

With martial arts gyms closed, Armenians grapple with culture loss

Lockdown leaves trainers and athletes without recourse



A mural outside Hayastan MMA depicts grappling expert and gym owner Gokor Chivivhyan flanked by instructors “Judo’ Gene LeBell (left) and Benny “The Jet” Urquidez. Each of them is considered a martial arts legend in their own right.

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August 6 at 3:45 PM



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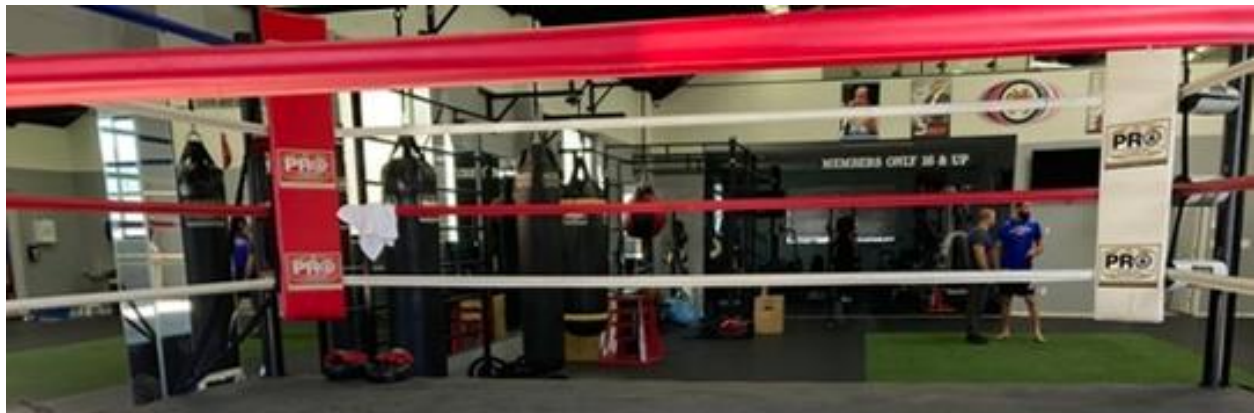
Gokor Ambaryan wakes up at 4:30 a.m. A short drive and he’s at the doors of his Las Vegas dojo, Freestyle Mixed Martial Arts (MMA). His routine is the same it’s been for years: he stretches, sprints a few laps and then wraps his hands in preparation for a sparring match. It’s like any other day at Freestyle MMA, except there’s no one in the room to grapple. His dojo is completely empty.

Instead of demonstrating how to perform seoi nage, a traditional over-the-shoulder Judo throw, or a submission lock for his students, Ambaryan removes the wraps and heads to his office, feet away from his mat. And for most of the day, it’s where he stays. Teaching three martial arts classes per day has mutated over the last four months into 15-hour days hunched over a keyboard, playing with spreadsheets, trying to secure loans, estimating how long his business can last without clients.

Since March, Ambaryan has seen his class for kids reduced by 80% due to COVID-19. Between the mandatory lockdown and the public's reasonable fear of exercising indoors, his adult classes have been nearly decimated. As long as some are interested in punching and kicking ("striking" in the fighting world), Ambaryan can set up socially distanced punching bags. But most of the grappling classes, wrestling, judo, jiu-jitsu, sambo - the main staple of his business - have been canceled entirely, and indefinitely.

Just three years ago, Ambaryan moved from Glendale, Calif., to Las Vegas to pursue his dream of owning his own martial arts gym. His business had just hit a good stride when the pandemic struck. This summer, Ambaryan was planning on hiring additional staff, but just a month ago, he let go of his one co-trainer, Arthur Malkhasyan. Ambaryan, 25, shared in a phone conversation that he now finds himself walking through his gym aimlessly. "This is my baby. I've put my whole life into it. Whether it stays or goes, it's always going to feel like my baby," said Ambaryan.

While Ambaryan strategizes how to keep his business afloat, his thoughts are also with the Armenian community in Los Angeles. Many of his family and friends went into a similar business, and he knows the challenges he's facing are only multiplied back home. His former Sensei, [Gokor Chivichyan](#), 57, who owns the internationally famous Hayastan MMA (literally translated Armenia MMA) has closed his gym to the public, only training a handful of professional fighters in one-on-one sessions. Ambaryan knows that Chivichyan will eventually have to change his business model if Hayastan MMA will survive. Investing in a few professional fighters with no idea when they will be able to compete again, Ambaryan explained, is not a good long-term strategy.



The empty ring at Hayastan MMA. Only a handful of professional fighters use the entire dojo now.

There is also Ambaryan's former training partner, Karen Darabedian, 33, who opened his own gym, KD MMA, in Glendale around the same time Ambaryan moved. In fact, the Armenian community in Los Angeles – the largest outside of Armenia – and its connection to martial arts, reveals how deeply combat sports, especially grappling, are intertwined within Armenian culture.

Kokh: A History of Conflict

[The traditional Armenian style of wrestling, Kokh](#), Ambaryan and Darabedian said, was a combined form of dance and sport that was synonymous with weddings, festivals, and other significant events. The Brazilian martial art, Capoeira would probably look and feel the closest to Kokh. It was even used as a ritual dance, where Armenian men sought to impress and court women. Kokh almost stood as a metaphor for the way Armenians viewed life: a constant yet beautiful struggle for existence.

“From the Assyrians to the Persians, from the Romans to the Ottomans – it doesn’t matter who – Armenians have always faced opposition,” said Ken Arutynyan, director of International Sports Union, a boxing and mixed martial arts gym based in North Hollywood. “They have always had to fight for their home and to preserve their culture. At this point, it’s just in our blood.”

Arutynyan may have a point. Since Armenia became a sovereign nation following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the nation has garnered 14 Olympic medals. Eight of those, roughly 57%, are in wrestling. The only other two sports in which Armenia has won a medal are boxing and weightlifting. To suggest that Armenians may lose a part of their culture if wrestling were to go away is not an exaggeration by any means.

Grappling in Today’s World

Just months ago, the U.S. Olympic & Paralympic Committee (USOPC) placed wrestling and judo in the highest category of risk to athletes for contracting COVID-19. The wrestling community pushed back against this label and, eventually, the USOPC capitulated, but only nominally. The USOPC swapped the “highest risk” labels for an incredibly similar Level 1-3 system, used to demarcate lowest-to highest-risk sports.

Gary Abbott, director of communications and special projects at USA Wrestling, was not amused. He has since pointed out that there is no conclusive data or evidence to support such categorizations, suggesting that basketball and other sports where athletes “make contact” with one another are not necessarily safer than wrestling.

The battle to preserve wrestling has become increasingly intense. Seven years ago, the International Olympic Committee decided to take out wrestling from the Olympics altogether, simply for not having high television ratings. After a long and arduous process, wrestling was reinstated by the IOC for the now-delayed 2020 Summer Games but faces the stigma of being a high-risk sport.

To protect wrestling, which many believe is the oldest sport in the world, and its athletes, USA Wrestling canceled its 2020 U.S. Marine Corps Junior and 16U National Championships. It’s a competition that the organization claims is “recognized as the largest wrestling tournament in the world.” The tournament was scheduled for July 17.

The Japanese sport of Judo, which is highly popular within Armenia and throughout the Armenian diaspora, is not having an easier time. High ranking officials and representatives of the sport are currently scrambling to introduce rules and regulations that would safeguard competitors from contracting COVID-19. Many ideas have been thrown around. Some are outlandish, but others are practical, like requiring athletes to bring two different colored gis to tournaments to reduce the risk of infection from wearing soiled gear. But the overall sentiment is one of helplessness.

[Gary Goltz](#), former president of the Nanka Judo Yudanshakai (Southern California’s Judo Black Belt Federation) and the United States Judo Association, put it bluntly when asked about the future of Judo: “I think we’re screwed.” if Judo were ever to return as a popular activity within the U.S., it’s a long way off.

Armenians and the Future of Grappling

Darabedian, the owner of KD MMA, does not have a hopeful outlook. He’s run the numbers, and he believes his business only has two more months at best until it folds.

For someone who began training in judo as a young child, his entire identity is wrapped up in the grappling world. If he loses his gym, he loses a piece of himself. Darabedian tries to imagine a future when the lockdown ends and the public returns to his gym, but for now, he can't help thinking that his fighters, several of whom were about to enter the Ultimate Fighting Championship, may have to pivot their careers. Darabedian's worst fear is that his experience is representative of many Armenians in the area.



A collage of professional fighters from Hayastan MMA decorate an office door inside the dojo. Former UFC champion and international **star Ronda Rousey is top center**. To her right is former WEC fighter and KD MMA owner Karen Darabedian.

“You’ve spent your whole life trying to build something, working toward this one goal, and then they just take it away from you,” Darabedian said. “They take everything away from you except your rent and mortgage.” When asked what he planned to do for the rest of the day, Darabedian said, “I am going to my gym – got a lot of things to do.”