

News in English

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This month's selections from The Japan Times

Japan losing its golden grip on Olympic judo

Minoru Matsutani
STAFF WRITER

Judo became an Olympic sport at the 1964 Tokyo Games and was dominated by the country of its origin until the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing.

This summer in London, Japan's men failed to win a single gold medal in judo and its women claimed just one. It was the first time since judo's Olympic debut that the men failed to grab gold.

Have Japan's judoka become weaker or have those in other countries gotten stronger? Here are some questions and answers:

What is the origin of judo?

Jigoro Kano opened a dojo in Tokyo in 1882 to teach a style of jujitsu he later called judo, according to the Japanese Olympic Committee.

Kano was deemed the originator of judo by the International Judo Federation, which was founded in 1951 and based in Budapest. Kano also was the first Asian member of the International Olympic Committee, according to the IJF. The All Japan Judo Federation was founded in 1949.

How strong was Japan in Olympic judo?

From the Tokyo Games until Beijing, Japanese judoka won 35 gold medals. France, its nearest rival

during that time, bagged 10, according to the IOC.

The 2004 Athens Games saw Japan collect its highest gold medal haul, winning eight.

How did Japan's judoka fare in London compared with other judoka?

In terms of gold medals, Japan and six other countries tied for fourth place with one each. Russia took three golds and France and South Korea won two each.

In terms of all medals, Japan and France shared the lead with seven, followed by Russia with five.

Why did Japan get only one gold in London?

Experts point to the internationalization of judo and the rise of strong foreign contenders.

Yasushi Oishi, 69, a coach at the Oishi Dojo in Obu, Aichi Prefecture, where several Olympians train, said judo has become especially popular in France.

"France has been very open to judo and lots of Japanese judoka went to coach there. Now judo is popular as a sport and parents want their children to learn it because of its focus on strict sportsmanship and discipline," Oishi told The Japan Times.

Also, France has lured talented judo coaches by offering them stable positions as government workers despite their lack of French citizenship, he said.

"It's very good for us that judo has become a globally recognized sport," he said.

Oishi also noted that Japanese judoka outnumber their foreign counterparts by a great deal, which in many cases means their foreign counterparts receive more attention in a more devoted training environment that receives nationwide support over the four-year run-up to the games.

Does Japan hold high expectations for Olympic judo?

Yes. From Barcelona to Beijing, judo accounted for 56 percent of Japan's gold medals and 37 percent of all its medals combined.

In London alone, the one judo gold accounted for 14 percent of the seven Japanese golds and the seven total judo medals 18 percent of the 38 medals Japan won overall.

"In the future, it will be difficult for Japan to get so many medals in judo," Oishi said. "We should not place too much pressure on Japanese judoka. Japanese judo has not gotten weaker; other countries have become stronger."

Who has won the most Olympic gold medals in judo so far?

Tadahiro Nomura won three gold medals, one each in Atlanta, Sydney and Athens. Nobody else has won as many golds in Olympic judo, according to IOC statistics.

Hitoshi Saito won two golds, one



Down and out: Japanese judoka Daiki Kamikawa (below) grapples with Iha Makau of Belarus on Aug. 3 at the London Olympics. Daiki lost the match, which left the Japanese male judo team bereft of Olympic golds for the first time since the sport was introduced at the 1964 Summer Games in Tokyo. KYODO

in Los Angeles and the other in Seoul, and Ryoko Tamura (now Tani) did likewise in Sydney and Athens.

Likewise, Austrian Peter Seisenbacher took golds in Los Angeles and Seoul, while Poland's Waldemar Legien did the same in Seoul and Barcelona. Frenchman David Douillet got one gold in Atlanta and another in Sydney, and Dongmei Xian of China took the center podium once in Athens and once in Beijing, according to the IOC data.

Dutchman Willem Rusla won two gold medals in Munich, in the 93-kg class and in the open category, which was eliminated in 1988. The heaviest category in judo now is the 100-kg-plus class.

Shin-Okubo denizens, fans counsel calm

Kazuaki Nagata
STAFF WRITER

The rising tensions between Tokyo and Seoul are best eased by level-headed diplomacy for the sake of both nations, said people interviewed last month by The Japan Times in Tokyo's Korean-centric Shin-Okubo district.

Tensions have been escalating over South Korea-controlled islets in the Sea of Japan that are claimed by Japan, which calls them Takeshima, and provocative remarks by South Korean President Lee Myung Bak, including that Emperor Akihito should apologize for Japan's colonial rule of the Korean Peninsula.

Lee visited the islets, which South Korea calls Dokdo, on Aug. 10, drawing Tokyo's ire.

"As a Japanese, I think the remark that (Lee) made about the Emperor was disrespectful ... but I think the two countries shouldn't get

emotional" and should discuss the issue more calmly, said Ishii, a woman in her 40s from Yokohama who gave only her family name.

Ishii, who was with a friend, said she comes to the area near JR Shin-Okubo Station with friends about once a month to eat Korean food and check out products dealing with Korean celebrities.

The area is widely known for its more than 100 Korean restaurants and shops, which attract fans of many nationalities.

"The territorial issue has nothing to do with cultural exchanges," she said, adding that her interest in South Korean TV dramas remains intact.

Business owners in the district said the diplomatic spat has not had an economic impact, but it has made them feel uneasy.

A Japanese man in his 40s who runs a cafe in the district said Lee's actions, including refusing to receive a personal letter from Prime

Minister Yoshihiko Noda, have appeared to be provocative, and he hopes Seoul handles the situation more calmly.

Asked if the rising tensions have caused a drop in visitors and business in the district, he said there seems to be fewer people on the streets. However, he added he is not sure if this is because of the bilateral row or due to the sweltering heat.

In any case, he said, a deterioration in diplomatic relations doesn't help the Japanese and South Korean workers in the area.

For instance, a group of Japanese held a rally in the Shin-Okubo district and damaged some of the Korean stores, he said.

His store normally makes it a rule not to allow any women to work alone at night, but he added, "I have been especially careful these days."

A 53-year-old Korean woman who



Business as usual: People check out products outside a store selling Korean merchandise in Shin-Okubo, dubbed Tokyo's Koreatown. KAZUAKI NAGATA

works at a store that sells goods promoted by Korean celebrities said her store has not been affected by the political conflict.

She said she thinks Takeshima is South Korea's territory but doesn't want to see the tension escalate and hurt the two countries' relations.

"It's really uncomfortable. I'm working here," she said, adding she hopes the two governments somehow find a peaceful solution in the near future.