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## "Judo" Gene LeBell (10/09/32 – 08/09/22)

By Hayward Nishioka

Several generations have passed since we have had a great public champion like Gene LeBell. Today there are only a handful who truly understand what a remarkable champion Gene LeBell was. Those who ever worked with Gene know. They know that even when he grabbed your wrist, you instantly knew, you were in trouble. Not only your wrist but your hand turned white, for lack of blood. No doubt anything else he had his hands around would suffer the same fate.

While he was a champion in a very professional way as an actor, stuntman, wrestler, and businessman, in reality, he was always a judoman at heart. Known to the public as "Judo" Gene LeBell. He advertised the word "judo" and brought it to the forefront and made it a household name. In 1963 his match with boxer Milo Savage, a boxing match on public television pitted boxing against judo. Not only did he win, he made history as the first MMA professional bout being made public.

At the same time, he brought to light the effectiveness of judo to the public at large. Over the years he has acted as a mentor and inspiration to many of us in Nanka judo including Ronda Rousey, Gokor Chivichyan, Jim West, Gary Goltz, Hal Sharp, and myself, and many of my students, as well.

In his earlier days in judo when judo was still in its infancy, Nanka judo was largely composed of Japanese members and Japanese ways of thinking about judo. It was more a Japanese cultural event than an Olympic sport then. When meetings were held, only the selected members were invited. The meeting then commenced in Japanese. It wasn't that they were trying to be exclusive. It's just the way the old timers were at the time, up till the early 1950s. Most everyone of high rank only spoke Japanese and there was no understanding of rules of order. As awful as it sounds here in print. Our founding fathers of early Nanka Judo did the best they could and did a good job for what they had going for them at the time.

In the midst of this chaotic time there was the genius of Gene LeBell who represented Nanka Judo yudanshakai and in 1954 and 1955 he beat all comers to judo in the National AAU Judo Championships of the United States. That included U.S. judo greats such as Vince Tamura and Johnny Osako whom he beat in the Grand Championships. Soon after, Gene turned his attention to professional wrestling a completely different sport yet was thought of as the "Bad Boy" of judo, for gaining money for sport.

With the passage of time and changing social conditions, what was once taboo was reevaluated and today athletes traverse freely from amateur courts to professional venues even in the Olympics helping to serve the search, the cause, of finding true excellence, whether it be on the court, track, road, field, mat, floor, water, or air, it's all about , Citius, Altius, Fortius. (Faster, Higher, Stronger).

What is little known to the judo public is that Gene was also an actor and stuntman. One of the best in Hollywood. He made anyone look like a hero. It was always a joy to see him all of a sudden appear as the bad guy, crashing into tables, falling off a building, or just plain being smacked around by the star, which included some of Hollywood's most famous. He was seen but not seen many times. It was him, but he was made up to be the bad guy. He probably had bit parts in over a thousand movies. Some of them you couldn't tell it was him, and in others you'd catch yourself saying, "Hey!! That's Gene!" --- I will miss being able to say that now.

His more recent part was assumed as one of Ronda Rousey's mentors. I'm sure it was he who showed her how to look mean and to not be the nice girl that she was. It's all a part of the show. Make them hate you! They'll actually love you for it!

In truth, he was a real nice man. One of the best that Nanka Judo ever produced. Unknown to many he volunteered his time to judo at Los Angeles City College Judo for over 25 years every Monday night between 6 to 8 in the evening from somewhere in the late 1970s to around the 2000s when Gokor provided him a place of honor at his dojo. There he taught many of the champions of Hayastan his famous grappling holds. One of his interesting questions was done in conjunction to one of his painful finishing holds.

He'd be cranking on your arm, leg, neck or body and ask you the question. "Who's the best looking guy in this dojo?" the answer was, "you are Gene, you are!!"

The good Lord had provided Gene with many gifts among them was a strong body and a sound mind. He wrote eight books on grappling and in addition he was an artist. I will miss receiving one of his annual patches to add to my collection of about 35 of them. The one I love the best is showing some guy running off without his head, which is being held tightly by Gene, with the words below. "When in doubt, Choke 'em Out."

*We all miss you Gene!*



[Chuck Norris' Roast to Gene from 2003](#)