

Black-Belt President Putin: A Man of Gentle Arts

Yamashita Yasuhiro

Russian president Vladimir Putin is well known for his black belt in judo. Former judo champion Yamashita Yasuhiro, now professor at Tokai University, describes Putin's devotion to judo and how he has learned from the judo ideal of "gentleness" to deepen his ties with the world. Judo, written with the characters "gentle" and "way," is an art teaching flexible adaptation and techniques of self-defense without using weapons.

My first connection with President Putin was in Moscow at the opening of an international judo tournament held in Russia in January 2000. Mr. Putin had just been appointed acting president of Russia at the close of the previous year. Unfortunately, I was not able to meet him in person during the tournament, but indirectly, through a representative of the all-Japan team, I presented him with a judo uniform in commemoration of the event. The following announcement, we were told, was broadcast to the arena: "And now, we have a gift to be presented to Acting President Putin from world-famous Japanese judo champion Yamashita Yasuhiro."

The Japan team was caught off guard—and later, myself as much as any of them—because the head of the Russian Judo Federation had simply suggested that I offer a gift to a certain "Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin," on behalf of the Japan team. It had not occurred to me, or the rest of us at the time, that this was in fact Acting President Putin himself.

During the elections held in March of the same year to officially determine Russia's second post-Soviet-era president, Putin's accomplishments in judo were to become widely known via the media. Seeing television coverage of this famous personage training hard in his judo gear, I remember feeling a surge of pleasure at the thought that even in far-away Russia there are people of his stature devoted to this sport.

Vladimir Putin had already made a name for himself in judo as a student at Leningrad State University and, it seems, fell just short of qualifying for the national team at the time. In July 2000, when Putin came to Japan for the Kyushu–Okinawa G-8 Summit, he made a stop in the

city of Gushikawa to attend a young people's judo training meet. The president's brief appearance throwing and getting thrown in free exercises with junior high school opponents convinced me that he is a man truly devoted to judo.

True to the Judo Spirit

The opportunity to personally meet a prominent figure with this sort of impressive appeal as a human being presented itself shortly thereafter. When President Putin came to Japan for a second time in September 2000 for a summit conference with then Prime Minister Mori Yoshiro, he asked to visit the Kodokan Judo Institute. After his official business was concluded, he had a tightly packed schedule, requiring him to depart very shortly afterward for the United States. We had assumed there would be no time for him to change, but he surprised us all by turning up with his judo gear already in hand, apparently having brought it from Russia just for this purpose.

It was the speech he gave, however, that impressed me most. Standing before Prime Minister Mori and the assembled master practitioners of the Kodokan school of judo, he said: "Surely I am not the only person who experiences an immense feeling of well-being upon entering the Kodokan—a feeling of homecoming. For judo practitioners around the world, the Kodokan is a kind of second home. It is wonderful that the Japanese sport of judo continues to develop into a worldwide sport, but there is something else that deserves more of our attention—that the culture of Japan, its spirit and ways of thinking, spreads through judo."

If a Japanese judoist were to make the same statement, it might have sounded perfectly obvious or presumptuous. But to have a Russian, and indeed the Russian president, understand with such clarity the potential of judo, was pro-



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Professor, Tokai University Faculty of Education. Master's course completed in the Department of Physical Education, Tokai University Graduate School. Winner of the All Japan Judo Championships for nine consecutive years beginning in 1977. Four-time winner of the World Judo Championships. 1984 Los Angeles Olympics gold-medal winner in men's open weight division of judo, and recipient of Japan's National Medal of Honor in the same year. Since ceasing active judo competition in 1985 with 203 consecutive victories, he has devoted himself to teaching judo. He holds a seventh-dan judo black belt and a variety of posts, including director of the All Japan Judo Federation, manager of the men's national team, trustee at the International Budo University, board member of the National Commission on Educational Reform, and member of the education ministry's Central Council on Education.



top: President Putin visiting the Kodokan together with then Prime Minister Mori Yoshiro and others on 5 September 2000.
bottom: Unmindful of his observers, who had not expected him to don judo gear, the president spent a short time working out in the dojo. Photos courtesy of the Kodokan Judo Institute.

foundly moving. Declining with great courtesy to tie on then and there the honorary red and white sixth-*dan* black belt bestowed on him by the head of the Kodokan Judo Institute, President Putin said, “As a practitioner of judo, I understand the heavy responsibility that comes with this belt. When I return to Russia I will redouble my efforts in training, so that the day when I will truly have the right to tie on this belt will come as soon as possible.”

The skeptic might dismiss such a statement as diplomatic lip service—a busy president could not possibly have time for serious judo practice. But I know for a fact that even now President Putin goes to the dojo twice a week without fail. I believe his words were spoken from the heart.

In December 2000 it was our turn to visit Russia, having been invited to compete in the first International Judo Tournament for the Russian Presidential Cup, founded by President Putin for the advancement of judo. Although Japan regrettably ended up in third place at the tournament, I had another opportunity to observe the president’s character on this occasion.

It occurred during the reception following the tournament. President Putin was to have been present, but as the evening wore on he did not appear. About an hour and a half into the reception, just as we were about to give up, concluding that the president’s official duties had kept him late and that he must have simply gone home, he appeared. According to those in his entourage, he had put in appearances at four separate banquets and receptions held that day, from staff-related events to visits by important dignitaries. He had attended each one in turn, offering words of appreciation and encouragement. With deep respect, I held up my glass of whiskey and toasted him in Russian, “*Nazdarovya*,” to which Mr. Putin replied with a smile, in Japanese: “*Kanpai*.”

The tournament, incidentally, was held in Magnitogorsk, not a major city, but a town that has long flourished for its steel manufacturing industry. I was told that Mr. Putin chose a provincial town as the site to hold the first Presidential Cup because he wanted judo to bring hope to people living in the outlying areas, thereby promoting local prosperity. Simply winning competitions

is not the ultimate purpose of sport, a principle that these episodes clearly convey President Putin understands.

The Wise Use of Strength and Mutual Prosperity

President Putin's ideas about judo and sports seem to have had an effect on the world leaders attending the summits. At the G-8 summit in Genova in July 2001, Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi of host country Italy gave the leaders of each nation a book titled *Judo: The History, Theory, and Practice*. President Putin is one of the three authors of the Russian original. Why did Prime Minister Berlusconi give this book to the leaders of the world? The media at the time explained his true intentions as follows: among the teachings of Kano Jigoro (1860–1938), founder of judo and the Kodokan, was: “Employ your own strength wisely and pursue prosperity for both yourself and others.” This was precisely the spirit demanded of the leaders of the developed nations who gathered in Genova.

Making maximum use of one's strength for the purpose of good, respecting others, and working together to build a world where all prosper—this spirit, first articulated in Japan, has already moved beyond the realm of judo and transcended national boundaries, and is now something sought and shared by people all over the world. People like Prime Minister Berlusconi and President Putin seem to understand this better than many Japanese.

The late Matsumae Shigeyoshi, first president of Tokai University and one of my mentors, always used to tell me: “I support you not only because I want you to win judo matches but because I want you to become a person who can contribute to world peace and secure the bonds of friendship with people around the world through the arts of judo that Japan has produced and nurtured.” A man deeply involved with cultivating private-sector ties with the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, he would add that we need to do this particularly at a time when everyone in Japan has their gaze fixed on the United States. He would surely have been pleased to know that a man of similar intent has become the president of Russia.

A Judo Renaissance

In 2001 the Kodokan and the All Japan Judo Federation launched a joint project called “Judo Renaissance” to advance programs that seek to return to the original spirit of judo as advocated by founder Kano stressing the nurture of human character.

Competitive sports nowadays, including Judo, are prone to emphasize technique alone, and to be concerned only with the number of bouts won or lost. Since I lead the Japanese national team as coach, my greatest objective is the

strengthening of Japan's judo record. But the role of judo does not end there. Supporting the mental and physical cultivation of young people based on the ideas taught by founder Kano to "perfect the self" and "benefit the world," I believe, is the original mission of judo.

At present 188 countries and regions are members of the International Judo Federation. The fact that judo has spread so far is probably related to its spiritual and educational value. It has spread to such an extent that it is now possible to build bridges spanning international society through private-sector diplomacy based on judo, which in turn encourages all sports to play a similar role. The president of another nation who understands the true significance of judo has reawakened us Japanese to this potential.

About this Article

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