

"The Gentle Giant"

By Blair Bartlett, LA Lakers, March 2010



For professional athletes, success is created by their competitive drive, determination, focus, and ability to perform under pressure. It is common for many professional basketball players to look off the court for guidance and balance. This refuge is often times sought in the most unlikely of places. You may be surprised to find where one Lakers player solidified his foundations both mentally and physically; in the ancient art of Judo.

Lakers center **DJ Mbenga** began practicing Judo when he was 9-years-old for self-defense and safety. Now towering at 7-feet tall, Mbenga was often ridiculed for his imposing height on the playground. "I was too tall for my age and kids were joking around with me in school. I was thinking I had to do something and I started doing Judo just to play around." However as Mbenga's height increased so did his involvement with the art. By the age of 20, Mbenga received a black belt, the most distinguished belt you can earn. Having played competitively and recreationally, Mbenga admits the practice "is everything: slow and aggressive."

The mental energy and concentration Judo requires makes it a steady sport, but at the same time Judo is still physically strenuous. In the beginning however, Judo is simply about grounding yourself in the practice. "When I started to do it, they only taught me resistance and self-discipline and that was not what I wanted to do. But as I progressed in the practice, I learned the aggressive aspects and began to attack." Known for its gentleness, Judo relies heavily on its basic principles of respect, balance, self-defense, self-discipline, and gentleness making it the "soft method" of the martial arts. It is characterized by the "indirect application of force to defeat an opponent." Mbenga asserts that "Judo is an activity which returns as much as you are willing to put in," and with 13-years behind his black belt, Judo has helped make him the "gentle giant" both on and off the court.

Mbenga's black belt in Judo symbolizes many achievements and years of hard work. It signifies completion of training, understanding of the practice and an overall recognition of accomplishment. An art that requires a certain amount of finesse, especially with footwork, Judo can never be fully perfected. Mbenga admits he still relies on the basics of Judo to help solidify his foundation because it is important to him. "We do that type of stuff in practice when we can, but when I am not in basketball and I have free time, I spend it working on my foundation by going back to the basics of Judo." The foundation of footwork and concentration is a vital aspect of basketball and Judo. You not only need to learn how to move your own body efficiently, but someone else's as well. It is about action and reaction and this helps develop good balance, concentration and agility.

What are the physical and mental benefits of Judo for athletes? For Mbenga, one of the most important attributes of Judo is the importance it plays on concentration and focus. "I think it helps me personally with my concentration because I am the type of person who could potentially lose control, but Judo helps me balance my emotions, calm down, listen to myself and better understand what I have to do." Dedicating 13-years to the practice, Mbenga admits the time and effort was well spent. "It was good that I learned how to manage my emotions at a young age because it has helped me succeed in basketball."

Another significant benefit of practicing Judo is the ability it has to help prevent injury. It teaches you how to "fall safely" which is helpful in all contact sports. The expansive NBA season requires a lot out of the players physically, mentally and emotionally. Mbenga looks to what he learned in Judo to ensure he is in pinnacle shape to execute maximum performance on the court.

Since Judo is an individual sport and basketball is a team sport, you may be asking, well why Judo? Success in Judo comes from looking inside yourself for a place of self-control and self-discipline, and even though it is practiced individually, for Mbenga "Judo teaches you to balance everything out so you can do it all." Basketball relies on the dynamics of a team, which Judo has prepared Mbenga for and allowed him to easily transition from activity to activity in his daily life. Who would have known a martial art could be so delicate? This "gentle giant" has learned some valuable lessons from practicing this ancient art and the inherited benefits are astounding. So, if you are looking for a way to stay in shape and find inner stability look no further than the Japanese sport of Judo.