

United States Martial Arts Association

8011 Mariposa Avenue, Citrus Heights, CA 95610-1514
Tel: (916) 727-1486, Fax: (916) 727-7236 Email: psp83@earthlink.net
USMA Home Page: <http://www.MARARTS.org>

50 Years and Six Steps to Freedom

A Short History of American Judo's Fight for Independence

By Philip S. Porter, Founder, United States Martial Arts Association

Second Edition: April 1, 2010

Nothing is so dull as history (or as fascinating, depending on your point of view!). And yet it is very important that the young Martial Arts leaders of today, like you; know something of the history of American Martial Arts. This knowledge will give you a depth of understanding—a perspective. Knowing this history will make you more mature and valuable—to yourself and to others. History will help you to know where we have been, through the triumphs and also the struggle for freedom the Martial Arts have been through.

As one of the leaders of the future, you will want to have this historical perspective so that you can plan where you wish the Martial Arts to go in the 21st century. I therefore offer you this brief history of some of our efforts over 50 years (1954-2004). I will keep it short—just a few pages—that's a promise!

Understand that this is a personal history. I was a very active participant in all six of these essential turning points in the history of American Martial Arts. I personally engineered three of these changes. Others were designed by those who wished to honor my service to the Martial Arts. These leaders did not necessarily want to honor me personally as much as they wanted to recognize and recognize the work I had done.

I have been exceptionally fortunate to have been intimately associated with these major events as they pertain to Judo, and of course they are important for many other Martial Arts as well.

I believe that the history of American Judo over the 50 years from 1954 to 2004 as I will present it here will be very instructive to you. The six historical steps I outline in this essay cover American Judo's fight for *organizational* independence. I emphasize the word organizational because although we are now free organizationally (structurally) some of us are still fearful in our minds—we many not yet be free mentally and spiritually. The struggle must go on—to achieve total freedom: in body, mind and spirit.

Judo—the First American Martial Art. Judo came to America over 100 years ago when Yamashita Sensei, the first of Dr. Jigoro Kano's students to be promoted to 10th Dan, taught President Teddy Roosevelt in the White House in about 1902. Remember—at that time Tae Kwon Do and Aikido had not even been invented. Karate was practiced then in Okinawa under a Chinese name, but did not receive the name Karate until about 1938. So Judo is the first and oldest American Martial Art. For the next 50 years Judo was practiced in America mostly by Japanese Americans in Hawaii and along the west coast around the cities of San Francisco, Los Angeles and Seattle.

Then, in 1952, the first class of young American airmen from the U.S. Air Force were sent to Japan to study Judo. They were led by Mr. Emelio Bruno (now deceased), a 5th Dan in Judo and a National AAU Wrestling Champion. Bruno was well known to the Kodokan. He was a personal student of both Kano Shihan (who personally awarded him the rank of Shodan in 1938) and Sumiyuki Kotani Sensei, later 10th Dan. Mel Bruno trained in wrestling with Kotani Sensei for the 1932 I Olympics in Los Angeles, in which Kotani wrestled, giving away three weight classes and placing 6th.

The young Air Force men who trained at the Kodokan returned to America to teach self-defense to Air Force combat crew members of the old Strategic Air Command (SAC). More importantly for Judo, these young black belts started hundreds of sport Judo clubs, both on their bases and in nearby cities. As an example, after I made Shodan in 1954, I personally started 13 new sport Judo clubs at or near various bases where I was stationed in the Air Force over the next 15 years. This is how the real American Judo began.

SAC also sent a team to the first U.S. National Judo Championships in San Jose, California in 1953. Although I had just been released from the hospital after a bad attack of arthritis, I was lucky to be a member of that SAC Judo Team and to compete in San Jose in 1953. I also fought in San Francisco the next year (1954) at the second National Judo Championships.

Step One: 1954—The Formation of the SAC Judo Society

In 1954 we held the first Strategic Air Command (SAC) Championships at Offutt AFB in Omaha, Nebraska. I had the honor to place third in my weight division in that event and to attend the foundation meeting of what we called the SAC Judo Society. We did this at a historic meeting attended by General Thomas S. Power, Vice Commander in Chief of SAC, who attended to represent General Curtis E. LeMay, Commander in Chief of SAC.

General LeMay was a great pioneer of American Judo. He was Yudansha Taigu of the Kodokan Judo Institute. Yudansha Taigu is a very special rank in Judo. It simply means that when the holder of the rank of Yudansha Taigu is in any kind of a Judo meeting he

has the same rank as the highest rank there. If there is a 9th Dan present, he is a 9th Dan. This rank has only been given to two people in America over the past 60 years. Both are now deceased. One was Mr. Doiguchi of California, and the other was General LeMay. There is no doubt that General LeMay was one of the founders of American Judo.

George Harris, U.S. Olympian (1964) and many times U.S. National Judo Champion, now 9th Dan in Judo, was also at the meeting when we founded the SAC Judo Society in 1954.

Understand that this meeting had the full support of the Kodokan, because Sumiyuki Kotani Sensei and Tadao Otaki Sensei (then 8th and 7th Dans, respectively) attended and advised us. This was very unusual. We were not Japanese Americans, yet Kodokan immediately recognized our ability to award Judo ranks. So this step marked the first structural creation of a real American Judo group.

Another reason this was new was because we did not form a Japanese style *Yudanshakai* (black belt group). At that time, all other Judo groups in America were simply member *Yudanshakai* of the Kodokan. We were the first Judo group to be independent of that system. To break away from the Japanese style *Yudanshakai* system took guts. Both Kotani and Otaki Sensei supported us. We were immediately recognized by Kodokan. We were still in the USJF, but were independent. This was a tremendous change in American Judo, but would you believe, the sky did not fall on us!

Step Two: 1969—The Founding of the U.S. Judo Association. During the long 15 years between 1954 and 1969 tremendous changes took place in American Judo. The SAC Judo Society grew and changed its name several times: to the SAC-ARDC Judo Society, to the Air Force Judo Association, and then to the Armed Forces Judo Association. We grew to over 25,000 members, larger than all of the *Yudanshakai* of the USJF put together. During those years the Air Force Judo Team won the National Five Man Team Championship every time it was held (I was a member of the team in 1960 in Tampa, Florida, and George Harris was our team captain). George won the Nationals again that year in Tampa. Starting in 1955, when Ed Maley the first Air Force fighter to place in the National Judo Championships, we took several places each year, and I even managed to squeeze out a bronze medal in Fresno in 1963 at age 38.

For many reasons, and especially because we were never given voting rights equal to our membership size (No taxation without representation!) the Board of the USJA at our Chicago meeting in 1969 voted to break away from both the Kodokan and its American affiliate, the USJF. By changing our name to the U.S. Judo Association (USJA), we became a totally independent American Martial Arts organization. We knew this was an earthshaking decision. We would no longer get our rank certificates by mail order from

Japan, and our enemies said we were doomed to fail. Our detractors said that now our ranks were “unrecognized,” and were therefore worthless. Ignoring this, and in spite of the perils we faced in taking this drastic step toward freedom, we were ready to launch our own American organization. I had already designed the USJA insignia and had written the USJA Constitution and By-Laws. As in the case of becoming independent in 1954, the end of the world did not come and our membership continued to grow. Many of our dedicated leaders simply commented, “It was about time!” Interestingly, although we did not apply to the Kodokan for permission to make promotions, our friendly relations with the Kodokan continued to be strong.

Step Three: 1973—The Promotion of the First American 6th Degree.

As of 1973, there had never been an American 6th Degree, Rokudan, promoted by the USJA. Sixth Degree denotes teacher’s rank, a big step up the rank ladder. The Board of the USJA decided that we must break new ground toward freedom. After all, we had many members who had been black belts and teachers for 15 or 20 years, and we knew very well they should hold teacher’s rank. At that time I proposed that we promote six of our top leaders to Rokudan. George Harris, Ben Campbell, Robey Reed, Karl Geis and myself were in that group. Although these promotions caused quite a stir, everyone agreed that the leaders promoted were as well qualified as Martial Artists who held 6th Dan ranks in Europe and Japan. I was then Director of Development of the USJA. I planned this move as a demonstration of our maturity as an independent national organization.

Step Four: 1988—The Promotion of America’s First 8th Degree.

In many ways, the freedom move we made in 1988 was the most difficult step up to that time. By then I was President of the USJA and our great National Judo Institute (NJI) in Colorado had been built with the donations of over 15,000 USJA Life Members. At the NJI, over the eight years I was the head coach, the NJI National Judo Team won 500 national and international medals, a feat never before accomplished. In 1989, for example, we won first place as a team. We took 18 medals in the U.S. Nationals that year, more than the next six teams behind us put together. Kate Donahoo also placed in the top five in the World Championships (1989) and the Olympics (1992).

Until then, America had never promoted one of its leaders to 8th Degree (Hachidan). Still, our great Olympian George Harris had 36 years of championship Judo behind him, and we knew he should be Hachidan. Not only that, the NJI won the Nationals every year and the USJA had really become the powerhouse of American Judo. So I had a letter written to every Black Belt in the USJA asking them all to vote on the promotion of George Harris to 8th Dan. The vote was unanimous in favor of this promotion. We

did it, and in spite of the croakers who prophesized doom, we continued to grow and prosper.

An important commentary on this first American 8th Dan promotion was written by Isao Inokuma, All Japan, Olympic, and World Gold Medalist. When, in Tokyo, he was shown the memo announcing this promotion (dated July 4, 1988); Inokuma wrote across the top of the page, **“July 4, 1988, Day of Independence of American Judo!”** I still have that hand written note in my files.

Step Five: 1994—The Promotion of America’s First 9th Degree.

In 1994 I was promoted to Kudan, 9th Dan, in Judo. This move toward freedom for American Judo was made by the Promotion Board and Board of Directors of the USJA, and also the Promotion Board of the USJI. Their contention was that I had 43 years of hard service and competition in Judo and had created many videos and books on the Martial Arts. In addition, I had become America’s most successful coach with over 1,000 national and international medalists produced and the Board felt that I had indeed completed the requirements for promotion to Kudan. These requirements had not been written down at that time, but the criteria were the same as those used now by the USMA. These requirements for promotion to 9th and 10th Dan in Judo are now available to you from the USMA. There is also a complete written explanation of these requirements published by our Association. I strongly recommend that you study these requirements.

Judoists who wished to remain subservient to Japan told us that this promotion to 9th Dan was the final straw. We had promoted one of our members to 9th Dan without getting permission from a foreign country, an unheard of step. But again, the sun continued to rise in the east each day as usual.

Step Six: 2004—The Promotion of America’s First 10th Degree.

Perhaps you were a witness to history in 2004. The USMA convened its National Promotion Board, consisting of 10th Degree Black Belts in many Martial Arts. Please note that there are over 1,000 different arts registered by our USMA, and we have over 100 members who are 10th Dans. Many of them were present at this meeting. This was in 2002. After the meeting I was informed that I was to be promoted to 10th Dan in Judo. I objected rather strongly. I had at that time 51 years in Judo and 59 years training in the Martial Arts, including eight years as 9th Dan.

Two years later, with ten years in grade as 9th Dan some of our leaders told me this: They said, *“Sensei, you always remind us when you promote us to 6th or 7th degree or other*

high dans that no political organization recognizes USMA ranks. We always reply that if you, our O-Sensei, thinks we are ready for promotion, that's good enough for us, and we gladly and gratefully accept promotions from you. Now it seems like you are telling us that USMA rank is good enough for us, but it is not good enough for you!"

I believe they were right. There is an unwritten law of the Martial Arts. It is: You never ask for rank, but on the other hand you cannot refuse to accept rank from your teacher. You just say "Yes Sensei," and accept the rank. Who is my Sensei? It is the assembled 10th Dans of our great Association. After much consideration, I said, "Yes Sensei," and gratefully accepted promotion to Judan effective January 1, 2005. I was ten years as a Kudan, and felt I wasn't ready because I hadn't even worn out my red belt.

The fact is that if we are going to have an effective and vital Martial Arts association every member, including myself as Founder, must abide by the decisions of our Promotion Board and our Board of Governors, and that's why I said, "Yes Sensei," and accepted Judan.

What About the Future?

We can't go any farther structurally in asserting our independence and freedom. However, we have a long way to go in changing our attitudes. The attitude of many of our Martial Arts politicians is one of fearfulness. The fear is always the same, worry over losing their positions of power and control. This fear makes them timid, and timid leaders don't win battles, they always find ways to bow down.

Thus, in Judo, this subservient attitude makes us losers. Fortunately, in Mixed Martial Arts and several other arts, we take the attitude that Americans can triumph in anything they set out to master. And that, in a nutshell, is why Judo in America is a dying art. That is why Americans are losers in Judo and yet winners in many other arts.

I hope we will have a reawakening in American Judo thinking. I know we can use a free and independent attitude to innovate, to use American physical education expertise, training methods, and tactics and strategy—and win!

I hope this very brief history has been interesting and useful to you. It is not only the story of our struggle to make American Judo free. It is, in a very real sense, the story of my life. Looking back, I am filled with love and gratitude to the thousands of leaders I have worked with. My God Bless and keep these stalwart men and women who have been my comrades in arms during our struggles. It is they who have made the tremendous and unflinching effort to insure the growth of American Martial Arts.

Let me close his essay with a quote below from the poem “Ulysses,” by Alfred, Lord Tennyson, whose work is a beautiful and important part of our English-speaking heritage—our legacy from the great British poets of the past. In this poem, Tennyson speaks for the aged hero Ulysses as he addresses the veteran and battle-tested crew of his ship. Please read it knowing that...

You are always in my heart.

Your servant and friend,

O-Sensei

Philip S. Porter

Founder, USMA. Judan: Judo, JuJitsu, Taiho Jitsu, Beikoku Mizu Ryu JuJitsu, Budo Taijutsu, Jun Kin Shin, Mixed Martial Arts

From “Ulysses,” by Alfred, Lord Tennyson.

“... Come my friends.

‘Tis not too late to seek a newer world...

...For my purpose holds

To sail beyond the sunset and the baths

Of all the western stars until I die...

Tho’ much is taken, much abides; and ‘tho

We are not now that strength which in old days

Moved earth and heaven; that which we are we are;

One equal temper of heroic hearts,

Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will

To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.”