**8-21-2026**

**'Judo has taught me to fall without hurting myself'**

**Henry Godfrey-Evans Essex**

Barbara Carolan joined a special class for over-65s at Harlow Judo Club

**When Barbara Carolan was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease, she was warned falls might become more common.**

Since she took up judo, they certainly have. Carolan, 71, attends a special class for over-65s to teach them how to "maneuver" their bodies during trips, throws and falls, at Harlow Judo Club in Essex.

The group also practice falling scenarios via walking exercises in which they "knock into each other", as well as games of cricket and dodgeball.

"I'm more confident when I go out and walk... Now I don't feel so scared because I know that I can deal with it myself," says Carolan. Nearly 170,000 people in the UK are thought to have Parkinson's, a disease that causes involuntary tremors, slow movement and stiff muscles.

Carolan is the only person with the condition in her judo group.

"What was even nicer was I forgot that I had a condition, or disease, however they want to call it," she says. "And I thought, 'Wow, this is fun!'"

Carolan was not confident enough to join in for the first two sessions

Carolan received her Parkinson's diagnosis in 2023. "I couldn't cut my food up on tables. I couldn't take lids off of jars," she says. She then came across Harlow Judo Club's advert for a 12-week course called Land on Your Feet.

Typically, Carolan struggles to co-ordinate two movements at once so was worried she would struggle. "If I'm walking and I'm concentrating on my feet, then I can't move my arms, that sort of thing," she says.

She spent the first few weeks just watching, until she found the confidence to join in.
"When we played these games, it was wonderful," she says. "I suddenly realized I'm moving my arms and my legs differently at the same time. So I was well chuffed with myself for doing that." She says she "can't describe" how much the sessions have changed her life.
"It's made a huge difference to me."

Instructor Mick Ellis age 75, has been coaching judo for 47 years He took up judo as a boy in 1960 and has now spent 66 years "on the mat". He started the club in 1979 and has now been coaching for 47 years.

The sessions are inspired by British Judo's Finding Your Feet initiative, developed in collaboration with the University of Hertfordshire and Anglia Ruskin University. It is designed to revolutionize how we approach falls among older adults, using judo as a tool for learning to fall safely.

Figures from the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities show that about a third of people aged 65 and over fall at least once a year, and the total cost of fragility fractures, which can occur from falling, to the UK has been estimated at £4.4bn a year. Ellis admits he was as terrified as his pupils when he started the course.

"I didn't know what I was going to do. I've been playing it by ear as I go along, basically making it all up," he says. He wants more people to be trained up as instructors, and for national bodies to take the scheme on.

Anna Castiaux, physical activity programmed lead at Parkinson's UK, said: "It is fantastic to hear how much Barbara has benefitted from joining the 'Landing on Your Feet' sessions.

"Staying active is one of the best ways to manage Parkinson's, both in terms of alleviating certain physical symptoms and boosting mental health too. "Meeting others in group sessions can also provide great social connection and help people feel less isolated."

**How to fall safely**

Carolan has learned how to reduce injury during a fall. "[Don't] put your hands out so you fall and possibly break both wrists," she says. "Turn your body, so turn your head away so it's not going to crack on the floor, tuck it in. "You can roll your body into a fall... tuck your arm under your shoulder and roll yourself out."

Her new-found skills were put to the test on the street when she tripped on a broken section of wall. She tucked her had out of the way and rolled, coming away with just a cut on her shin. "Without thinking, it was all over."

Active Essex, NHS Essex Integrated Care Board, local councils and community organizations worked together to develop the programmed in Harlow. Beverley Flowers, executive director of neighborhood health at NHS Essex, said: "Land on Your Feet is a great example of neighborhood health in action, bringing the NHS, local authorities, voluntary organizations and community groups together to provide more joined-up support closer to home.

"Barbara's story shows the difference this approach can make. By connecting people with the right support in their own communities, programmed like Land on Your Feet can help people build confidence, stay active and independent, and live well for longer."