

Doing Judo at the Korean Yudo College, December 1959

aka The Day I Met Kyu Ha Kim

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by Jon Bluming

Editor's note:

From February 1959 until November 1961, Jon Bluming trained in judo, iaido, jojutsu, and karate in Japan. During this time, he also visited Korea and the Philippines, and the following article describes his experiences in Korea during December 1959.

Mr. Bluming is presently President and Technical Director of the Kyokushin Budo Kai, and an illustrated account of his life and times is soon to be published in Europe. His most recently published English-language article, "Without spirit budo is but an empty shell," appeared in Journal of Asian Martial Arts, 7:2 1998. He passed away in 2019.

In late 1959 I was told that I had to go to another country to renew my visa to Japan. I was not happy but knew right away what I would do. I had promised my Dutch sensei, Granddad Schutte, that I would go, if possible, to visit our Korean friends. So, in December 1959, I think it was the 19th, I was back in Korea for the first time since the war. It was a strange feeling standing there again and many flashbacks sped through my mind. Still, except for some new hotels, Seoul had not changed much since 1953. The streets were still unpaved and muddy, ruining your shoes, and the old-style houses, the kind I liked so much, were still everywhere.

The first place I went was the USO, where they put me up and fed me for free -- all I had to do was show them my US 2nd Division papers and my three Purple Hearts. After that I went over to the headquarters of the Korean Yudo Association. I didn't know what to expect there but remembered some friendly faces of the men who visited Holland in 1954.

The Korean Honbu dojo was very old and smelled like old wood but was very stylish in a romantic old way. Its tatami were old and hard but good for fighting. The windows, though, were strange, as at the bottom some inches above the tatami they were mostly broken. As a result, the snow blew through them and the wind kissed your ankles. Which was kind of exciting, as like the Kodokan they didn't believe in heating the dojo and the air temperature was about 15 below zero Celsius.

Something that was familiar, though, were the many young fighters who milled around the dojo looked me over with faces that said that they couldn't wait to get hold of that tall outlander fellow and kick his ass.

The instructors, though, were great. I was the first European to ever visit their dojo, and Suk Sensei and Park Yong-So, who had visited Holland in 1954, not only remembered me, but had even received a letter from Choi In-Do saying that I was coming. So, the first thing they did was take me out for dinner. Korean food is very spicy and the kimchee, or pickled cabbage, smelled like the old days, like carbide, but I loved it.

After the meal we went back to the dojo to look things over, and I saw that Donn Draeger was right when he told me that Korean judo was rougher than Japanese collegiate judo, and that in Korea a throw was followed up, whether it was good or not.

Technically, in those days the Koreans may not have been as good as the Japanese, but they sure put up a good fight. And, like the Japanese, they hate like hell to lose to a foreigner. So, the next day when I went over there to do some judo I felt like Daniel in the lion's den.

Guys stood in line waiting to get to me. They had all the diplomacy of a bulldozer and they trembled from chagrin when somebody beat them to the front of the line.



Suk Sensei and Kyu Ha Kim in 1971

Suk Sensei introduced me to all and gave kind of a speech and judging from their faces he made me look good. That didn't make me very happy as it occurred to me that I didn't need a feather stuck where the sun doesn't shine when the crowd is waiting to butcher me.

He then let me warm up a bit which was necessary for it was bloody cold and my feet were blue and inside my pants my willie was an inch long and shrinking by the minute.



Kyu Ha Kim in 1968

I wanted to play a bit first with some beginners to get the hang of it, but Suk led me past the aching line of fierce-looking faces to a well-built, hard-muscled man with an unyielding face named Kim (Kyu Ha).

Just then I remembered Donn telling me to watch out for their national champion, a fellow named Kim. I just knew this was him.

More time I did not get, for after bowing he stepped forward and put his hands out, all the while looking to the teachers who were all seated at the side of the mat.

He smiled, like the speech was good but he wanted to see for himself, still looking at the teachers, as if asking permission to do something.

At the same moment I threw him with deruippon, with means "grip and throw". I followed up with left osotogari and he crashed right on his head for ippon.

Like one man, all the teachers stood up and I heard a great sigh all around me.

I was as astonished as anybody else. I guess I completely surprised him with my left style judo for he was expecting a right side throw like most did in those days.

It also was the last thing that was easy about Kim, for after that he completely vacuum-cleaned the mat with me, which convinced me that yes, this was the Korean champ.

After a while he tired of me and left me in a cloud of rice straw dust. But there was no time to get a breather because now the waiting rows moved forwards and I was kept more than a little busy.

Thank God that they were not all like Kim for now it was my turn and I happily bored one after the other under the tatami.

They were a lovely lot, with terrific fighting spirit and once you got to know them, a great attitude.

Unfortunately, my guardian angel chose just then to take a wink or two for all of a sudden, I found myself with a tough judoka on my back. I'd tried to take him for a ride with my uchimata and couldn't get him turned all the way.

So, he rode me like a horse, pushing my head forward as we went, and the back of my head hit the mat first with him pushing me further.

I heard a loud noise in my head that sounded like a breaking twig, saw a kind of orange flame in front of my eyes, and felt my whole neck stiffening.

So, after no more than ten judoka I decided to bow out.

I wanted to take a shower but had forgotten that I was in Korea, and that it wasn't all that long after the war. The only little room in the building was a toilet that smelled of 2000-year old piss and looked as if it was built even longer ago. I right away got homesick for the old Honbu dojo of the Kyokushin Kai and the Kodokan.

Fortunately, the ice had been broken and all these Korean judoka wanted to know as much as possible about Holland and Choi, who was still the head judo instructor in Holland, etc.

So, off the whole crowd went to the Ofuro (hot baths), traipsing through the muddy, frozen streets in our wet judogis. It's a miracle that I didn't get a cold or worse, but in the hot tub I started to feel better even if I couldn't move my neck.

After the bath we had dinner in a place right out of a book by Pearl S. Buck. It was complete with all the Korean goodies, the kind most Europeans and Americans shudder away from, but I loved it.

Years later in 1985 when I had a part in a movie about the Korean War called Field of Honor, I went one day to Seoul to visit my old friends and was surprised to find the Korean Yudo Association in a beautiful building worthy of their work and many championships during the intervening years. Choi In-Do picked me up in his car and took me to see the selection contest preceding a major championship.

On the way he told me that Suk sensei had had a stroke and was not well at all but would be in for a while anyway. When he came into the dojo Choi went over to him and told Sensei that I came back to visit them. He looked genuinely surprised and happy to see me, and I walked over and bowed deep to this unique human being who was by now the first 10th dan in Korea.

Then something happened you seldom see with Japanese or Koreans. He spread both his big arms and gave me a powerful bearhug and said, "What a nice surprise that I am able to see you one more time, for I see you as family." He looked me in the eyes and tears came down his face and I had tears, too, seeing the damage that time and age and sickness had done to this once fierce fighter and still kind sensei.

After that I got to sit beside him and talk. All the while he held my hand which is a sign of great affection with Koreans. He wanted to know how Opa Schutte, my first judo teacher and his friend, had died and what became of all the judo problems in Europe.

It was by then something like thirty-one years since I had first met him as a 2-kyu at the Amsterdam Tung Yen dojo. May the gods bless this lovely sensei for he died shortly after that meeting.

Anyway, back to 1959.

After dinner I was told that I could test the following day for 4-dan. In 1959 there were only four of those grades in all of Holland. Anton Geesink got his after taking third place in the World Championships in 1959. N. Age and Ge Koning both got theirs soon after by telling the Kodokan that they were Geesink's teachers, which was not a little white lie, but a big black one because Geesink's sensei was Jan van der Horst from Utrecht. And the fourth was Opa Schutte, who got his from the legendary Tokyo Hirano in 1952. So, it was a great honor and I really cursed my injured neck.

I took a cab to the USO and went to bed early but could not sleep because of the pain in my whole upper body. Meanwhile I kept hearing this noise outside that sounded like automatic gunfire in the near distance. I remember thinking that it would be just my luck that tonight the war starts over again. And with that uneasy thought I finally drifted off to restless sleep.

The following morning, I discovered the gunfire was the wood they had laid over some big potholes slapping up and down as cars drove over it. Boy, did I feel silly.

Upon arriving in the dojo on the morning of December 24, 1959 I quickly learned that the Koreans also had the philosophy of keeping going no matter what. As I changed clothes in the dressing room the thought of that ice cold tatami with the snow on it and the wind blowing up my trousers gave me goosebumps and my neck felt terrible. After three cups of tea I felt a little better and straggled over to the dojo.

I must have looked a sad sight for some even asked how my neck was. As I warmed up the pain shot through my body. Then I noticed that they had brought in a whole bunch of college students to watch the Hollander fight. I saw all those grim faces looking at me and I got mad.

The more it hurt the madder I got and gradually my fighting spirit returned. I did not want to screw up this great opportunity.

To earn my rank, I had to win three matches. Two were student champions named Kim, both ranked 2-dan, and the other was the Korean student champion Sup Lee, 3-dan.

By this time, I was really riled up and could have clobbered a gorilla.

The first Kim I threw right away with tsurikomi goshi (hip throw) for half point and an armlock for the score.

The second Kim I threw with two half points with uchimata, hip leg throw.

Sup Lee attacked right from the start like a man with a holy mission. Left and right he fiercely attacked my legs with ouchi and kouchi gari, little and big inner leg reaps, and I needed all my wits to keep him away from me. Meanwhile my own throws he stopped like a pro.

Then he attacked again with kouchi gari, gripping my leg in the progress and boring his head in my stomach. He clearly intended to land me on my backside.

To stop that I put down my hand, thus putting me into the position for a two-handed choke. The choke worked like a charm and his lights went out. I got a big ovation, and everybody wanted to shake hands.

The rest was just formality, and, in the end, they gave me my certificate for 4-dan and my teacher's license. I was the first European to get this from the Koreans, and I felt like a million dollars.



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Addendum:

**50 Years Later, An Interview of Mr. Kim
by his student Robert Berry in June 2009,
Re: his recollections on the encounter with
Jon Bluming**

Mr. Kim is doing very well, occasionally teaching judo a little bit. A few months ago, he was demonstrating how to properly grip a judogi and he grabbed my lapel. There was a strength in his grip that I have not felt in a very long time.

I can tell you how happy all of us at Mr. Kim's dojo are and how well Mr. Kim he is doing.

Anyway, at the beginning of last month I was getting ready to relocate from Western Pennsylvania to Western Massachusetts and Mr. Kim invited me out to dinner as a going away party. Being somewhat of a special event, there was a tiny bit of sake consumed and the Grandmaster was a little more talkative than usual.

He tells the Bluming story a little different. He told us a long time ago that Bluming never threw him as is related in the article. I have always had a hard time reconciling the 2 versions of the story until now. Mr. Kim says that Bluming came to his dojo in Korea after testing in Japan for his next rank (not before, as in the article).

Bluming apparently "took the line" in Japan during his test and overpowered his opponents fairly easily by virtue of his size. Looking for more of a challenge, he asked where he might find some larger judoka. His Japanese hosts told him to try Korea, "They have some pretty big guys there." You know the Japanese had to be laughing their asses off knowing what was likely to happen next.

When Bluming showed at the dojo in Korea, Mr. Kim's instructor told him to go randori with the Westerner. Mr. Kim had no idea who Bluming was, or what his experience level was. I think the key here is that Mr. Kim was told to go *randori*, not shiai. When Bluming came out hard, it probably was not what Mr. Kim was expecting. He was probably thinking he had to be careful with the Caucasian.

After Bluming knocked Mr. Kim down, I think he decided, "Oh, OK. That's the way you want to play? I can do that too." From then on, he mopped the mat up with Bluming, just as is related in the article. It makes perfect sense to me that Bluming could have thrown Mr. Kim, If Mr. Kim only thought he was going to do some randori with a relatively inexperienced Westerner.

After bowing out, Bluming apparently asked if he could go somewhere and talk with Mr. Kim. After showering, the 2 went out for tea. Bluming told Mr. Kim that he had "taken the line" easily in Japan and could not believe how easily Mr. Kim had thrown him around the mat. Bluming said he thought Mr. Kim must be "the best judoka in the world!" and asked if there were any other guys in Korea like him. Mr. Kim told him, "

There's about 4 or 5 guys in Korea like me." Such humility from the Korean National Champion.

Jon Bluming was also a karateka. Apparently, he beat up on some of Mas Oyama's students pretty good, maybe on this same trip. Later on, Mas Oyama ran into Mr. Kim somewhere and asked him how it was that he did so well against Bluming, but his karateka did so poorly. Mr. Kim replied, "I don't know. He didn't try to do karate on me. We did judo. My judo was better than his judo." Again, a very humble response.