

Tiny warriors learn art, philosophy of judo

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To his youngest students, Tony Farah is a gentle giant. So it's appropriate that the martial art the Sensei is teaching them, judo, translates in Japanese to the phrase "gentle way."



Donna Forman with Harlen Turrentine both 3, practice a hold-down

He is the founder of [Goltz Judo's Tiny Tots classes](#), which are taught through the city of Claremont at the Alexander Hughes Community Center. It is one of the only programs in the country to teach the discipline—which involves tumbling, falling, throwing and grappling—to children so young (*a few have only recently graduated from diapers!*).

It takes a certain skill to preside over dozens of active 3- to 7-year-olds. "I call it herding cats," Mr. Farah said. "They're all over the place."

The trick is to direct all of that energy.



Students in the Tiny Tots class run laps around the mat

“You’ve got to keep them busy in this class,” he explained. “I can’t have them sitting down while I lecture them for 15 minutes. Otherwise, I’ll lose their attention and they’ll be rolling all over the floor, bouncing off the walls.”

Sensei Tony throws in new exercises from time to time, to keep the kids on their toes and expand their skillset. Much of the time, however, he repeats the same exercises so students and their parents can see week-to-week improvement.

“A lot of times, a kid will be excited to come to judo because he wants to show me a somersault he couldn’t do before,” he said.



Drew Shoji with Glenn Forman both 7, having a match

Exercise is an arid term to describe the practice that in Mr. Farah's hands turns into play. He saw other judo teachers lead youngsters in a duck walk, a standard exercise to help build their core, and riffed on the idea.

"I started adding some funny animals the kids might like. We do the alligator walk, where the kids use their arms to walk, and drag their feet behind them. It builds upper body strength," he said. "We do the frog leap, the rabbit hop—things that make it more fun for the kids and help to strengthen some part of the body. I call it a trip to the zoo."

While Mr. Farah is tending to his menagerie of kids, he has the help of an assistant, most often his daughter Ashton. For the Farahs, judo is a family affair. It started with his son, Matthew, who at age 14 was struggling to find his athletic niche.

"We tried basketball and soccer, but he didn't like team sports. He wanted to do something individual, where he could take responsibility for the good and the bad. And frankly, he didn't like the way the parents acted at some of these events—how crazy they got," Mr. Farah recalled.

Eventually he gave judo a try. It was "love at first fight," and not just for Matthew. Ashton, who was 12, walked into her brother's class and instantly caught the fever. "She couldn't wait for the next day to sign herself up."

Before long, Mr. Farah was itching to join his children in their new pursuit.



Sensei Tony Farah illuminating the goals of judo

“I always kind of wrestled with my son. As he got better at judo, he started doing moves on me,” he said. “I thought, I’d better do something or I won’t be able to keep up with him.”

Mr. Farah, who was 40 when he first donned a judo gi a dozen years ago, had always dreamed of earning a black belt in martial arts.

“I was doing judo on the mat with my kids, we were working out and learning together,” he said. “So I was able to take care of my dreams and, at the same time, spend time with my family.”

Once Sensei Tony, now a third-degree black belt, became proficient, he began to pass his skills along, first assisting with classes and then teaching his own.

Once, Goltz Judo didn’t teach any children younger than 6. Many clubs don’t let kids try their hand at judo until they are at least 8. Every once in a while, though, Mr. Farah would see a 5-year-old competing at a tournament. It got him thinking.

“Everyone said kids can’t start judo too early because it is too technical, too physically demanding and you can’t get the kids to focus,” he said. “But I was sure that with the right program, you can teach the little kids the same things the older kids are learning.”

Five years ago, Mr. Farah approached Goltz Judo founder Gary Goltz, a 7th-degree black belt who has been practicing judo for 50 years, with his idea for a Tiny Tots class aimed at 4- and 5-year-olds. Mr. Goltz gave his blessing and the program was an immediate success.



Tyler Charpentier, 5, takes on Goltz Judo’s Head Sensei, Gary Goltz, 61

“The class morphed really fast to include kids who are 3, 4, 5 and 6. Our only requirement we have is that they’re housebroken,” Mr. Goltz joked.

One adaptations had to be made for the Tiny Tot class. It used to be that triple zero was the smallest size gi you could find in the country.

“The problem is they were draping over the kids,” Mr. Goltz said. “So we had to have my distributor order a smaller size of gi and have them manufactured overseas. Three months later a batch of quadruple zeros came over from Pakistan. Since then, we’ve gone through a carload.”

The Tiny Tot program is now an intrinsic part of Goltz Judo, one of the largest clubs in the US Judo Association. Mr. Goltz never ceases to marvel at the magic worked by Mr. Farah. “It’s amazing. He’s got patience like I’ve never seen in anyone,” he said.

Mr. Farah is easygoing by nature, but he also makes a conscious effort to get his students to listen without raising his voice.

“Unfortunately, other people try to use yelling and screaming, but I don’t believe in that. You can talk to them at a reasonable level. They understand,” Mr. Farah said. “If you put down your expectations at the beginning and emphasize it every week, the kids will follow.”

It’s important not to take yourself too seriously when dealing with pint-sized students, Mr. Farah added.

“We’re not trying to build judo players yet, we’re getting them to love the sport,” he said. “Sometimes you try to get mad at them and they smile and you’re like, ‘Okay, let’s move on.’”



Students in the Tiny Tots class are much amused by a self-defense demonstration

The Tiny Tots are an especially kinetic group. At the start of the class, Sensei Tony tosses out an array of colorful rubber balls that the kids can kick around to blow off steam.

Occasionally, he gently reprimands kids for chatting or fidgeting. But despite the sense of controlled chaos, there is something profound going on.

“What I like about judo is that it has really good life principals that you can use, not just on the mat but in everyday life,” he said, noting that the first of these is that of mutual welfare and benefit.

“Everybody moves forward together. As you get more advanced, you help other people become more advanced,” he said. “We should always be doing stuff like that in the real world, giving back to our community and our society.”

All Goltz Judo instructors have day jobs. Mr. Farah, for instance, is an IT manager for Mercury Insurance, while Mr. Goltz is an executive in the health care industry.

“As instructors, we’re not looking for money,” Mr. Farah said.

Mr. Farah feels it is important to pass on the physical lessons of judo as well as the philosophical ones. “In judo, you always have a partner with you. You’re used to having someone grabbing on you and pulling on you. So if something ever happens on the street, you’re not intimidated because you do that three times a week.”



In honor of Goltz Judo’s 25th Anniversary with the city of Claremont, they have invested in new tatami mats for the judo classes. Like their predecessors, which were plumb worn out, they will see a lot of action.

But it is likely the mats will last quite a while because the kids are taught, from the start, that the tatami is our “sacred ground.” You never walk on them with you shoes on and, at the end of each lesson, you bow your way off the mat.

Likewise, Mr. Farah’s passion for teaching judo to the littlest of local warriors is likely to last for quite some time.

“You have to be patient. You have to really love the kids,” he said. “And I love these kids like they’re my own. It’s always been like that.”