

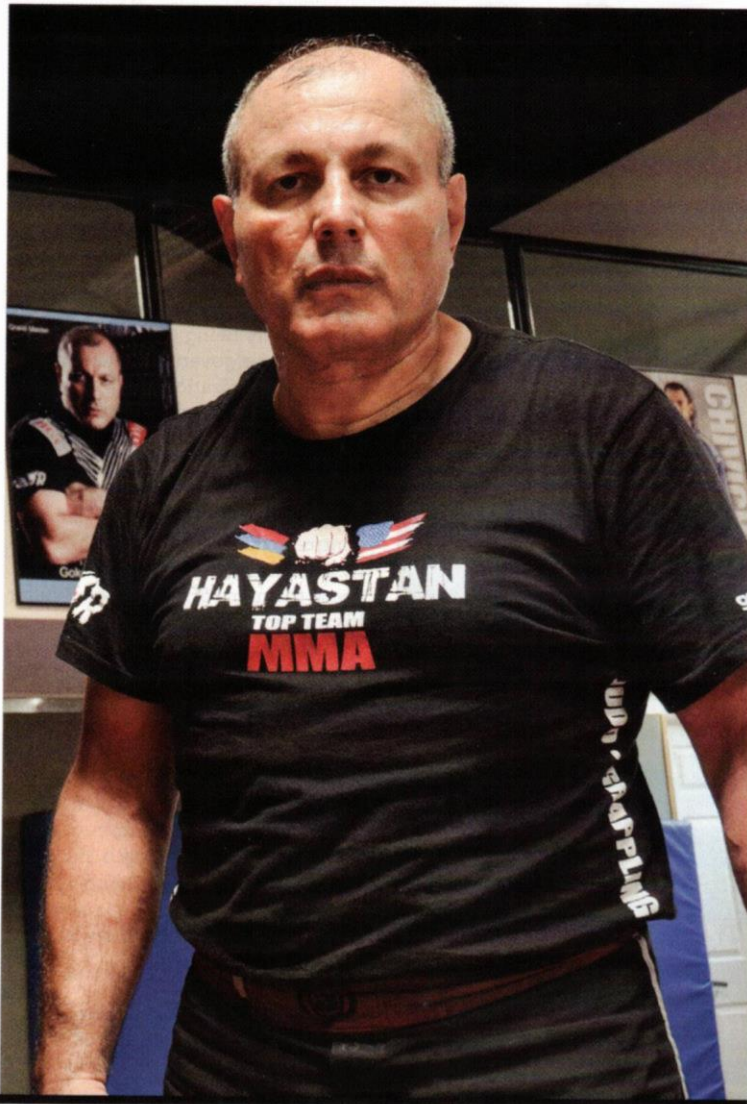


FIGHTBOOK

Jack-of-All-Trades in the Grappling World

Even though many combat sports now incorporate grappling, it's the rare martial artist who can navigate them all and put his skills to use regardless of the setting. But from judo to sambo and from mixed martial arts to no-gi grappling – and, most recently, Brazilian jiu-jitsu – Gokor Chivichyan has shown a unique aptitude for making his game work regardless of the rules.

BY MARK JACOBS



HIS LATEST SUCCESS, a division title at the World Master IBJJF Jiu-Jitsu Championship, came after more than a decade away from competition. “To be honest, most of the reason I came out of retirement was to lose weight,” said Chivichyan, 56. “It was good motivation to train harder, and I ended up dropping 25 pounds to make my division.”

Prior to competing in 2019, Chivichyan had been out of the combat sports since 2008, when he jumped into a judo event on a lark and won his division. Before that, he'd been

laid off for 10 years. That's a far cry from his youth when he competed twice a month.

GROWING UP in Armenia, then part of the Soviet Union, Chivichyan started wrestling when he was a child and later took up judo and sambo. He came to the United States with his family in 1981 and continued his training in Los Angeles with legendary grappler “Judo” Gene LeBell.

“Gene kept calling it ‘grappling’ and would tell everyone, ‘Gokor does grappling,’ so I would always say I did grappling. I think we were really

the first ones in martial arts to call it that. Now everyone says they do grappling,” Chivichyan said.

There were both positives and negatives for the Armenian in America. He recalled that in general, the training he received in Armenia and the old Soviet Union was more professional. There were always coaches monitoring athletes' workouts, diet and pretty much every facet of their martial arts life. In contrast, he noted, in America all that is up to the individual.

“You could progress faster over there,” he said. “But the bad part was

(See Black Belt's article and video on [Gokor's Ultimate Throw](#) at the 2008 Judo Winter Nationals)

they would only let you go so high. Even if you became a world champion, they wouldn't let you move on and grow. In America, they give you a lot more opportunities to grow. And now, with things like MMA, the training here is much more professional."

CHIVICHYAN'S BIGGEST regret in his martial arts career is never getting the opportunity to go to the Olympics as a *judoka*. During his prime competitive years in the 1980s, he was stuck in citizenship limbo. No longer living in Armenia, he couldn't compete for the Soviet Union. But not having achieved his U.S. citizenship yet, he was ineligible to join the American team. He finally got his American citizenship in 1988, but it was too late to qualify for that year's Olympic squad, he said.

Rather than wait around for another four years, Chivichyan stepped back from competition and considered the future. Recently married, he needed to earn money, so he opened his own school in 1991. It came at just the right time because the UFC and the grappling craze were about to hit full force.

"In the 1980s, I was telling people it's not all about striking," Chivichyan said. "I'd say, 'You have to grapple, you have to be able to wrestle.' But

the martial arts magazines were only showing karate and kung fu, and no one wanted to hear about grappling. Then the UFC came along and a lot of strikers wanted to compete, but they saw the grapplers had more chances to beat the strikers, so they started coming down to my academy to train."

With his teaching expertise — and his old coach LeBell frequently in residence — Chivichyan built his Hayastan MMA Academy into a Southern California mecca for all manner of grapplers, from aspiring judo champs to would-be MMA fighters. UFC great Ronda Rousey got her start in MMA there. And several of Chivichyan's younger students like Karo Parisyan and Manny Gamburyan grew up onsite and made it all the way to the UFC, as well.

ALTHOUGH HE'D sporadically venture back into competition, winning a national judo title in 1994 and an MMA fight in 1997, Chivichyan had been absent from that world for a decade when he attended a judo event in 2008. He jokingly mentioned to his friends that he might compete. When someone took him seriously and it was announced that he was entering, he was

forced to step up. Wearing a borrowed gi, Chivichyan emerged victorious. But this last time around, for his Brazilian jiu-jitsu debut, he was a little better prepared.

After trying a preliminary event earlier in the year, Chivichyan began preparing in earnest for the World Master IBJJF Jiu-Jitsu Championship in August. Having to compete under a rule set he wasn't completely familiar with — one that didn't allow some of his favorite leg-lock techniques — he decided to stick with the basics and rely on his go-to judo moves.

After hitting his first opponent with a textbook judo sweep and landing in side control before clinching victory, Chivichyan made it through to the finals. "I didn't need to impress people," he said. "I just decided to keep things simple and not try to submit everyone. In the championship fight, as soon as we locked up on our feet, my opponent felt the strength in my grip and

immediately went to the ground. But I'm pretty good there, too."

Easily passing his opponent's guard, Chivichyan scored the only points of the match to take home the gold.

He admitted that it felt good to be back on the

podium again after all these years.

"When I was young, I didn't say I was going to *compete*; I'd say I was going to go *win*," he said. "After years of not competing, I didn't have that confidence anymore. But as soon as I grabbed the first guy and saw he was worried about my grip, I got more confident."

Whatever the rules, as long as there's grappling involved, Chivichyan has proved over and over that his confidence is justified. The only question is, Will martial artists have to wait another 10 years to see him compete again?

"You never know," he said. "I've got a no-gi tournament I'm going to with some students coming up. Maybe I'll jump in there." **BT**

Gokor Chivichyan's website is gokor.com.

Gokor Chivichyan (right) and Rodrigo Antunes, the BJJ coach who trained with him for the IBJJF competition.

