

# **Judo: An article led astray**

**by**

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On being asked, by Joseph Svinth, to write a little on Judo Kata, he said he had been told by several internationally ranked coaches that if you're interested in winning Olympic-level competition, then Kata is a waste of time, and that as a coach you'd do better to get the players to lift weights, run, and do Ran-dori with top-flight people. Kata these folks maintain is what you do once you get old, not what you teach Olympic hopefuls. Mr. Svinth said he would guess I would disagree with this theory.

Wow is that a mouthful, this is not just a simple theory. There are too many subjects included for it to be simple. I think that Mr. Svinth must be drawing me out.

That is all right I don't mind a discussion. Nevertheless, it is like having the question put to you "have you stopped beating your wife?"

A simple answer will not suffice, nor will just talking about Kata. I now have to talk about the relationship between many parts of Judo and Judo training, and also the relationship between Judo and society in general. What a set of books I would have to write to cover all that properly. This I do not have time for, and I'm sure you would not have the time or inclination to read anyway, so I'll try to simplify a wide and complex subject.

## Winning Olympic-level Competitions

I will start by stating that I also think that if you are only interested in winning Olympic level competition there is no imperative to practice Kata. If there is a use for Kata is another thing. (I'll come back to some of the uses of Kata later, and even explain what I think Kata is. For the time being when I use the word Kata, I will just talk about what I will later call the listed Kata. That is the eight, nine or however you count them, from the Ko-shiki-no-kata on to the more modern Kata.)

Maybe I should have started by trying to find out what is meant by "winning Olympic level competitions." I may be wrong but as I think there is only one Olympics, the meaning must be medals at the Olympic Games. But is just taking part in the Olympics not good enough? Then what about getting medals in World, International or other competitions, is that so bad? In some competitions the winner may only get his name put on a cup, is this kind of competition less worthwhile because there aren't any medals? In the grading system used by all Martial Arts, where contests are part of the system, a signature in a book giving permission to call ourselves another grade is all we look for, not medals.

Many people I know are proud that they took part in an International contest without even winning a medal. Some even, are proud that they were unofficially allowed to take part in squad training for International matches. Even taking part in other lesser competitions, inter-club etc. can be a matter of pride for some people that had to put in a lot of work to be able to do so.

I'm sure those coaches, no matter how much pressure they are under to get medals, cannot mean that people not getting Olympic medals have no place in Judo.

If we are only interested in winning Olympic medals, most of us would give up straight away as we must know what a small percentage of a percentage chance there is of that. It is good that we non-Olympic-medal-winners do not do this and try our best to improve, and get somewhere near our full potential, and stay in Judo.

Lazy people can and do, make the thought that they will probably never get a medal, one of their excuses for not doing the practice the coach suggests and are all too ready to accept any low target of skill or grade.

Our coach would probably tell us it is almost impossible to know for sure what we are capable of, and we should simply keep on trying, and enjoy (if that is the word) training, while we can.

Apart from Kata, what other things are not needed for the aim of getting a medal? You do not need a grade. I can't see anyone saying another country's competitors should not take part in the competition as they don't have a proper grade!

You do not need to know any Japanese terminology.

You don't even need to know many techniques. Logically speaking if your one throw is good enough there is no need for any Katame-waza or other throws. Contest rules do not state that we must go into Ne-waza if the throw does not score Ippon.

It would be interesting to hear from the coaches what they think is the minimum number of techniques needed to win those medals.

We must not just consider the Judo side of things. Many things in modern life are not necessary for medal winners, reading, writing, music and such like. I'll let you make up your own list of things not needed to win medals.

What kind of Olympic medal winners do we in Judo and society want then? Is it a mindless fighting machine, that must be sooner or later, when it shows the slightest sign of lack of success at winning medals, be thrown aside for a younger person, never to be seen again? What kind of C.V. would this person have if he or she then tried to get a job?

These questions of qualifications not directly applicable to Judo apply to other sports as well, for example, does a runner really need to have a university education?

We can look on the Olympic Medal Winners as the very top of a great pyramid.

I'll have to say something about the rest of the pyramid later, but while we are here at the top, looking down at the support, I would like to ask the coaches another question. What is the minimum number needed in the pyramid, to have a hope of producing one medal winner?

To get back to the training the hopefuls. First of all there is a need to develop a Tokui-waza, that is a favourite (the most suitable) technique. The coach should be able to help with the selection of the main throw.

It may be that the person joining the national squad, at say 18 years old and say second-dan, may be advised to drop the throw that got them to the position they are at. Many times we see that the student has blindly mimicked the technique of someone they admire, and it may not be the technique

they should be working on. This advice may be hard for the coach to give, and it may cause upset for the student but the student must learn to trust the coach.

The coach giving this advice, hopefully, may have enough experience and insight to be able to make this selection, but if there is a doubt the coach should try to be a little more scientific and have some kinds of tests to find out what is best for the student, that is what suits the student's psycho-physical habits, build etc. One way is to get the student to go through the Nage-no-kata.

In the listed Nage-no-kata the throws are carried out on the right and the left, and the coach may find out, for example, that the student is a natural left-hander and not the right-hander they seemed to be up to then. More likely the coach may find the student has a facility for a throw he would never think of trying in Ran-dori, let alone in Shi-ai.

To take a step backwards, I have seen contestants put at a great disadvantage because they had not had to contest against left-handers, so I think it is good to have a mix of right and left handers in a training squad. If there doesn't happen to be a mix like this, an alternative would be to get some of the right-handers in the squad to train as though they were left-handers. Of course they will have needed prior training to do this. So once again Nage-no-kata would be helpful.

Once a Tokui-waza is sorted out how does the student carry out the practice of a hundred thousand times that we were traditionally told we need? (See T.P. Leggett's article "The Cherry Tree"). Most of us think this training must be carried out in Uchi-komi. I note that this is not even mentioned above in the statements by the coaches!

Most people, even after they have done the 100,000, still find at times they sometimes have trouble with their Tokui-waza and have to "go back to basics" and this basic can be found in Kata. Jigoro Kano said that Kata is the grammar of Judo, Ran-dori he said was the composition.

In the statement, it was said Ran-dori with top-flight people is what is recommended instead of Kata. I have never seen any alternative to Uchi-komi and Ran-dori as the main training methods both for the top competitor and the hopefuls. I'm not sure if the statement means that this is not so in some places.

Anyway, it looks like we are caught on the horns of a dilemma with the statement. If it is good for the student to do Ran-dori with top-flight people, it sounds like it is a waste of time for the top-flight person. This I do not believe to be true, in a session of Randori, there are many ways of preventing anyone wasting time, and I'm sure the coaches don't need me to remind them of those ways.

One way would be to develop techniques that would not be powerful enough to be, at the moment, used against other Top competitors, and where do I suggest this person find the other throws that should be tried, yes, in Kata. As mention above the Top competitors could train on the wrong side (left instead of right or vice-versa).

If players only uses their Tokui-waza, no matter how out classed their training partners are, I think it is like a battleship using its' big guns to sink a fishing boat. So you can see I think versatility in throwing techniques is a desirable aim.

Talking about squad training brings us to another question for the coaches, what is the minimum number in the elite squad to produce Olympic medal winners?

Weight training I think has its' place in Judo training. We are still talking about medal winners in the Olympics and the squad of elite trainees that have some skill and are controlled in their weight training by a good coach. Where I think weight training is not good is when it is introduced before the player has enough skill in Judo techniques. Some players, without a good coach to steer them, make what they think is a new discovery, that it is quicker and easier to develop brute strength than it is to develop Judo skill. These people do have a little success in the lower grades and unable to give up their discovery, never get anywhere near their potential in Judo.

With the physical-strength we need in Judo there is also a need, for specific flexibility that can be only really be developed by the movements-with-the-weight-of-a-human-body of Judo, the throws etc. that cannot be carried out in the same way with weights. Even the training carried out with ropes and pulleys, which is better than weights on a bar, cannot exactly mimic lifting, pulling or pushing a human body about.

It's strange we hear lots of talk about weight training for strength - we don't hear the same amount said about flexibility do we?

Running as a cardiovascular exercise is good and has its place in Judo, but like the weight training cannot replace doing Judo. I have seen students, having discovered running, seems to be less demanding than Judo, get carried away with training at running till they can run a marathon distance, yet still get puffed out on the mat. So it must be running and Judo are different in some way. The attitude of these people, bad in Judo gets carried over to running, and it falls well short of what a real runner would have. It is easy for them to kid themselves they are running where as they don't run they Jog, which is the easy part of running.

Weight training and running, apart from being used as supplements for Judo, can be used as a break from the grind of Uchi-komi, Randori and Shi-ai, and this is another use of Kata. At least this break is still Judo so "keeps their hand in".

Having gone through all the training, and been lead through the steps of contest, and having won the Olympic medal what happens to this person? I have seen them retire from contest, and as contest is the only thing they know, from judo in general.

There was a saying in feudal times in Japan that the lives of the Samurai were like the cheery blossom, very beautiful but alas they don't last long. Do we think it should be the same with the Top contest person? I hope not. I hope these people have been given some general training in Judo, including Kata, and a lead into coaching skills, before they get to this water shed, so they can stay in Judo without feeling too lost among the ordinary "bods", or better still become a coach.

There are not that many posts coaching the elite National squads, so the coach may have to coach somewhere in the rest of the pyramid. For this the coach should study all parts of Judo so as to be able to teach the average person in Judo. Again make up your own list of types of people that start Judo and become what I have called the average person, that we want to keep. Every individual deserves a good coach, and hopefully they then may stay in Judo, and with the help of the good coach, some may even stand a chance of getting somewhere.

The last part of the statement I must comment on is the bit about doing Kata when you are old. If the coaches were talking about the top contest person, shall we guess at about 25 years old? Having been a medal winner they are now about 4th Dan, still tough, and maybe going on to be a coach, and so find there is a need for a study of Kata. This person will now know how much effort

that must be put in to claim to have some facility at any Kata, let alone all of the listed Kata. If he had to do 100.000 of his Tokui, how many for the Nage-no-kata?

Physical Education experts tell us a left and a right of the same thing (say a throw) should be thought of as two separate things to be learned. So in the Nage-no-kata there are quite a few to be done. This kind of “old person” could make a good job of learning the Kata as they will soon find out it is the same as other Judo training.

What about other people, what is old for them? Will this old person be willing and able to take the 30 hard falls while doing the Nage-no-kata? The average person will not.

From my experience, people past their prime in Judo, already with ingrained attitudes, such as not wanting to be thrown, even one time. Having only been thrown by such throws as Tai-otoshi, do not enjoy being thrown by such throws as Kata-guruma. Even from the very first throw in Nage-no-kata, Uki-otoshi, they find they have a heavy fall, and worse still Tori does not seem to be in a position where assistance can be given with the landing. These are problems the Coach must take into consideration, and I'm sure the Coach will agree with me and say the sooner the student starts Kata or Contest the better.

If the Coach has to look after a mixed group of people, of a range of ages and Judo experience, and teach them Kata, it can be done if not too high a target is set.

The old person, for example, could just take Tori's part in Nage-no-kata, so no falls are taken. This is not ideal, but what is in this life? If the old person does not study the part of Uke I think this person is only carrying out shallow learning, like a cook that can only put on the icing onto a cake.

In Japan I was told that you should be Uke for seven years, before becoming Tori. This may sound, to some, like another bit of outdated Japanese mysticism. In Western military circles I have heard it said that you should study your enemy in order to overcome him. This lesson has been ignored in modern times, with dire results.

Basic strategies for armies often also apply to individuals in fighting situations and this is what we are talking about here. It is best to learn the attacks by Uke so as to know their strengths and weaknesses, then it is possible to avoid and counter the attacks. This sounds like we are talking about Self-defence, so we are. Most of the listed Kata, are Self-defence-Kata. Even Nage-no-kata has blow attacks in it, but the same tactics that apply in Self-defence also apply in Contest Judo.

Applying this principle of studying the opposition to sport Judo situations, we look at all the films and videos to see the Tokui-waza of people that may be met in contest, so see what we must be careful of and even see if there is a chance to develop some Kaeshi-waza, against it. But this cannot teach us as much as the physical experience can.

Having said all that about the importance of being Uke, the old person that knows their Uke-mi is not up to the standard needed for Nage-no-kata, need not shy away, there are many other Kata that can be done, in fact one to suit every one, depending on what they want to learn. One of the many good points about Ju-no-kata is that the throws are not fully carried out. So you don't need a mat or break-falls.

The coach should be knowledgeable enough to be able to give the student this kind of choice.

All Physical Education teachers I have spoken to tell me, that students must start when they are young. Even six or so years old, is not too young an age to start things like gymnastics!

What about learning in general, do the experts tell us not to worry about education until we are at least 25 years old? No, they say something like four or five. Some are even talking about learning in the womb! So it seems it is thought that all learning should be begun at an age as early as possible, as long as it does not harm the young.

We will let the experts fight among themselves, over the exact age to begin which learning. We in Judo can have our own idea.

I'm not sure what age is right in Judo. I have an idea that it is around fourteen years of age for contest Judo.

Before that play-Judo is all right, and even though there does not seem to be the follow on into senior Judo from this group that there should be, I think it is somewhere in this lower age group that Kata, of the right sort, should be introduced. Not when they are old.

What about the real aged, I think we are never too old to learn, though we, exactly like the young, have to be looked after by the coach, so we do not attempt dangerous things, and our learning is in easy stages.

I've gone all round the block maybe now I can get onto the subject of Kata in more detail as it may affect the lower part, the middle as well as the top of the Judo pyramid.

Each of the Kata deserve an article, or two, to itself, so I'll try to keep my remarks to Kata in general so to make an end to this article.

Kata to me is anything that is not the real thing.

To me Uchi-komi is Kata.

Ran-dori is Kata. Ran-dori is even done on the move as in the listed Kata. In fact Kano called the Nage-no-kata and the Katame-no-kata the "Ran-dori-no-kata" so he thought there was a connection before I did.

Shi-ai I think of as Kata as most contests are a step in training for higher level contests (the Olympic Gold?).

To give another example of my idea why Shi-ai could be thought of as Kata.

Many students start Judo with the aim of learning Self-defense. Prospective Coaches please note. Any contest this kind of student has will certainly be Kata as it will be a part of Self-defense training for the life or death struggle they had in mind. This is how contest was thought of at the inception of Judo.

Having said what I think Kata is, it will be seen that I think that Kata cannot be avoided in Judo, even by the Coaches mentioned in the introduction.

The listed Kata, what I believe the Coaches were thinking about, has a bad press in Judo in the West.

One reason is the difficulty with the translation of the word into English. Even T.P. Leggett, for his books on Kata, calls it Formal Demonstration. In respect for him, I admit all the words used, form etc. don't fill the bill and a long-winded explanation is no good on the front of a book. The thing is, if we think Kata is either formal or a demonstration or even both of those things together, we get lead down the wrong path.

If we take only a glance at the Martial arts, we will see that they all have Kata as the main method of training, most have Kata as the exclusive training method. Judo began as a Martial Art, and to keep this tradition we need the listed Kata. For those that have, or at least like to appear to have, no time for tradition, they can look to the irreplaceable practical use of Kata.

We must read up on what Kano said to find all the details of what he thought Judo should be, but one thing is obvious all Judo training must be safe to carry out, if it is not safe it is not Judo.

For the sake of safety some techniques were banned from Shi-ai. Those potentially dangerous techniques, leg locks, wrist locks, spine locks and such like were not banned entirely, they are now in the listed Kata, where they can be learned by Tori and yet keep Uke safe. So Judo Kata and Martial Arts Kata are used for the same reason, safety in training.

A thing that is easily overlooked in Kata is the things the attacker, Uke, must learn. In the Kime-no-kata and Go-shin-jutsu, for example, Uke must learn to use a sword, a knife, a stick and a gun.

Uke must also learn non weapon techniques such as kicking, poking, punching and hitting in other ways, to name just a few things that help to broaden the, dare I say it, the Judo education that cannot be learned in Judo sport training.

Each of the listed Kata can be looked-on as a study on its own, but a careful look will show us that the whole list has a balance so that each Kata compliments the other Kata.

For example we see the attack Ryo-te-tori (Both-hands-held) in Kime-no-kata, Go-shin-jutsu and Juno-kata, to name just three, and in each Kata there is a differing response. So we learn at least three defences against this attack.

In learning situations I have always been told that we must start with the easily learned or, in physical subjects, safe and easily performed. Each Kata has the techniques put in order of difficulty. We may disagree with the exact order in some Kata, but we can still see it.

The Kata where this order is most easily seen is in the Go-shin-jutsu. This has grip attacks before blows, blows before kicks, kicks before knife attacks, knife before stick attacks and after those there is the gun attacks.

So the thought as to the order of learning is not at all modern, it is even seen in the Ko-shiki-no-kata.

Applying this same principle to the rest of Judo, each training method can be modified to be in easy steps.

Uchi-komi can be carried out in varying ways and, if controlled by the coach or the partners, so can Ran-dori.

Shi-ai as well as other training should be taken in easy steps. In fact, if we take part in Grading (Sho-kyu and Sho-dan) contests, this is done anyway. It is only the other contests that the coach will have to look at, and try to put into a list of difficulty.

What about Kata-training, is this different to other forms of training? I do not think so, and so also think that even the listed Kata are not so sacred that they cannot be modified to suit the skill standard, and the learning capacity of the trainee.

Like Shi-ai, we cannot start at the top with a Kata. We may not agree what is the top in Kata, but if we agree individuals cannot learn everything at one go, we must approach the learning in stages. The techniques can be learned, as all other Judo techniques are, in the various steps of Uchi-komi, and where suitable in a non-competitive form of Ran-dori.

We should bear this in mind when needed, but Kata training should be approached in a differing manner. Why not try the whole Kata at a time but leave out all the details that cannot be learned in one go?

Even the order of the listed Kata can be modified until the full standard Kata is used.

Often people that try to learn in order, say the Nage-no-kata, by trying first to learn all the details of the first set (in this case, Te-waza), which sound logical. Then move on to the logical next set but re-cap on the first. Then set 3 re-cap 1-2-, then set 4, plus 1-2-3, and so set 5 added to 1-2-3-4. So we see that set one has been done five times, set five only once.

If this was thought of as for a demonstration, the first set may be not so bad, but the last!

If they were in show business, would it not be better to have the most polished performance, not as a curtain raiser but in the finale?

We not in show-biz cannot sort out the technique we may need for Self-defense, or Contest, so should give equal training to the whole of a Kata. The only way we can do this is to start with a very rough outline of the Kata then gradually add details so that it starts to look like Judo. Even techniques should be modified into a simplified form. For example all the heavy throws of Nage-no-kata can be done so Uke is lightly rolled down. This can be done if Tori goes down onto his knees in throws like Kata-guruma.

Another obvious modification in Nage-no-kata would be to do the throws on one side, left or right. The very important changes in grips can be left out for the time being, that is until the trainees needs a little more to think about.

In a self-defense Kata all the things not familiar to the trainees can be left out in the early stages. Uke must be protected in the wrist locks, until Uke learns how to react and stay safe when these unfamiliar techniques are applied to his wrists. Tori instead of gripping Uke's hand can grip the forearm, near the wrist joint, so that an elbow lock (Hiji-kan-setsu-waza) is applied and not the wrist lock (Te-kubi-kan-setsu-waza). Hiji-kan-setsu waza should be familiar to all but the junior players.

If the trainees are young all locks should be avoided and instead a holding (Osae-waza) technique should be used.

Only once the full standard techniques are fully incorporated should the least important things, what I call the ceremonial, be added. For example, the position on the mat, the formal moves to get into the techniques and things that get over-emphasized such as not turning your back on Jo-zeki.

The Japanese names for techniques in the Kata I think should never take up precious mat time, so this is another thing that can be left out until a more appropriate time.

With beginners I find it better not to even mention the word Kata until the students find out how interesting what they are doing is.

When the Japanese terms are introduced I try to avoid the use of English names as they can mislead. For example Se-oi-nage, in the UK, is called "Shoulder-throw". In the Nage-no-kata this throw comes before Kata-guruma, which we all know is "Shoulder-wheel" in English so confusion sets in. If "Carry-on-the-back-throw" is used for Se-oi-nage it is a better translation and it also gives the students more of an idea what to aim for. Unfortunately it is a bit long-winded, so I don't bother.

I believe Coaches should learn the Japanese for all techniques and training, but they should not force the same learning onto the students. By all means set the students intellectual as well as physical challenges, but don't put them off.

One of the things that seem to make Kata artificial is the Sugi-ashi foot movements that are used in some Kata. When this is introduced I point out it is the way a boxer or Western fencer moves, and, as most people have seen these sports in action, it helps to keep the movements more natural.

A further thing I want to say about Kata in general, I think that coaches should think about forming their own Kata. This could be done by the Top Coaches, mentioned above, if they want a set of throws they want the trainees to learn for contest or as an exercise in movement, flexibility or versatility. The Coach could even have a set of throws that each finish in a holding, arm-lock or strangle, which we don't have in the listed Kata.

A non-Kodokan Kata that may be useful is a Go-no-sen-no-kata. This Kata of throws and counter throws can be made up to suit the Coach and the trainees.

One last thing about Kata it is the same as Ran-dori in that you can learn a lot by a session with a more skilled person.

I am not sure I have made a case that can influence the Top Coaches, or anyone else come to that, so I'll close with a thought.

In Far Eastern Philosophy there is a saying (I'll use the Japanese) Su-sui-san-sei. Often the translation is simplified into "The three wine tasters." Like all these things there is more to it than that. The wine can even be thought of as vinegar. The three can be thought of as the three saintly persons (The Buddha, Confucius and Lao-tse). Sometimes instead of those three it is said that the three are teachers (or maybe they are the same). The outline of this thing is that the three all taste the same drink, maybe wine or, for the pure non-drinker, vinegar. One, we are not told which, thinks the drink is sour, one says it is just right, the last says it is too sweet.

This tale and the wine, is like Judo training and our Kata, a very complex subject so there can be differing opinions about it, but let us at least have a good taste while we consider it.