perspective, there are millions of styles of Judo each with only 1 member so none gains wider popularity than another. They all remain 'Judo'.

During my 25 years of teaching judo up to this point, I have done Morote Seoi Nage consistently about 3 different ways with any regularity and success and therefore I have taught those 3 ways of doing it to my students so each could decide which they prefer. I had a student who was also an amateur body builder and his biceps were too large to allow him to place his elbow under Uke's arm to execute Morote Seoi Nage the way that I taught it.

Obviously, this was a problem with the technique and I knew that my style of Judo would not work for him. We discussed it on the mat for about 5 minutes looking at how his body moved and what his range of motion was at different joints. The solution was something I had never contemplated before but after he used it in matches successfully, I saw that this student had taken my Judo and made it his own.

By the way, the modification we made that allowed him to be successful with less mobility was to change from a standard right-hand on left lapel to a right hand on right lapel (crossing the center line) and then driving the hand up as high as possible to under the ear so he could execute the technique without the excessive force being placed on the elbow joint.

Another example of this is how do you, a normal and fully intact man or woman, teach someone who has lost a hand during their life to execute Nage or Katame or Goshin Jutsu no Kata? Clearly, the techniques of these kata require Tori to have two hands. No single-handed individual will be able to execute Tori's movements in these kata as a two-handed Tori will, so some modification has to be introduced. Does this make the technique invalid or wrong or does it make teaching physically challenged students any less important? It should not if you are true to the spirit of Judo.

I don't have the same body type as my instructor and I teach very few who have the same body type that I have. Because of that, I cannot run a Judo club by dictatorship and demand that my students all learn and perform Judo exactly as I do. I have to practice 'Ju' and yield that piece so that I can partner with my students and mold the techniques to fit them. All I do is show my Judo and what works for me and try to help them work through the technique so they can mold it for their use.

As we all gain experience in Judo and in teaching, we all learn as many ways of executing a given technique as possible, as there will always be someone who cannot execute Morote Seoi Nage in 1 of the 3 ways that you can and a 4th way will have to be discovered. Judo players that make Judo a lifestyle "Learn to Teach and Teach to Learn."

I have to give thanks to all of my teachers who have helped me learn new ways to practice the same 100 or so technique in an infinite number of ways. They have been ranked White Belt to Red Belt and every rank in between.

Ignore the belt on the person and open the mind to see what you can learn from them. Even after 50 or 60 years of playing Judo, I expect that there will still be kyu-grade students who will be able to teach me something new. I am truly looking forward to it.

Play Hard! Have Fun! Strive to Improve!!

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