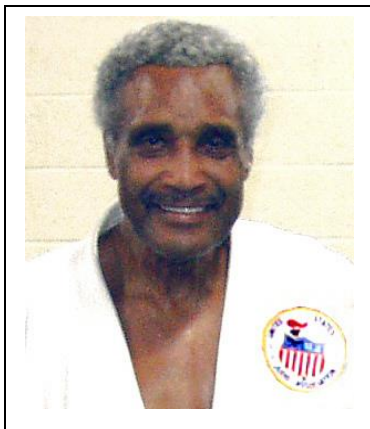




UNITED STATES JUDO ASSOCIATION

January 15, 2011



We are pleased to announce that the United States Judo Association has promoted George Lee Harris to Judan (10th Degree Black Belt) today which would have been his 78th birthday. This honor was approved unanimously by both the USJA's Promotion Board and Board of Directors. Mr. Harris passed away on January 7th, 2011. This is the first recognized 10th dan promotion by one of the 3 major judo organizations in the United States. Mr. Harris placed 5th in the 1956 World Championships, won six Air Force judo championships, four US National titles, two Gold Medals in the Pan American Games, and was on the 1964 US Olympic Team.



After his retirement from competition, Mr. Harris became a goodwill ambassador for judo. He was one of the leaders of the Armed Forces Judo Association (AFJA) that became the United States Judo Association (USJA) which he and several others founded in 1968. Mr. Harris served as one of our early presidents and chaired our promotion board for several decades.

A formal presentation and tribute to Mr. Harris will be held during the opening ceremonies at this year's Joint USJA/USJF Junior Nationals on July 2nd in Toledo, Ohio. We hope to see many of club leaders and members at what is sure to be a very memorable ceremony.

Sincerely,

Gary Goltz, USJA President



Announcement on George Harris from the IJF - January 8, 2011

It is with deep sadness that we announce the passing of American judo legend George Harris 9th Dan. The genial and gentle giant Harris had fought a long battle with cancer and died peacefully in the arms of his wife. George Lee Harris was born in the tiny village of Kittrell, North Carolina on 15 January 1933. By 1952 Harris had moved north to Philadelphia and the Korean War was at its height. Harris showed an early taste for combat activities and was an amateur boxer from the age of 12, continuing through high school. Yet, despite the knowledge that many of his high school friends had been killed or were missing in action he joined the US Air Force. Harris was sent to Travis Air Force Base in California for medical combat training.

It was here that he was offered an introduction to judo by Lt. Philip S. Porter Jr., USAF who brought George to a judo class taught by Walter Todd, Chief Civilian Combatives Instructor, Physical Conditioning Unit, Strategic Air Command. In 1954 a 10-man AAU-Air Force team visited six Japanese cities to compete in 16 contests. Harris was a successful member of this team and reportedly won all of his 16 contests. In 1956 Harris, by then a 2nd Dan, took third place in the heavyweight division at the national AAU Judo Tournament at Seattle. After winning the US National Championships in 1957 and '58 Harris was transferred from his original Air Force responsibilities to the Physical Conditioning Unit (PCU) where he was able to concentrate on learning judo, karate, aikido, and jiu jitsu. His new role was to maintain the fitness levels of Air Force flying personnel and, in the Strategic Air Command, teach hand-to-hand combat to bomb crews.

Over a period of ten years Harris would spend many months in Japan training at the Kodokan and, when not training in Japan, the Air Force sent Harris to compete throughout Europe and South America. In 1958 Harris won the 3rd Dan category at the Pan-American Judo Championships held in Rio de Janeiro. Later that year, Harris represented the U.S. at the 2nd World Championships in Tokyo where he placed 5th losing to eventual gold medalist Sone of Japan. After his efforts in Tokyo Harris was promoted to 4th Dan. He competed at the 1964 Olympic Games in Tokyo when judo made its Olympic debut. Harris, an African-American, competed alongside teammates Jim Bregman, who was Jewish, Ben Nighthorse Campbell, a Native American, and Paul Maruyama, a Japanese American.

In 1968 Harris, along with fellow Armed Forces Judo Association (AFJA) leaders George Bass, Robey Reed, Jim Bregman, Phil Porter, Rick Mertins, and Karl Geis, attended a meeting in Chicago that saw the founding of the United States Judo Association (USJA). Widely regarded as an honest and upright figure in US judo, Harris came from a family where his father and all uncles had all died before the age of 50. Harris was only a few days short of his 78th birthday. He was the father of three daughters, all college graduates, of whom he was immensely and understandably proud. In 2000 Rebecca Barnett interviewed him for an article later published in *The Masters, Judo for Adults*. "Everything that happens in life shapes your values and whether you'll be an honorable person. I've tried to be a good person, to touch other people's lives, to impact them to live honorably" said Harris.

Ten Questions With George Harris

By Rebecca Barnett – May 2003

Published in *The Masters, Judo for Adults*

We all have our heroes in judo, men we hold in awe. George Harris is one of my heroes. Mr. Harris was on the first judo Olympic Team in 1964. He was a gold medalist in the Pan American Games (precursor to the World Championships) in 1960 and 1963. George Harris was a four time National Champion and six times Air Force Champion. Our two-part interview on judo and honor took place in 2000.

Q: How did you get started in judo?

George Harris: I had been an amateur boxer from the age of 12, all through high school.

In 1952 the Korean War was ongoing. All of my high school friends had been killed or were missing in action. I joined the Air Force and after basic training, I requested a transfer as far away from home (Philadelphia) as possible without leaving the country. The Air Force sent me to Travis Air Force Base in California for medical combat training. A patient of mine told me that he played judo when he wasn't flying and offered to show me after he was discharged. That patient was Phil Porter.

Q: How did playing judo become a part of your Air Force responsibilities?

Harris: When I won the National Championships in 1957 and '58 the military noticed. The Air Force moved me from medic responsibilities to the physical fitness unit. I learned judo, karate, aikido and jiu jitsu. My job was to keep Air Force flying personnel in shape. In the Strategic Air Command we taught the bombers hand-to-hand combat. If the pilots went down behind enemy lines they could fight their way free and return back to their own lines.

Q: How did the Air Force train their competitors?

Harris: Every year for 10 years I spent 4 to 8 months in Japan training at the Kodokan. The Air Force would send over 26 men at a time. I was always tired and sore from being beat up. The Japanese were curious – they had not seen a black man before. It was interesting to see their reaction. They wanted to see if the black would rub off. I competed in the Air Force until there was no one left to beat. The Air Force sent me all over Europe and South America competing when I wasn't in Japan training.

Q: What sacrifices did you make to become an Olympian?

Harris: I retired at a lower rank due to the constant judo travel and training demands. I missed out on promotions. I used to regret my slower advancement and lower rank than my peers. But I had to decide - what was my priority? It was to travel, train and focus on the Olympics. It made me a better person, gave me insight on life and people. Now, I would not trade those experiences for any amount of money. I met outstanding people.

Q: For a time you were a television celebrity?

Harris: Yes, I appeared on talk shows and was twice a guest on [To Tell the Truth](#). But as an amateur athlete I could not violate my status by accepting any money.

Q: And you starred in a judo movie?

Harris: Yes, the first and only judo movie ever made was a predecessor of the *Karate Kid*. It was called [The Year of the Gentle Tiger](#), and was later shown as an NBC daytime program.

Q: After retiring from the Air Force you faced some ethical challenges in the private sector?

Harris: In my second career, I traveled around the world teaching contract negotiation. I was offered money, bribes and sometimes was threatened by the men I had to evaluate. I used to have a boss who like to scream and yell at the men, call them names. I refused to be browbeaten. I would say, "I understand English. I hear very well."

At another job, I refused to take kickbacks for pallet use. I could buy pallets from Ohio and Virginia by the truckload for \$4.00 each. In NYC they cost \$15.00 each with the kickback. If you don't have good ethics, someone will lead you astray. The company fired me, replaced with a kid who made a lower salary, a kid I had trained for a year. When I was fired he didn't even look up from his desk. He later stole \$60,000 from the company. That young man didn't get the training he needed in his home life.

I always thought I had a guardian angel looking after me. People have always helped me through times that were tough. You can't go through life doing it all on your own - someone or something is looking out for you. Every day at lunch I would work out to keep in shape. When I went back to the office, I was fit and full of energy, ready to work. My co-workers came back sleepy from eating a big lunch

Q: Of all the athletes you've trained, who stands out in your mind?

Harris: Anne Marie was a ten year old little fat girl in my judo class back in the early 1970s. Twenty years later she called me. She and her brother had been trying to find me for years. She had a child with a mental disability. She said, "You have been an inspiration to me and my brother for 20 years. Whenever times are tough, I think, what would sensei do, what would sensei say? He would never give up." She wanted to thank me for giving her a creed to live her life by. I was crying; I couldn't wait to hang up the phone so I could really sob. You never know the impact you have on people's lives.

Q: You've had some health problems lately.

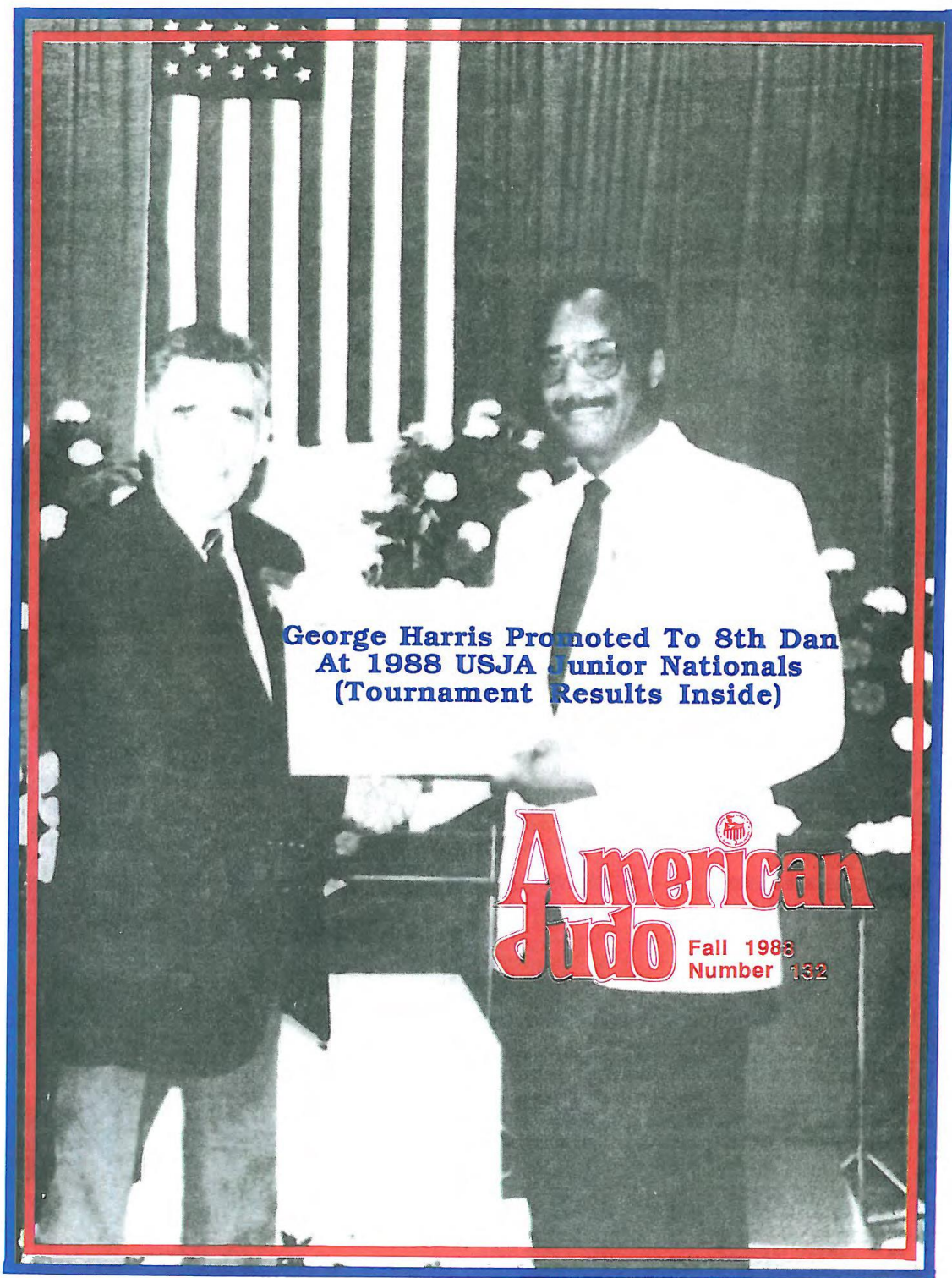
Harris: In the past year I've had a back operation, a heart attack, stroke and now I'm fighting prostate cancer. I've been through a lot but my faith in God pulled me through. I don't smoke, I drink very little and exercise every day. All of the men in my family, my father and uncles died by the age of 50. I'm 67 and I'm still here, still working out and still in good condition.

Everything that happens in life shapes your values and whether you'll be an honorable person. I've raised my three girls, all college graduates. I've tried to be a good person, to touch other people's lives, to impact them to live honorably. Lying in that hospital bed, I made my peace with my Maker. I am not afraid to die.

Q: Many people have heard there was a comic book written about your life, but have never seen a copy. Whatever happened to it?

Harris: After I retired from the Air Force in the 1980s, I lived in New York. A young man in my judo class was a writer. He thought I had led an interesting life. He wrote the [story of my life in comic book form](#). But after the comic book was completed, he stashed the copies away in his mother's basement and moved away to Oklahoma. I went over and retrieved several copies, don't know what happened to the rest.

Below is a reprint of an article from *American Judo* #131 Summer of 1998, the United States Judo Association's official publication.



**George Harris Promoted To 8th Dan
At 1988 USJA Junior Nationals
(Tournament Results Inside)**

**American
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Fall 1988
Number 132

**GEORGE LEE HARRIS, 8TH
DEGREE BLACK BELT -- THE
MAKING OF A LEGEND**



JUDO GREAT GEORGE HARRIS PROMOTED BY USJA TO WELL DESERVED 8TH DAN

By Phil Porter, Head Coach, America's Judo Team

When the Congress of the United States, through Congressman Ben Campbell, himself an Olympian in Judo from the same team as George Harris (Tokyo, 1964), awarded George Lee Harris a plaque engraved with the words, "For A Lifetime Of Achievement," they said it correctly.

George Harris earned those words. He earned them on the mat at the Kodokan in Japan during the 1950's and 1960's. He earned them fighting a 30 minute final match, and winning, the Pan American Judo Championships. He earned them writhing on the floor in agony from a torn elbow ligament in Tampa after winning his third national heavyweight and grand national championship. He earned them in two world championships and the Olympics, and he earned them devoting the last 24 years since his retirement



The 1964 U.S. Olympic Judo Team. This was the first Olympic Judo Team. From the left: George Harris, Ben Campbell, Paul Maruyama and Jim Bregman. In the background are Ken Busch and Mr. Ichinoe, 8th Dan.



The victorious U.S. Pan American Judo Team which won three gold medals and a silver to win the team championship at the first Judo contests held in the Pan American Games in San Paulo, Brazil, 1963. From the left: George Harris, Gold Medal, Heavyweight; Ben Campbell, Gold Medal, Open; Tosh Seino, Gold Medal, Lightweight; Paul Maruyama, Silver Medal, Middleweight.



At Jim Bregman's Camp Olympus in West Virginia, George shows a counter to one of Bill Montgomery's attacks. This was in 1959.

from competition teaching young kids the art and science of Judo.

I know because I was there for a lot of it. Here's how it happened. In the spring of 1953 I was in the hospital at Travis AFB, California with a severe case of arthritis. One day a young medical corpsman came into the room to ask me about Judo. He had been a Golden Gloves boxing champion in his home town, Philadelphia. Soon after that he came to our little dojo at Travis and started Judo under Walt Todd.

In 1954, the next year, we both placed in the first Strategic Air Command Judo Championships in Omaha, and just before I went overseas to England for four years, I remember throwing George in randori in our club. That was the last time, because a month later he caught me in a tournament for ippon and from then on he was unstoppable.

While I was in England he not only won the National Heavyweight and Grand Championships twice, he fought in the second World Championships in Tokyo, placing fourth. George went on to win the Pan American Judo Championships Gold Medal in 1958 (after winning his second national grand championship the same year), and when Judo was begun in the Pan American Games in 1963, George won the gold there, and went on to place fourth in the Olympics in 1964.

But beyond the competition, George Harris is a marvelous teacher of Judo. His Olympic Judo Development Camp, held each August in Port Jervis, New York, is the oldest continuously run summer Judo camp in the country, with 1988 being its 16th year. He has given everything he has to young people for a quarter of a century after his fighting days were over.



When the national championships were held in Hawaii in 1957, George Harris, after only four years in Judo, won both the heavyweight and grand championships for the first time. The Air Force Team also won the national five-man team championships. In fact, the national team championships was always won by the Air Force Team, so they discontinued the event in 1960 after the team of Tosh Seino, John Martindale, Robey Reed, Phil Porter, and George Harris won it for the 5th consecutive year. Kneeling, from left: John Hodge, Ed Maley, George Harris, Mike O'Conner. Standing from left: John Redding, Sam Williams, (name unavailable), Robey Reed, Martin Tyrrel, and the project officer.



In 1958, George Harris won his second national heavyweight and grand national titles in Chicago, Illinois. Here, Professor Masato Tamura presents George with the outstanding Judoist award.

As twice past President of our Association, his sound judgement and loyalty to the ideals of Judo have been impressed upon our organization permanently. With Jim Bregman and Jim Nichols, George established the legal foundation of the USJA in the 1970's, incorporating both the USJA and the NJI at that time. We all owe him a debt impossible to repay.

When I wrote to all of the high dans of the Association after our National Promotion Committee and Board of Directors had approved his promotion to 8th Dan, there was a tremendous wave of enthusiasm and affection for George beyond anything I had previously seen in Judo.

And so, as our Association made its first award of 8th Degree Black Belt to George Lee Harris, it is truly fitting that we have established the first named scholarship fund of the Association, the George Lee Harris Endowment. In the first few months after this endowment was established, \$30,000 was donated by his comrades in Judo. Their names are listed in this issue of "American Judo." We hope that every reader of this issue will feel that he too would like to become a Charter Donor of the George Lee Harris Endowment.

The interest from the Harris Endowment will be used to provide scholarships for deserving young people who wish to study Judo at the National Judo Institute while they attend college. Our goal for the endowment is \$100,000 by the end of the year.



OFFICIAL PUBLICATION
OF THE
UNITED STATES
JUDO ASSOCIATION



Professor Sumiyuki Kotani, the only living 10th Dan in the world, referees a win by George Harris in Chicago at the Nationals. Kotani, now retired, was then a 9th Dan. The Air Force brought him to the United States each year for many years in the 1950's and 1960's to train the Air Force Judo Team.



Helping kids as always, George Harris runs a clinic at the Kittyhawk Judo Club in Ohio, November 1971. In the background are national kata champions Judy Baker and Linda Stoops.



George Harris leaves the mat after the introduction of athletes at the second world championships of Judo held in Tokyo in 1958. George placed fourth, losing only to the world gold medalist Sone of Japan. Behind George is "Big Sam" Williams, the other member of the U.S. Judo Team to the world games.



John Schmidt (left), a fine heavyweight Judoist of the Travis AFB Judo Club where George started Judo, takes part in a demonstration of tai otoshi by George.



Professor Kazuzo Kudo, 9th Dan, presents the Outstanding Judoist award to George Harris after he won yet another national heavyweight championship in Fresno, California in 1963.



A young George Harris, after four years in Judo, accepts both the overall champion trophy and the outstanding Judoist awards from Major General Walter C. Sweeney at Portsmouth, New Hampshire at the 4th Annual SAC Judo Championships. This was before his victories in Hawaii the same year.



During the U. S. Judo Team tour of France in 1964, George Harris attacks Alari of France in a team match in the famous Salle Coubertin in Paris. George won the match, and was undefeated on this tour.



The founder of Air Force Judo, Mr. Mel Bruno, gives George Harris a special award after he won the Air Force Heavyweight and Grand Championships at the Air Force Academy in 1961.

