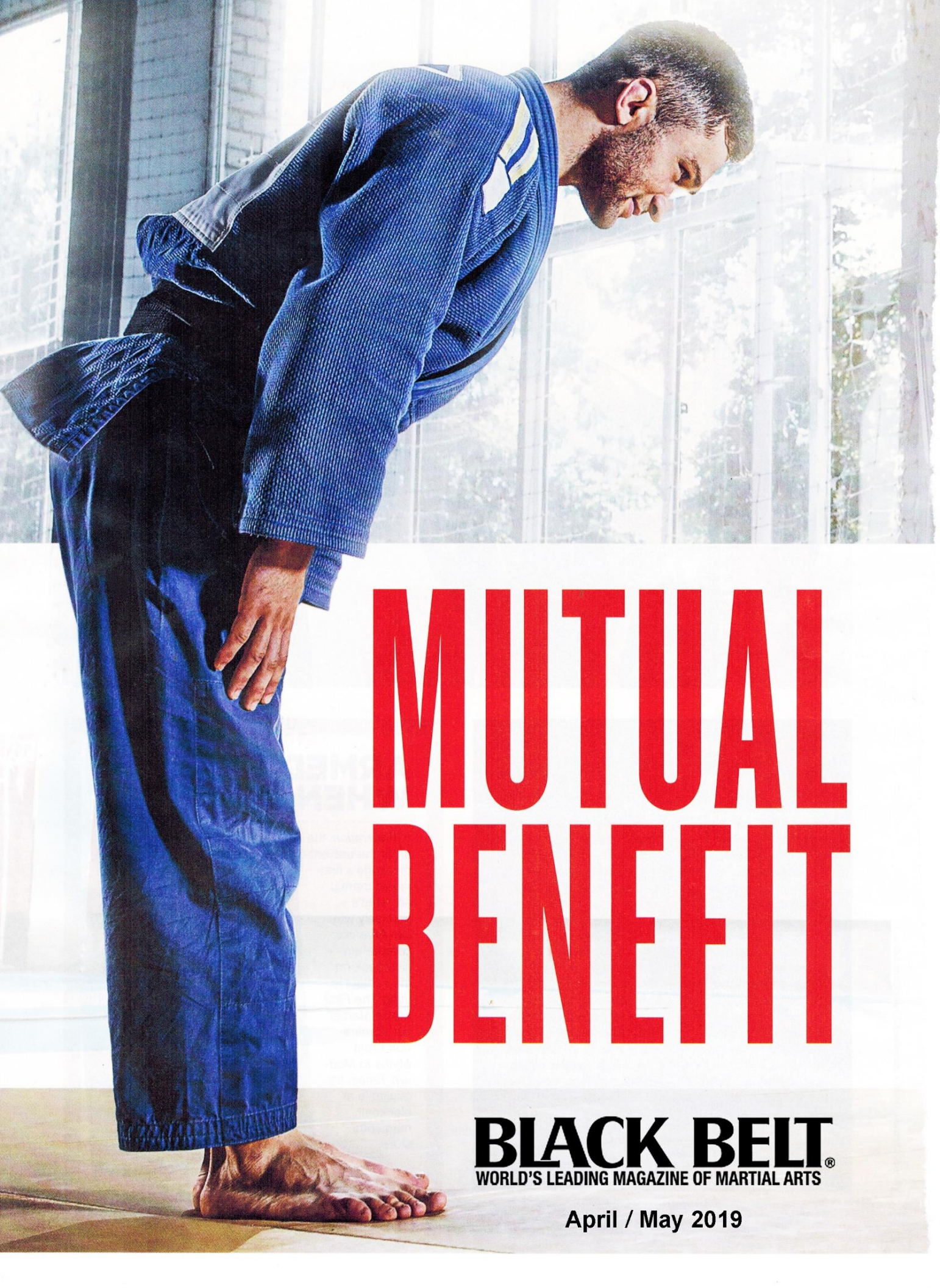

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WHAT AMERICAN JUDO LEADERS CAN LEARN FROM THE SUCCESS OF BRAZILIAN JIU-JITSU

by
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ON A FATEFUL DAY BACK IN THE 1960s, I watched an episode of *The Green Hornet* on my parents' black-and-white television: As Kato, Bruce Lee beat the living daylights out of a bunch of bad guys with grace and ease. I immediately decided that I wanted to learn kung fu. The next day, I signed up for judo lessons at the local YMCA. Why? It was the only place nearby. But it wound up being a great thing for my life because that was where I met Kyu Ha Kim, a 6-foot-2-inch, 220-pound Korean judo champ and the man who would become my *sensei*.

Thousands of people who began their martial studies half a century ago could probably tell you a similar story. Back then, judo reigned as the most popular martial art in the United States and many other nations. Today, it's estimated that 28 million people around the world do judo, with the top 10 countries being (in order) Japan, France, South Korea, Russia, Georgia, Brazil (where it's more popular than Brazilian *jiu-jitsu*), Mongolia, Cuba, China and Germany.

While judo still rules as the third most-practiced sport internationally and the first martial art to be added to the Olympics, it's taken a back seat to karate, kung fu, *tae-kwondo* and now Brazilian jiu-jitsu in the United States. Judo's loss of the top spot can't be discussed without first recalling how it even got to the top.

JUDO'S RISE

It all started with the ban on martial arts that was imposed by the occupation forces after Japan was defeated in World War II. That prompted leaders at the Kodokan — the judo headquarters founded by Jigoro Kano in 1882 — to begin embracing American servicemen, mostly officers, with the goal of impressing on them their art's peaceful philosophy and goal of encouraging people to give back to society.

It worked. Soon, judo was once again allowed to flourish in Japan. As the American servicemen returned home, they teamed up with the Japanese-American population and helped form the Judo Black Belt Federation, now the U.S. Judo Federation. The art grew, and in 1964 it debuted as an Olympic event at the Tokyo Games.

Throughout the 1960s, judo was featured on numerous TV talk shows, as well as episodes of *The Andy Griffith Show, The Rifleman, Naked City* and other series. Judo was becoming quite popular, but as *judoka* scrambled to meet the demand, they were often viewed as sellouts. Those who had been seen as judo stalwarts were ostracized because they elected to open for-profit *dojo*. Even "Judo" Gene LeBell suffered their wrath when he was banned from entering judo competitions because he'd worked as a pro wrestler.

The old hands believed that judo had to retain its amateur status. It stemmed from the ban on martial arts in Japan post-World War II. Even

Above: Jigoro Kano demonstrates a judo technique. Right: The original Kodokan.

Judo & Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu share many techniques, including the armbar shown here

more important, it is what enabled karate and kung fu to begin stealing judo's thunder in the entertainment world. Karate and kung fu quickly became huge draws at the box office and secured ongoing spots on TV series. Meanwhile, judo continued to fade, losing practitioners and seeing club after club close. In the States, the registered judo population plunged from a high of 100,000 to less than 25,000.

Fast-forward to 1993. The Ultimate Fighting Championship launched in Denver, and to everyone's surprise, one striker after another was taken to the mat and handily defeated by the same submissions used in judo. I, for one, can recall how proud I was to finally see judo's prowess on display again.

To my chagrin, however, it was BJJ that was feted, not judo. The Brazilian art quickly became the newest American fad. And that fad transformed into a movement as more and more schools opened — and BJJ started to rival and then surpass taekwondo as the most popular art in America.

We can clearly see how this happened. Now, we must ask, What can be done to reverse judo's decline? What can American judo leaders learn from the success of BJJ? Can the two arts act in mutually beneficial ways? I've pondered those questions for years. My observations are presented here.

BJJ: BASICALLY JUST JUDO?

Japanese judo masters such as Mitsuyo Maeda in the 1920s and Masahiko Kimura in the 1940s profoundly influenced the early development of Brazilian jiu-jitsu. That statement is not intended to denigrate BJJ in any way. The success it's enjoyed, especially since the inception of the UFC, has been nothing short of phenomenal. Commercial BJJ schools now exist around the world, with chains like Gracie Barra boasting more than 700 branches. BJJ tournaments draw huge crowds. Practitioners spend hundreds of dollars on monthly membership dues, uniforms, clinics, videos, books and accessories.

This is the exact opposite of judo in the United States. Many judo schools here are affiliated with parks-and-recreation departments (mine included — for 30 years), YMCAs and Japanese community centers, all of which charge nominal fees. There are few commercial judo dojo, and the largest judo tournaments in America are the size of regional BJJ competitions.

CORRECTIVE ACTION: American judo leaders must modernize their thinking and stop opposing commercialization. Forever treating judo like an amateur sport or a martial art that should never be for-profit will only ensure its continuing decline in the 21st century.

JUDO'S FOCUS ON JUNIORS

One of the most noticeable changes in American judo from the 1960s to the present has been the decline in adult participation. This is a byproduct of the creation of USA Judo, the national governing body for the art. According to Hayward Nishioka, this action led to a friendly rivalry between the U.S. Judo Federation and the U.S. Judo Association, and with the USJA removed from the Olympic equation, more focus was put on grass-roots junior judo.

In contrast, BJJ has flourished in the adult demographic. Nowadays, BJJ schools even compete with fitness clubs in the race to attract adults looking to stay in shape.

CORRECTIVE ACTION: American judo leaders need to recruit more adults who show an interest in the art and retain them by providing engaging training. Adults who are enthusiastic about their study of judo are more likely to train, compete, buy and stay. The challenge, of course, is doing that while maintaining the focus on the next generation.

In addition, commercial judo schools in America should reintegrate the traditional rules that allow the use of leg grabs and pickups as part of the judo syllabus. These moves were banned by the International Judo Federation because it was thought they made judo look more like wrestling. While the end product is better-looking throws for television, it dumbed down judo's effectiveness for self-defense and its ability to mesh well with BJJ.

FEAR OF FALLING

Another factor that's holding judo back is an entire category of its techniques: throws. As we know, a throw requires a great deal of physicality, flexibility and technical mastery. And that's just for the thrower. The person being thrown needs to have mastered the art of the breakfall — or risk injury.

Acquiring proficiency in judo, like other martial arts, takes years. That's particularly true for throws. Unfortunately, as we age, it becomes more and more difficult to properly perform the throws and the breakfalls. Meanwhile, BJJ training avoids that pitfall by focusing on ground work, which is much less taxing on the body, especially for seniors.

CORRECTIVE ACTION: A slower introduction of *randori* (free practice) to newcomers, especially adults, would be welcome. (In fact, in Nishioka's new Mini Dojo course — which is designed to put judo into more places, including BJJ schools — randori is left out altogether.) It takes

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years of practice to become technically efficient and able to do judo smoothly. In the interim, practitioners, especially adults, often overcompensate for their lack of skill by relying on brute strength in randori, and that can lead to more injuries.

American judo leaders are starting to offer classes that feature randori that begins on the ground. The USJA now has a *"kosen* judo" division that's based on a group in Japan that continues to follow the teachings of Maeda, which resemble BJJ. This reassures those who have a fear of falling that they can handle the physicality of training. It also reassures them that weak knees and bad hips will be less of a problem in the dojo. Even with a ground-only focus, a judo class can still give students a great workout. Of course, instructors should allow anyone who's physically capable of throwing and being thrown to practice their techniques, as well.

RANK IN TWO ARTS

According to Kano, earning a *shodan* (first-degree black belt) in judo is the beginning of the student's training, not the end. In fact, among senior back belts, the rank is viewed as an indicator that a student has reached a level at which the basics are sufficiently honed for serious training and spiritual development to begin. The average adult judoka who trains two or three times a week with plenty of randori and participates in the occasional tournament can reach shodan in four years.

This is roughly half the time it takes to earn a first degree in BJJ. As such, it's my contention that a judo black belt earned today is roughly equivalent to a brown belt in Brazilian jiu-jitsu. A judo *sandan* (third degree) is probably equivalent to a first degree in BJJ. And that's fine — different arts emphasize different philosophies in addition to different skill sets.

CORRECTIVE ACTION: Think of the possibilities that would crop up if American judo leaders and BJJ leaders agreed to recognize each other's rank. According to the observation I just mentioned, there are thousands of BJJ practitioners who, in a year's time, could attain shodan rank in judo. That would constitute an army of new judo black-belt instructors who are connected to successful BJJ schools. The American judo population could double in a decade. A rising tide, as they say, lifts all boats.

Such growth could have the additional effect of deepening the pool of potential Olympic medal contenders in judo. By creating more athletes like Ronda Rousey, Kayla Harrison and Travis Stevens, America would win more Olympic medals, and judo and the martial arts in general would enjoy increased exposure in the media.

It brings to mind the judo motto of *jita kyoei:* mutual welfare and benefit.

CONSTANT EVOLUTION

Jigoro Kano was first and foremost an educator. As such, he was constantly refining, innovating, systemizing and improving his creation. He saw judo as an art that would always evolve. In a similar vein, Jim Bregman, America's first Olympic judo medalist who's now a 10th-degree black belt, once said, "We must go back to the future." Sadly, many judo leaders have strayed from that vision.

CORRECTIVE ACTION: American judo leaders must follow in Kano's footsteps and adopt his philosophy of embracing change and experimentation. One example of this experimentation is already taking place in certain parts of the country: Organizers of freestyle judo tournaments are allowing leg grabs and more ground work — and extending the welcome mat to local BJJ clubs. Some have even created no-*gi* divisions.

Those who are familiar with Kano's inspirational phrases will recognize *seiryoku zenjo,* meaning "maximum efficiency." How does this apply to the situation in which judo finds itself? There's no need to reinvent the wheel. There is much to be learned from the success of Brazilian jiu-jitsu. Judo leaders must not be afraid of trying new things as they strive to bring the benefits of judo training to a larger population.

Gary Goltz, eighth dan, is the former president of the U.S. Judo Association. He now serves as chairman of the USJA's National Promotion Board, as well as president of the Nanka Judo Yudanshakai, the Southern California Judo Black Belt Association. He's also a board member of the Hal Sharp Judo Teachers Foundation. For more information, visit goltzjudo.com.

AMERICAN JUDO ALLIANCE

In 2018 history was made when the American Judo Alliance Agreement was signed by the U.S. Judo Association, U.S. Judo Federation and USA Judo Inc. The agreement paves the way for the three organizations to grow the sport of judo in the United States.

In addition to updating past agreements that have been implemented over the years, the American Judo Alliance Agreement focuses on the following initiatives:

- Revising the reciprocal-participation agreement so members of the USJA, USJF and USA Judo can freely participate in each other's local and regional events.
- Adding safeguards and requirements for aligned insurance coverage to protect members and participants.
- Establishing reciprocal recognition of coach certifications provided that insurance requirements, background screenings and Safe Sport training have been completed. This means that without regard to any particular membership affiliation, coaches from the three federations will be permitted to coach at any event sanctioned by any of the organizations.
- Creating an American Judo Development Model. The organizations have agreed that some standardization in the method of instruction and skill-level programming will assist in the integration of the sport and may help identify and develop athletes for competition at the national and international level. As such, they will form an integrated coaching certification in the interest of growing judo in the United States via a task force that includes members from each organization.