

First Woman to Earn Highest Judo Rank at Age 98



[ABC News Clip of Keiko Fukuda in Action](#)

By NINA TERRERO, ABC News August 11, 2011

Keiko Fukuda is 98 years old, 4 feet 10 and a mere 100 pounds, but this petite woman has been recognized as a giant in the martial arts world of judo.

Fukuda was just awarded a 10th-degree black belt, judo's highest level and an honor that has been granted to only a handful of men worldwide and never before to a woman.

Fukuda, who is addressed by sensei, which means teacher, is as soft spoken as she is humble. "I appreciate it very much," was all she would say to ABCNews.com. Before Fukuda attained her new rank, she was a ninth degree black belt, an already stratospheric ranking in the world of judo.

Although she sometimes uses a wheelchair, Fukuda continues to teach classes three times a week to women and girls as young as 14 at the Soko Joshi Judo Club in the Noe Valley area of San Francisco.

She was recently videotaped getting out of her wheelchair to demonstrate a move meant to flip an opponent on his back. Instead of tossing the opponent, she settled for a comment that drew laughs from her students.

For Fukuda, the award bestowed by USA Judo represents more than a recognition of her skills and worldwide reputation as a sensei. It also honors the prestigious legacy as the last surviving student of the founder of judo.

Fukuda's grandfather was Hachinosuke Fukuda, one of Japan's last eminent samurai. Her grandfather taught jiu jitsu to Jigoro Kano, who in 1882 invented the art of Japanese judo, which is meant to be practiced as a holistic sport blending the mind, body and spirit.

"Her grandfather taught Dr. Kano, the founder of judo, and when she expressed an interest in the art in her 20's, Dr. Kano himself invited her to come in to the women's section of the Kodokan," said Eiko Saito-Shepherd, a Fukuda disciple.

The Kodokan is the institute for teaching judo masters.

As a direct student of Kano's, "Sensei Fukuda is a living legacy, she's a direct descendent of the origins of Judo, as well as the longest, and only living student of Kano's worldwide," said Gary Goltz, president of the U.S. Judo Association.

Fukuda has made her own mark in the disciplined world of judo.

"She has been teaching judo for 51 years. I know, when I travel, not only in the United States, they talk about Sensei Fukuda. She is known all over the world and her devotion to judo is indescribable – she is committed," Saito-Shepherd said.

She is also charming, said Saito-Shepherd.

"When you see and talk to her, you're drawn to her... She presents herself as warm, thoughtful, and caring person. That's people's first impression of her," Saito-Shepherd said.

Shelley Fernandez, who has lived with Fukuda for the last 45 years as a caretaker, described her as "an amazing person who is very humble and believes that through judo and self-discipline, your mind tells your body what to do, how to move forward and put your spirit behind it to live your life in balance... she is a master."

Fernandez described the moment when Fukuda received news of the award: "Her first reaction was complete surprise, she just couldn't believe it! She was very happy because this would help women, and then finally, she thought it was a dream come true. She thought it would be impossible."

98-year-old woman earns judo's highest rank

by Jeff Mills, San Francisco Chronicle, Wednesday August 3, 2011



Sensei Keiko Fukuda at a dojo in Noe Valley. Credit: Photo by Lance Iversen / The Chronicle

Although she can no longer stand for very long, Sensei Keiko Fukuda, the highest-ranking woman in the world of judo, can still spot a misplaced thumb from across the room.

At 98, she is still teaching the Japanese martial art three times a week at a women's dojo in Noe Valley, giving pointers from a fold-out chair, wearing her ki - and the red belt that signals her superior rank.

She waves two students over who are practicing fending off a knife-wielding purse snatcher, using finesse and balance to harness power. Fukuda, her hands shaking slightly, holds their fingers and moves their thumbs into their palms. Better. She nods, and the students bow in gratitude before trying the move again.

"The kind of judo I teach is an old one, it comes from the samurais, and there aren't many of the older generation left who can teach these katas," Fukuda said through an interpreter.

Documentary filmmaker Yuriko Gamo Romer of San Francisco is capturing Fukuda's story of enduring war, discrimination, giving up marriage and leaving her family behind

in Japan to devote herself to judo. Although several books have been written about Fukuda, including two autobiographies, this will be the first film, slated for an early 2012 release.

"First degree is black belt," said Romer, who first heard about Fukuda from a story in O Magazine. "When she was promoted to ninth degree, there were just three people, all men, at that level, and they all moved to 10th degree when she moved up. There's nothing above 10th degree."

Fukuda is the only living student of judo's founder, Jigoro Kano, who opened his judo school, the Kodokan, in Tokyo, in 1882. Kano added a women's section to his school about 40 years later and invited Fukuda to train because of her martial arts lineage. She was the granddaughter of a renowned jujitsu master who had taught that Japanese martial art to Kano.

"At first, all I could think of was how aggressive the maneuvers were, and how unusual it was to see women spreading their legs," Fukuda said.

She was 21. She felt destined to practice judo. She declined her family's plans to marry her to a dentist when she met with him and he told her she'd have to give up judo. She wanted to honor her grandfather's legacy, a family martial arts tradition that passed to her because her father had died young and a brother was in ill health.

[Be Strong, Be Gentle, Be Beautiful - Trailer](#)

USA Judo Promotes Last Student of Jigoro Kano to 10th Dan

Keiko Fukuda's first reaction was "total surprise" on hearing the news, said Shelley Fernandez, who lives with and takes care of the 98-year-old sensei and last surviving student of judo's founder, Jigoro Kano.

Then came a sense of great pride, "especially knowing that this promotion would help women's judo," Fukuda told Fernandez, who was present when Fukuda received the call that USA Judo had promoted her to 10th Dan.

Fukuda said that she hopes "this promotion is an inspiration to other women," as being a female was always the reason she was held back.

She thanked USA Judo for the promotion, saying she was proud to join Professor Kano, her grandfather, who was a samurai jujitsu instructor, and Mifune, her second judo instructor, as 10th degree.

"This is a dream come true," Fukuda said. Even now, she teaches judo three times a week.



Keiko Fukuda, 10th Dan