

# **The HISTORY of JUDO at the NEW YORK ATHLETIC CLUB**

Kevin Earls NYAC Captain

## **The Early Years of Judo at the NYAC**

In 1958 Charlie Lambur founded the NYAC Judo Club and was its first instructor. Judo began slowly with a few club members but developed steadily. It was a strange new sport within the NYAC but club members quickly became tough local competitors.

A major breakthrough for the international sport of Judo and the NYAC Judo Club occurred in 1964 when Judo became an Olympic event and the first Olympic Judo competition was held at the Tokyo Games. The success from that event generated greater world-wide interest in Judo and the momentum continues to the present day.

Along with Olympic visibility, 1964 brought the highly respected Judoka, Sadaki Nakabayashi, 8th Dan, 3 time Japanese intercollegiate Champion, to the NYAC as instructor, resulting in rapid growth and interest among NYAC members. The competitive age of the NYAC Judo Team was beginning.

## **THE SIXTIES**

The earliest of the great competitors for the NYAC was Bernie Lepkofker, who joined in 1959. Bernie, the "gentle giant", was to be a major force at the National Championships for 4 decades. Bernie won or placed in the National Championships 10 times. He was the perennial Metropolitan AAU Heavy Weight Champion as well as All Division Grand Champion for 3 decades. He won 4 Gold

Medals in International Competition. A contemporary of Bernie in the 60's was Matthew Valluri, a former French and European Champion who also represented the NYAC. Matthew had an outstanding competitive career in America and won many tournaments for the Club with his high level of technical ability. Lepkofker, Valluri, and teammate Shiro Oishi won medals at numerous National Championships. Throughout the 60's the NYAC was developing a reputation as a force in American Judo.

### **THE SEVENTIES**

The 70's brought the next level of growth and success to the NYAC Judo as Teimoc Johnston-Ono joined the team. "The Kid" as Bernie nicknamed him, was a many time Junior National champion. Teimoc made his permanent mark on the program by consistently competing for the top slot at the National Championships throughout the 70's. In 1972, he and Bernie competed in the Olympic trials along with future teammate Tom Cress. All 3 finished just short of making the Olympic Team and became alternates for the 1972 Olympic Games in Munich.

Team member Dave Purzansky demonstrated unique versatility, winning both the National Judo and Freestyle Wrestling Championships in 1973. In 1974, Sensei Yoichiro Matsumura became head instructor of the NYAC Judo Club. His technical knowledge in both the standing (throwing) phase of Judo and grappling (mat work) phase, were magical. Sensei Matsumura's instruction in the techniques of Judo, augmented with his knowledge of advanced training methods, vastly accelerated the growth of the Judo program. Sensei Matsumura possessed the ability to turn regional competitors into national champions.

Teimoc continued his rapid development and improvement. He won the National Championships and Olympic Trials in 1976. He became the NYAC's first Judo Olympian competing for the US and the NYAC in Montreal. Teimoc went on to win or place in 24 international tournaments. He continued to be the man to beat on the Judo scene winning the National Championships again in 1978 and placing in the top 3, several times. He was a "force to be reckoned with" on the judo scene throughout the 70's and 80's. Teimoc ended his competitive years when he became the coach of the Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs. He was a fitting choice for that post.

The end of the 70's saw Bernie and Andy Blumenthal winning international titles and Andy medaling at the Nationals. The end of the 70's also marked the addition of Fred Glock to the judo team and the start of new growth and success for Judo at the NYAC.

### **The EIGHTIES**

Along with 'Freddy' Glock, 1980 brought a new influx of competitors to the NYAC that added greatly to the depth of an already strong program. Joining Teimoc, Fred Glock, Bernie and Andy Blumenthal, came a number of highly regarded competitors including John Walla, Tom Cress, Kevin Earls, Ed Musikantow, Dr Arthur Canario, and Rick Haims, all of who would become fixtures in the judo program for the next 3 decades .

Freddy Glock won the first of his 4 National Championships in 1980 as well as several US Open championships. In 1981, the NYAC enjoyed continued success at the US Open Championships with Kevin Earls finishing second, and Teimoc and Fred Glock each finishing 3<sup>rd</sup>. Teimoc, who finished in 2nd place in the 1981 and

1982 US Nationals, briefly digressed from the sport and used his Judo skills to win the National Sambo Championship in 1983.

In 1984 Kevin Earls, John French and John Walla placed in the National Championships for the first time joining teammate Freddy Glock on the winners' podium.

That start in 1985 led to NYAC Judo Club members winning National Championship titles (in a run that remains unbroken today). The depth of the NYAC Judo Club was tremendous. Each year, the Club would send 6 to 8 competitors to the National Championships, all of whom had legitimate chances to win. 1985 also brought the addition of Aziz Bendris from Morocco and a number of others from various countries to the Club. These individuals brought with them judo training techniques from around the world and added to the international flavor of the Club. You will find every race and creed represented on the mat of the NYAC Judo Club.

The next era of NYAC Judo success was in 1987 when Fred Glock suffered a serious injury which limited his ability to compete. Teimoc was ending an 18 year run of National and International success. Age and injuries were taking their toll on Tom Cress, Kevin Earls, John Walla, Andy Blumenthal and Rick Haims. Then along came 19 year old Jason Morris.

Jason was an 8 time Jr. National Champion and High School and Collegiate Champion. He had an immediate impact on National and International Judo competition. Representing the NYAC, he won the Pan-Am games in 1987, as well as the Austrian Open (the only American at the time ever to do so). He won the

National Championship in 1989 (the first of 5) and quickly became recognized as the dominant competitor in the 172 lb. weight class.

Jason became the NYAC's 2nd Judo Olympian, easily winning a place on the 1988 team to Seoul Korea where he finished 5<sup>th</sup>, as well as 5th in the World Championships. But his best years, and that of the NYAC, were still to come.

### **The NINTIES**

The 90's were to mark a new era and unprecedented success for the NYAC Judo Team.

Jason was joined by close friend Jim Pedro whose father, James Pedro, Sr., was an outstanding competitor through the 60's and 70's. Jimmy's Dad had competing in judo from the time he could walk. When he came to the AC, he "knew his way around the mat". Jimmy, a many time Junior National Champion, joined Jason. Together Jimmy and Jason quickly established themselves as the dominant American Judo competitors in their respective weight classes. Representing the NYAC in 1991, Jason Morris, Jimmy Pedro and Rene Capo each won the National Championships. This was the first time in club history (but not the last) that the Judo Team had achieved such a feat. That year Jim Pedro went on to take a Bronze Medal in the '91 World Championships. Jason Morris won his second Gold Medal in the Pan-American Games. Great things were happening and 1992 was to be a banner year for the NYAC Judo Team.

Jason and Jimmy easily won places on the Olympic Team headed for Barcelona. Jason won his 4th National Championship in preparation for the Summer Games.

Jim Pedro, looking for greater competition in his preparation, fought in a heavier weight division in the Nationals, taking second place.

At the XXV Olympiad in Barcelona, a great deal was expected of Jason Morris who had been ranked in the top 6 in the world for the past 5 years. Having the hardest draw and fighting brilliantly he won the Silver Medal. This was the United States only medal in Judo at these Olympics and made Jason only the 6th American Judo player ever to receive an Olympic Medal. These outstanding accomplishments led to Jason being named American Judo player of the year, and the runner-up was - who else - but Jimmy Pedro.

In 1993 Leo White and Brian Olson joined the NYAC Judo Team adding additional elite international athletes to what was becoming America's finest team. Leo came from the U.S. Army as a 13 time National Champion and two time Olympian. Brian had a run of 5 consecutive national championships. This group - Morris, Pedro, Olson, and White - delivered 3 or more National Champions from 1993 through 1999. All four were selected as World Team members. All four were clearly recognized as the dominant American competitors and the only hope for a medal at the Worlds. Unfortunately, a serious knee injury kept Leo White from competing at the Worlds Championships. Jim Pedro fought valiantly to a 5th place finish. But Jason Morris rose to the occasion and won the only US medal, a Bronze. This led to the Second Consecutive year of his being named "American Judo Player of the Year." Runner-up, once again, was teammate Jim Pedro.

In 1994 Alex Ottiano joined the team. Jimmy Pedro, Brian Olsen, and Leo White repeated as National Champions and Club's first female elite judo player, Colleen Rosensteel, won her first of 5 national titles for the NYAC. 1996 was a big year. Building on their outstanding accomplishments, Jason, Jimmy, Brian, Alex and

Colleen became Olympians. This was the third straight Olympics where the NYAC had multiple representatives on the US judo squad. These Games were highlighted by the NYAC winning its second Olympic medal in judo as Jimmy Pedro brought home the bronze. The core group continued their dominance in their respective weight classes throughout 1997. The highlight for Olsen was his bronze medal at the World's. In 1999, the NYAC garnering multiple national titles and accumulating impressive wins abroad. All members had great runs in 1999 building up to the Sydney Games but no one in US judo history had a year like Jimmy Pedro. Jimmy ran off an almost undefeated season both at home and internationally winning the Nationals, US Open, NY Open, Pan American Games and finished with a gold at the World's becoming the NYAC's first and US Judo's third World Champion.

### **The New Century**

The Olympic year flies at a frenetic pace as athletes jockey to make the team. Once again, in 2000, the NYAC would send a large contingent. Jason Morris ended his 2 year retirement and made his 4<sup>th</sup> Olympic Team. He was joined by World Champion Jim Pedro, and two-time Olympians Brian Olson and Alex Ottiano. Much was expected as the hope of all US judo looked to Jimmy to bring home the first gold in judo. Unfortunately that was not in the stars. After numerous hard fought battles Jimmy ended just beyond a medal, finishing 5<sup>th</sup>. US team left Australia without a medal.

Jason retired once again as did Jim Pedro and Leo White. This was the end of an era. Jason and Jim had been the cornerstones for the NYAC and US judo for the past 14 years. It was time to rebuild.

The next influx of elite players to join the Club included a group of young women: Sayaka Matsumoto, Carrie Chandler and Katie Mocco. The women were joined by Aaron Cohen, the son of a judo icon and nephew of another, both former Olympians – Irwin and Steve Cohen. Sylwester “Kasper” Gawel joined the Club, having had an outstanding judo career in Poland, and exposed the group to new European techniques. Kasper quickly showed there was still a lot left in the tank by placing at the US Open. This new blood along with the continued success of Brian Olsen and Alex Ottiano was the driving force of NYAC judo. The women quickly rose too. Sayaka and Carrie were national champs. Nate Torra, Alex Ottiano, and Aaron Cohen each took a silver medal. 2003 brought the very young Ronda Rousey to the club along with local talent Taraje Williams Murray. And Jimmy Pedro, after some serious soul searching, decided to give the Olympics one more shot. This group had a great year with Sayaka, Carrie, Alex, Taraje, and Jimmy all winning the Nationals and all ready to make an Olympic run.

In 2004, the games were held in Athens. Sayaka, Carrie, Alex, Aaron, Taraje and Jimmy were joined by Brian Olsen at the Olympic Trials. Taraje and Ronda made their first team, Alex his second, Brian his third and Jimmy his fourth. Jimmy Pedro capped the year with his second bronze Olympic medal, and the only medal won by an American Judo player in Athens.

2007 has brought the NYAC it's largest influx of elite local competitors since the 80's. Taraje was joined by the St. Leger twins- Harry and Gary, Dariuz Mikolajczak, and Shintaro Higashi, the son of a NY judo instructor-. They joined several of Jason Morris' students – Jeremy Liggett and Nick Delpopolo and Jim Pedro's student Kayla Harrison. This group along with Aaron Cohen, NYAC's Joel Brutus, and the women team members brought immediate results. The tally at the Nationals from 12 weight classes entered was 6 first place finishes, 4 seconds

and 4 thirds. Four of the group - Taraje, Carrie Chandler, Joel Brutus and US Judo's rising star, Ronda Rousey - won places on the World Team. Ronda fought brilliantly at the Worlds, winning the Silver thereby joining her coach Jimmy Pedro (three medals, including the 1999 Gold), Jason Morris and Brian Olsen (one each) as the NYAC's fourth World medalist. Since 1990, nine World medals have been won by US Judo Players, 6 of those by NYAC members!!

The torch that Jimmy and Jason have carried for so long for the NYAC has been passed to Ronda. Clearly the NYAC has become the most dominant Judo Club in USA Judo.

### **NYAC Championship – New York Open**

The NYAC hosted many Metropolitan AAU Championships. It was a fiercely fought tournament due to the high level of Judo in the city and tremendous depth in all divisions. The NYAC was the perennial winner of the Team Championship in this tournament. The NYAC was also the site of the military Championships and the Pan-American trials, but the NYAC did not have its own tournament until 1983.

Through the efforts of the former Joe Casale and Vinny Ursone, the first annual NYAC Judo Tournament was born twenty five years ago. From humble beginnings come great things. The years have seen this tournament grow, first from a regional, then to a national event. Mel Appelbaum, John Walla, Arthur Canario, the judo Chairmen and many, many others have taken what was one of the premier contests in the nation to a full scale international event. Competitors from over 20 countries regularly travel to NY to compete here. You will find Olympic and World medalists fighting here, and not always winning. The NY

Open has become the most competitive international competition held in North America.

### **The Chairman**

A special note for the strong-willed energetic men who built the NYAC Judo Team:

First and foremost there is Charlie Lambur who was the Founding Father and driving force of the NYAC Judo Team for almost 20 years. If it were not for him there would not be a Judo program. Joe Casale picked up the torch and added greater depth to the program in the 70's. Vinny Ursone and Ed Musikantow then took the team through the 80's adding elite athletes to an already strong program. They began the prestigious NYAC Tournament easily the finest in the US. Kevin Earls piloted the program through the outstanding growth of the 90's passing the torch to Owen Tunney when Kevin was elected the only judo competitor to serve on the NYAC Board and later became NYAC Captain, overseeing all sports. The judo club is now in the excellent hands of Owen Tunney and Andy Blumenthal and will continue to grow and move forward, building on the successes of the predecessors.

### **The Club Today**

Judo at the NYAC is an eclectic mix of individuals. The Judo Team is comprised of elite athletes, businessmen, students, stockbrokers, doctors and lawyers. There are current elite world class athletes whose exploits have been documented here as well as regional champions, and former national champions for whom their competitive days are past. Yet, twice a week, they all step on the mat to fight their

best against everybody. Some like Arthur Canario, a former National Champion, continue to compete in the Masters Division and become World Masters Champions.

They all come together weekly to fight, have a beer and share in the camaraderie that sets the NYAC Judo Team apart from all others.

The development and support of elite athletes is the central goal of the New York Athletic Club and this is certainly true of the Judo Program. Sensei Matsumura continues as the head instructor as he has for 33 years. He is ably assisted by Teimoc Johnston Ono and Aziz Bendris here in New York City. We also utilize the assistance of our two Olympic medalists Jason Morris located in upstate NY and Jim Pedro in Massachusetts to attract and develop elite athletes for the NYAC. Here at the Club, our workouts encompass both current elite champions, the old guard comprised of former champs, and interested NYAC club members.

We have a children's program designed to give the sons and daughters of NYAC members exposure to and basic training in judo and the self discipline and self esteem that is the byproduct of good Judo instruction. This is ably run by Aziz Bendris, Francesco Rulli, Said Dib, John White, Jim Gorman, and Michael Garbarino. The NYAC continues to this day its commitment to all phases of judo.