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Coronavirus lockdown won't keep San Jose State judo master from his 100th birthday party

Yoshihiro Uchida, the grandfather of American Judo, plans to celebrate 100th birthday in midst of coronavirus pandemic



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SARATOGA — Yoshihiro Uchida, the grandfather of American judo and a San Jose fixture since 1940, plans a new way to celebrate his 100th birthday on Wednesday.

Instead of attending a now-canceled gala dinner in his honor Uchida expects to pass the milestone participating in a Zoom video conference call for the first time.

In another example of the small ways Americans are adjusting to life during the global coronavirus pandemic, Uchida's family and friends are using whatever means possible to commemorate the occasion. The man known as "Yosh" is game.

"I never thought I'd reach 100 but I feel very happy that I have," he said this week.

San Jose State University judo coach Yoshihiro Uchida smiles after being honored for 70 years of service coaching judo for the University, at the Diaz Compean Student Union at San Jose State University, in San Jose, on Thursday, April 5, 2017. (LiPo Ching/Bay Area News Group)

Daughter Lydia Uchida-Sakai said they will practice using Zoom with the family patriarch on a 55-inch television screen at her father's home in Saratoga. Later, about a dozen friends from the San Jose State judo community expect to join the call.

Uchida, the coach of the U.S. team in 1964 when judo was introduced at the Tokyo Games, still will get to enjoy a dinner party with cake. But the dinner will include only immediate family members at the Saratoga home that sits just below some of the area's wineries. The menu was not selected as of Monday, but Uchida-Sakai said she was considering making a pot roast like her mother used to do for birthdays.

If not for the shelter-in-place orders, Uchida probably would have had a busy calendar, his daughter said.

"Normally on his birthday he has dates already," she said. "He has birthday parties ongoing. They usually last a month."

It's not a surprise. Uchida, born April 1, 1920, has a large extended family through martial arts and as a leader of San Jose's Japantown district. He turned San Jose State into a national power in judo after organizing the inaugural collegiate national championship in 1962. He led San Jose State to its first of more than 40 titles at the event.

The 5-foot-5-inch black belt turned the South Bay into a judo grooming ground that has spawned 18 Olympians, including retired U.S. senator Ben Nighthorse Campbell, R-Colorado. Uchida has missed only three Summer Olympics since serving as the coach in 1964.

The centenarian was scheduled to return to Tokyo for the 2020 Olympics that have been moved to the summer of 2021.

Just another obstacle, Uchida said.

"I've got to survive to enjoy the things that I have planned," he said. "If I'm around for 101 I might as well do something."

The attitude does not surprise Mike Swain, a four-time Olympian who runs the San Jose State judo club with Uchida.

Swain recalled this week how his former coach, at age 96, got stuck in Miami overnight on the way to the Rio Games in 2016. Two men associated with San Jose State's judo club accompanied Uchida, who disappeared at the airport. The chaperones found him with flight attendants who had taken Uchida to their airline club lounge.

By the time the group landed in Rio they had two hours to reach the Olympic judo stadium where San Jose State star Marti Malloy was competing. Despite the hectic trip, Uchida insisted they head straight to the arena.

Uchida was a black belt who founded San Jose State's judo program. Swain said Uchida's fighting spirit has kept the master martial artist going. "He has been through a lot," Swain said. "He's a fighter who doesn't give up."

Uchida was born in Calexico but spent his youth in Garden Grove, where he said his family grew strawberries and tomatoes after giving up dairy farming in the Imperial Valley.

One of four children of Japanese immigrants, Uchida worked on the family farm and attended programs at local community centers to learn about his ancestral culture. Uchida took up judo at age 10.

Uchida recalled his week how tough the farming experience had been. It is the main reason he decided to attend college, he said. Uchida enrolled at Fullerton Junior College in Orange County but after one semester, a roommate suggested they transfer to San Jose State.

"Where's that," Uchida recalled asking.

"They got a teacher's college and a good football team," his roommate replied.

Uchida was sold on the idea of watching college football.

He began in the chemical engineering program at San Jose State in 1940. Soon, Uchida became a student-coach of the school's judo program. He also competed as a wrestler.

World War II interrupted Uchida's education. The U.S. Army drafted him after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, on Dec. 7, 1941. He served four years in a segregated Japanese-American unit in bases throughout the United States.

As he approached 100 years, Uchida reflected on the struggles of Japanese Americans after the Pearl Harbor attack.

"All of a sudden the government closed us down and we had to move, and everything had to be given away," he said of the family farm. "It was sad to see somebody come in with a truck and trailer and just tear up the whole field. Those were crushing times."

While Uchida worked as a laboratory technician in the medical corps during the war, the rest of his family members were sent to internment camps as part of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's decision to relocate 110,000 Japanese and Japanese-Americans from the West Coast.

In a strange historical twist, Yoshihiro Uchida Hall — now San Jose State's dojo for judo — was used as a Santa Clara County processing center for interns. Uchida's parents were sent to Poston, Arizona. His brothers landed at the Tule Lake Relocation Center in the eastern Sierra. His sister and her husband were interned in Idaho.

"I'm here to be able to tell people what it was like to stand there and watch while they took everything from under you," Uchida said. "Your whole life's accomplishments are taken away."

Decades later, Uchida built a medical laboratory business in the South Bay while growing San Jose State's judo program. He left his mark on the community beyond the dojo.

By 1989, Uchida had sold his chain of laboratories to Unilab for \$30 million. He founded the Japanese American Chamber of Silicon Valley in 1996.

Uchida said he never forgot the irony of representing a country at the 1964 Summer Olympics that had placed his family in internment camps.

"People used to say you have to take life in stride," he said. "I used to say what are they talking about? But now I understand."

Swain said the video party would be like a flower blossoming.

"Everything is so depressing right now," he said. "People forget real life goes on."



[Sensei Gary Goltz](#), President of Nanka Judo Yudanshakai with Yosh Uchida, Judan in 2016