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Sweep the Leg!



Master the Foot Sweep, Judo's Secret Weapon

by Gary Goltz

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Jigoro Kano, Judo's Founder

Judo is a way to effectively use both your physical and spiritual strength. By training you in attacks and defenses, it refines your body and your soul, and helps you make the spiritual essence of judo a part of your very being. In this way, you are able to strive toward self-perfection and contribute something of value to the world.

— Jigoro Kano, Judo's Founder

Modern judo straddles the line that often separates self-defense from combat sport. Practitioners of the grappling art view that as a strength, however, because judo has managed to elegantly master both endeavors while sacrificing none of its founder's directives.

As such, judo, which has been a popular Olympic sport since 1964, teaches techniques that function equally well in competition and on the street. One of the most useful and effective is the foot sweep.

First Things First

An essential component of judo is the fine art of getting your opponent onto the mat, and the foot sweep is a primary method for accomplishing that because it can be used against a person who's advancing or retreating. It's excellent as a counter and great for setting up combinations. Before you can begin learning it, however, you and your training partner must know how to fall. Skip that and chances are you'll wind up bruised or broken in short order—even if you're on a forgiving surface. (See sidebar.)

The name "judo" is composed of two root words: ju, which means "gentle," and do, which is often translated as "way." Combine them, and you get "gentle way," a term that reveals much about the way the foot sweep is effected. To be efficient in its execution, you must yield to your opponent's energy so you can use his force against him. At no point do you meet force with force because that would mean the stronger person always wins. The lesson: Don't try to execute a sweep by using every bit of power your body can generate to knock his supporting leg out from under him. That wouldn't be an intelligent way to fight.

If you don't believe the lowly foot sweep can be effective against a skilled opponent, read an account of Anton Geesink's match with Japanese champ Akio Kaminaga at the Budokan in 1964. Now a 10th-degree black belt, Geesink is renowned for having been the only foreigner to win a gold medal (open weight division) at the Tokyo Olympics. In the final bout, he used a foot sweep to bring down his famous foe. Afterward, the Dutchman attributed his win to the top-notch traditional training he'd received at the Kodokan judo headquarters.

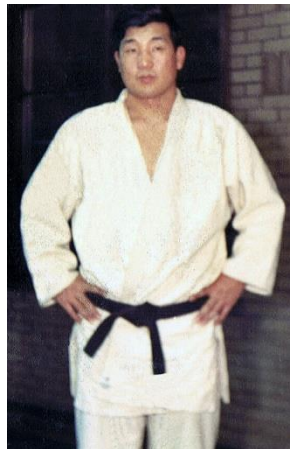
Time to Get Technical

The foot sweep is effective because it's fast and doesn't require great amounts of strength. Fringe benefit: You can use it from a distance without having to do a full 180-degree tai sabaki, or turning motion, which is required when you execute most of judo's major forward throws. These factors make the foot sweep ideal for use against a bigger opponent as well as for use by older martial artists who suffer from reduced flexibility because of injuries to the knees and/or lower back.



Throws like ippon seionage (one arm shoulder throw) on right or tai otoshi (body drop) on left require good flexibility in order to make the 180 degree tai sabki (turning motion).

The challenge associated with using the foot sweep in competition is that to become proficient, you need near-perfect timing, coordination and balance. I say “challenge” and not “obstacle” because the ease with which you master the sweep depends on the person from whom you learn it. I was fortunate to have trained under one of the world's best technicians, Kyu Ha Kim, who was the South Korean national champion in the late 1950s. Standing 6 feet 2 inches tall and weighing 210 pounds, he's a big man to this day. With his long legs and thick ankles, he resembles Geesink in his heyday—which makes it not much of a surprise that he's a master of the foot sweep.



Kyu Ha Kim circa 1966

While engaging in randori with Kim, he'd put me on the mat with such speed that it felt like I was on a ride at Disneyland. The amazing part was, no matter which throw he used or how high I flew, I always managed to execute a perfect breakfall. It's as much a testament to Kim's flawless technique as it is to Jigoro Kano's genius in designing attacks that could be practiced safely and enjoyably.

During those workouts, I never appreciated the beauty of the foot sweep. It wasn't until after I injured my knee in competition just before I turned 30 that everything jelled. As it became more and more difficult for me to pull off those big throws during randori with my students, I re-examined the concept of the foot sweep. In no time, the technique began working for me. In fact, it became so effective and effortless that it seemed almost magical.

The lesson I learned is that once you're able to use the foot sweep against smaller or same-size opponents, you're well on your way to being able to use it against taller and heavier opponents. The keys to making it work, I realized, are constant movement, proper body positioning and a sense of when to apply it.

Mechanics of Sweeping

To use the foot sweep in most applications, you need to turn your foot so the blade—the part of it you would use to execute a side kick—is on the mat. That means the bottom of your foot is almost vertical. Your straight leg and properly angled foot should resemble a hockey stick.



The hockey stick helps to show the proper leg and foot position. The blade needs to remain on the ice, or you will miss the puck as does the foot needs to slide across the tatami in a circular motion.

The sweeping motion uses the sole of your foot to make contact with your opponent's ankle, heel or, in one technique, lower leg just below the knee. Your foot is propelled along a wide, circular path using power that's generated by your hip. Don't neglect your upper body—your arms need to off-balance your opponent, after which they create a *tsuri* (lifting and pulling) movement.

Back to the analogy: For a hockey stick to effectively place a puck where it needs to be, its blade has to remain on the ice. Fail to do that—perhaps by swinging the stick like a golf club—and you may not impart sufficient power to get to the goal. Likewise, you must keep the blade of your foot in contact with the mat as you execute your sweep. Simply let it slide across the surface until your opponent's foot leaves the floor.

A great way to gauge the correctness of your foot sweep is to use a large, flat-bottom beanbag such as the one developed by world judo champion and Black Belt Hall of Fame member Mike Swain. Once you've mastered the mechanics of the sweep, you should be able to send it gliding 20 feet or more without rolling. It should make a nice swishing sound as it speeds away from you.



The picture on the right shows a bad sweep with the foot too high and lacking trust from the hips and abs causing the bean bag to roll on its side. The picture on the left sends the bean bag smoothly gliding across the tatami.

Throwing Techniques

The foot sweeps used in judo vary in the level of skill needed to perform them. They can be done against an advancing or retreating opponent. They are excellent as counters and great for setting up combinations. I will cover four of the basic ones that work from various directions and situations.

Sasae Tsurikomi Ashi (Propping Ankle Foot Sweep)



As your opponent moves diagonally pivot on the ball of your left foot in a perpendicular direction to the side of the opponent's right foot. Using a tsuri (lifting and pulling) motion turn your left wrist like checking a watch while pushing with your left arm on the opponent's right elbow upward moving him forward in a circular direction.



Sweep your opponent's left ankle and snap his upper body sending him airborne.



Continue rotating your body and your opponents to your right.



Maintain control by holding your opponent's left arm and turning to your left. Apply an arm lock or pin if needed.

Kosoto Gari (Minor Outer Reap)



As your opponent is moving backwards, turn his shoulders towards his left in a forward direction using your arms so that he is perpendicular then abruptly sweep his left heel with your right foot in the direction its pointed while snapping your arms.



Continue your sweep throwing him to your right side and maintain control of his left arm for groundwork.

Hari Tsurikomi Ashi (Lift and Pull Ankle Foot Sweep)



As your opponent moves forward pull him with your left hand while pushing him upward with your right hand. Apply the sweep with your right foot to his left ankle and leg causing him to collapse into your body.



Continue sweeping while lifting him with your arms throwing him to your right side and as always maintain control of his left arm in case you need to move into groundwork to finish him.

Self-Defense

So far, this discussion of the foot sweep has focused on its efficacy in competition. Because judo is also designed for self-defense, the technique can be your secret weapon on the street. It can enable you to knock down an attacker who's bigger than you without requiring excessive force or much room to maneuver. That makes it ideal for use by law-enforcement, security and airline personnel, in particular.

The nature of the foot sweep—which has your hands engaged with your opponent's upper body while you attack his legs—makes it perfect for defense against a striker or an armed assailant. That, coupled with the element of surprise, may be all you need to turn the tables long enough to gain the advantage in a life-threatening situation. It's why nearly all Japanese police officers are accomplished at the foot sweep and why you should be, too.

Deashi Barai (Advancing Foot Sweep) from a Knife Attack



As your attacker advances at you with a front knife thrust parry to the outside of his knife hand grabbing it above the wrist and pulling him forward. Apply an open back hand strike to the eyes in order to distract him.



Stretch his body out as far as you can as you position yourself to apply the foot sweep to his rear right heel.



Continue pulling on his right arm as you do what Crease ordered Johnny to do “sweep the leg”.

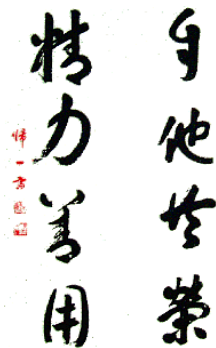


Once the attacker hits the ground, apply a basic wrist lock in order to disarm him of the knife. Remember the basic rule in law enforcement is that “hands kill” so always keep your eye on them.



Maintain control over your attacker’s wrist and take him into a cuffing technique for those in law enforcement

At the root of judo are two principles; *seiryoku zenyo* (to make the best use of your power) and *jita kyoei* (to go forward together with your opponent). Foot sweeps are an invaluable tool in martial arts and truly depict judo’s principles.



Kano's Calligraphy of Judo's Principles



About the author:

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[Video of Gary Demonstrating Foot Sweeps](#)