



# Parents Guide to Judo

## Enhancing Confidence and Independence for Blind and Visually Impaired

BY RON C. PECK, CFO & CO-FOUNDER OF THE BLIND JUDO FOUNDATION

### TABLE OF CONTENTS

Summary / Introduction .....	1
Enhancing Confidence .....	2
Value of Judo .....	4
Tenets of Judo .....	4
History of Judo .....	9
Paralympics & Paralympians ....	7
Origin of Paralympics .....	8
Finding Gym & First Steps .....	10
Final Thoughts.....	11

### Summary

The purpose of this paper is to describe how the sport of Judo is an especially strong method of building personal, physical, and emotional capability for blind or visually impaired persons. This paper outlines the benefits of Judo; how it is taught; and a brief history of its origins. It also includes a summary of a recent Judo success for a blind and visually impaired person.

### Introduction

Parents only want the best for their children. Children who are blind or visually impaired bring added concerns to parents as the children grow up, enter school, socialize, and build their network of peers. Parents want their children to have every possible opportunity to thrive, including the chance to reap the physical and mental benefits of sports.

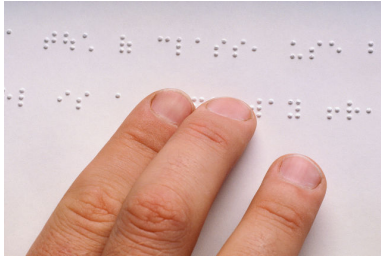
Each day we witness media glorification of various sports figures from a variety of sports disciplines. This especially holds true during the Olympics, which many consider to be the ultimate measure of athletic achievement. But, what about the Paralympics? Two weeks after the close of the Olympics, most sponsors, media, and spectators head home. Yet, this short two-week period is the opening of the second largest sporting event in the world: the Paralympic Games

There are only nineteen competitive sports in the Summer Paralympic Games as compared with thirty-nine events in the Summer Olympic Games. One such sport is called Judo. The US Paralympic Judo Team is comprised solely of blind and visually impaired athletes (Judokas) that have embraced Judo like no other sport. Of course, not all who practice the sport of Judo compete in the Para-



© 2010 Blind Judo Foundation

Revised March 2010



Reading Braille

---

*Judo the “Gentle art” or the “soft method”*

---

lympics. Yet, regardless of the level of competition that is reached, this sport offers athletes more physical, mental, psychological, and spiritual benefits than one can imagine. These benefits extend beyond the athlete and reach the parents, family members, and organizations that support blind and visually impaired children and young adults.

### **How Can Judo Enhance Confidence and Independence in a Blind Person’s Life?**

There are 94,000<sup>(1)</sup> school age children in America who are blind or visually impaired. This physical impairment can potentially lead to a loss of independence and the inability to participate in activities such as athletics, through which skills are achieved and confidence is gained. But this does not have to be the case.

Where does one learn *confidence*, build *character*, make and follow through on *commitments*, and learn *humility*, *respect*, and *responsibility*? Often times these traits are learned from parents, grandparents, teachers, loved ones, and from experiences in life itself. However, there is another resource for building these qualities: learning and practicing the sport of Judo. Observers of the sport may perceive that Judo is all about “fighting” and learning to protect oneself in uncomfortable and challenging situations. The true value of the sport of Judo is learning the Tenets of Judo. There is no better place to build one’s confidence than by stepping onto the Judo mat and regularly practicing the sport of Judo.

### **What Is It About Judo That Can Change a Young Person’s Life?**

Judo is often referred to as the “soft method” or “gentle art,” which is actually an indirect application of force to overtake or defeat an opponent. Said another way, it is a method of using the opponent’s strength against him or her. Jigoro Kano, the originator of Judo, referred to Judo as maximum efficiency in the use of leverage.

Kano’s philosophy of mind, body, and character development through Judo was a means for improving oneself, not only physically, but also mentally, emotionally, and morally. These are part of the Tenets of Judo that are being learned and expounded upon by the Blind Judo Foundation ([www.blindjudofoundation.org](http://www.blindjudofoundation.org)) and other organizations supporting this sport.

A judo practitioner is known as a **Judoka**. Back in Kano’s time (1877), however, one had to be a 4<sup>th</sup> degree (Dan) Black Belt to hold the title of

## **Ju-do-ka**

*A person who practices  
Judo*

**Jordan Mouton**

**2008 US Paralympic  
Judo Team**



Photo: Chris Hardy

Judoka. Breaking down the word judoka, the suffix “ka” when coupled with a noun means a person with expertise on a certain subject. Practitioners below the 4<sup>th</sup> Dan Black Belt were simply “trainees.” Today, however, there is no distinction in ranking to be called a Judoka. Even a beginner White Belt is a Judoka.

Belt colors worn by a Judoka are indications of skill level, with the White Belt being the first belt. The colors leading to a Black Belt after White are White Belt with a Yellow strip; Yellow; Orange; Green; Blue; Purple; Brown (with three levels within the Brown ranking) and finally, Black. The Black Belt has rankings from 1<sup>st</sup> degree, or Dan, up to 10<sup>th</sup> Dan. However, all colors of all levels are fully respected when practicing the sport of Judo

Often, one will hear the word “sensei” in reference to the teacher or master of the judo gym (dojo). This word derives from “sen” (before) and “sei” (life) or one who has preceded you. Traditionally, sensei has been reserved for instructors of the 4<sup>th</sup> Dan or above. Though, in the case of **Willy Cahill**, an 8<sup>th</sup> Dan (Black Belt) and the past coach of the US Olympic Judo and USParalympic Judo Teams, while he certainly deserves the title of sensei, he prefers to be called Coach.

During training, workouts, and competition, one wears a uniform called a Judogi. The Judogi is made out of a heavy weave material in order to withstand the strength of throwing and mat work, or grappling. Usually the uniform is referred to as simply a gi (pronounced gee).

It is interesting to note that the gi was actually created by Jigoro Kano back in 1907. Many other martial arts developed similar uniforms from Kano’s design. The two primary colors to Gi’s: white and blue along with a colored belt to indicate ranking within the sport. In judo competitions, one competitor will wear a white Judogi and the other will wear blue. This is so the judges, referees, and spectators will clearly recognize each judoka, especially during competition.

In Japan, however, it is tradition to compete only with a white Judogi, but with colored sashes to distinguish between the opponents. True judo purists tend to look down or dismiss the use of a blue(2) Judogi.

When watching a judo match, the various techniques and practices are still called out and identified in Japanese. One does not need to speak Japanese in order to practice Judo but Judokas do need to learn the various techniques in the original language.

For example: The primary goal in judo is throwing ones opponent, which is called *nage-waza*, and the ground or mat work is called *ne-waza*. Even throws are divided into groups of techniques: standing *tachi-waza* and what are referred to as sacrifice techniques called *sutemi-waza*. There are many more techniques, throws, grappling, and foot work that,



**Old Chinese proverb says:**

*“Tell me and I’ll forget;*

*Show me and I’ll remember;*

*Involve me and*

*I’ll understand.”*

have their Japanese names. Further descriptions go beyond the purpose of this paper.

## **Does Judo Have Value for Blind and Visually Impaired Children and Young Adults?**

If there is any one sport tailored to blind and visually impaired children and young adults, it’s the sport of Judo. Parents might wonder if their child will get hurt learning Judo, or how the sport of Judo can translate to blind people. Many assume that one needs to see in order to attempt such a sport. The concerns and questions continue.

Recent research compiled by the U.S. Department of Education shows that recreation and sports activities provide individuals with disabilities the opportunity to increase mobility, independence, and socialization, among other benefits. Research also indicates that athletic activity is influential in preventing a decline in not only physical and cognitive functions, but psychological functions as well. It has also been proven that individuals involved with athletics have higher grade point averages, better time management skills, and improved performance on standardized tests. Why should visually impaired children and young adults miss out on these benefits? When they are introduced to the sport of Judo, they will reap all of these benefits and many more.

Further research will reveal those benefits that can be applied to each and everyone of us based upon where we are in our own and individual development. Even a sense of spirituality and well being applies to children and young adults in their development for all that are willing to step onto the Judo mat. The benefits continue.....

Judo is a natural fit for the blind and visually impaired. An old Chinese proverb says “Tell me and I’ll forget; Show me and I’ll remember; Involve me and I’ll understand”. With the sport of Judo, one is “involved,” and for blind and visually impaired children and young adults, it is positive and life altering experience.

## **What are the Tenets of Judo?**

Many people perceive Judo to be all about fighting and competing in a martial art. In fact, it is about learning principles that we all strive to achieve. The basic tenets or lessons learned from the sport of Judo are as follows.

**Confidence** is developed through the many experiences that manifest themselves through the practice of Judo. Confidence is built over time through positive reinforcements. On the judo mat a Judoka (one who practices Judo) will be competing against others with equal, lesser, and sometimes greater skills. Through repeated practice, these skills become engrained in the minds of Judokas, and their confidence builds. Confi-

## **TENETS OF JUDO**

**Confidence**

**Character**

**Commitment**

**Humility**

**Respect**

**Responsibility**

dence enhances one's success in school and occupation, in interactions with others, and, in recreation and social activities.

**Character** is also developed on the Judo mat, whether the sport is practiced as an exercise or with the goal of becoming an elite athlete representing the USA at the Paralympic Games. People with "character" are more accepted among others, and in society in general. People with character stand out. Others not only gravitate toward them, they also look upon these individuals as potential leaders. Learning to work with peers of all ability levels assists in the development of a person's character. Knowing that someone with a disability can successfully compete on equal footing with others who are non-disabled can be both motivating and character building.

**Commitments** are easy to make, but not all of us follow through on our commitments. In the sport of Judo, if one expresses a commitment to the sport with other persons, coaches, participants, and parents, it is not easy to avoid following through on that commitment. How many of us have heard or even made commitments with which we didn't follow through? Judo encourages the concept of do-what-you-say-you-will-do (DWYSYWD), helping athletes to understand the importance of keeping commitments.

**Humility** is also a great lesson to learn in life, and the Judo mat can be a good place to develop this valuable trait. No matter how good you think you are, there is always someone better than you. One might assume that high ranking Judo belts might be better than lower belts, but this it does not assure them of winning all matches. One learns very quickly that "humility" plays a big part in learning the sport of Judo.

**Respect** is also a learned quality, not only in one's personal life but in Judo. Respect for each of the other athletes and their backgrounds and experiences are quickly realized on the Judo mat. Respect for oneself as a team member or fellow player is quickly learned by all who practice this art form. As we move into society, having respect for others and their differences is a quality worth nurturing. What better place to learn this human attribute then through the sport of Judo?

**Responsibility** is certainly not the last of the Tenets of Judo that we all strive for in our personal, professional, and family lives. Accepting responsibility for yourself and others is a quality that opens many doors and garners many friendships. Being a responsible person and having the other qualities listed above can make the difference between achieving success and being average throughout life.

There are many more qualities to learn from this sport that are useful in the everyday activities of life. You will discover for yourself the benefits of Judo that transcend the above tenets when enrolling your child or young adult into this sport.

## Is Judo the Last Frontier for Enhancing Confidence and Independence within the Blind and Visually Impaired Community?

No, yet it is a major tool well worth considering. Consequently, our blind, low vision and visually impaired individuals are the only athletes in the sport of Judo that have ever won Gold Medals for America since Judo was introduced at the Olympics in 1964. Because the sport is so tactile, Judo has become a natural for those that are blind or visually impaired

### What is the History of Judo?

The father of Judo is Jigoro Kano (1860-1938) who was born in Japan. There is a long and rich history for this particular sport that is worth knowing for those considering an introduction to this meaningful and character developing activity.

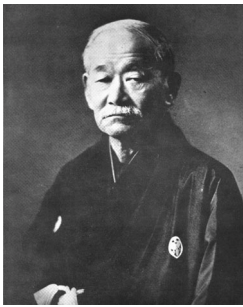
Kano was born into a well to do Japanese family back in 1860. As a small boy, he was often picked on by what we call “bullies” today. Consequently he started pursuing a martial art called jujitsu to help build confidence. Jujitsu, however, was becoming a dying art during his early life which was also compounded by not being able to find a qualified teacher.

At 18 years of age Kano became a university student and also wanted to continue studying his martial arts. He was referred to a Master of a certain style of martial arts called Tenjin Shin-yo-ryo. But again this was a small and special group of practitioners at his university. This type of martial art emphasized techniques over formal exercise, which was the beginning of Kano’s emphasis on free practice (randori) in Judo.

After joining this school, the head instructor became ill and died. Wanting to continue his interest in martial arts, Kano became a student in another Tenjin Shin-yo-ryu school to continue building his skills. The head instructor at this school put more of an emphasis on the practice of pre-arranged forms (or kata) than his previous instructor.

Through dedication, Kano finally earned the title of Master Instructor (shihan) and became an assistant instructor to the head master of this second school. Unfortunately this head instructor also became ill and Kano was left knowing he had much more to learn about martial arts. He joined and started studying another style and became a student of Kito-ryu. But again he was back to free practice with emphasis on throwing techniques.

By now Kano was creating his own composite style and was full of new ideas and reforming jujitsu to its original beginnings. His holistic ap-



Jigoro Kano—1860-1938

### *The Father of Judo*



## Kodokan

“a place for teaching the way”



*The Olympic / Paralympic  
Rings Representing the Five  
Inhabited Continents—  
North and South America  
are one*

proach to martial arts like jujitsu or judo was coming into view. This holistic concept would include not only the body, but also the mind. It would combine character development with the martial arts prowess.

Kano was now 22 and had graduated from the university. While his formal university studies had been completed, he had only just begun when it came to studying his martial arts. He was now practicing and training other Judokas at a Buddhist temple. Two years later the Temple became known as the Kodokan or “place for teaching the way.” Yet Kano still had not been recognized as a Master in Kito-ryu. Nevertheless this would now be known as the Kodokan beginning.

Judo became known as Kano Jiu-Jitsu or Kano Jiu-Do, and later as Kodokan Jiu-Do or simply Judo. The word “Judo,” which derives from jujitsu means the “gentle art” or “soft method.” Many spectators of the sport of Judo might not consider it the “gentle art,” but practitioners of the sport understand and appreciate this description.

Jigoro Kano died in 1938 and posthumously was inducted into the International Judo Federation (IJF) Hall of Fame in 1999. The legend and vision that Kano had for the sport of Judo is very much alive today.

### What Is the Paralympics and Who Are Paralympians?

The sport of Judo was introduced to the Olympic Games in 1964, and in Japan and 1988 at the Paralympic Games in Korea. It is unfortunate that most Americans are unfamiliar with the Paralympics, which is the second largest sporting event in the world. The Olympic Games are the largest.

The only Gold Medals won for the USA in the sport of Judo were earned at the 2000 Paralympic Games in Sydney, Australia. As of this writing (2010), Gold has never been won by the US Olympic (sighted) Judo Team since Judo was introduced in 1964.

Before continuing, let’s define a couple of words for clarity. In 1980, WHO(4) (World Health Organization) published the International Classification of Impairments, Disabilities and Handicaps with the following definitions:

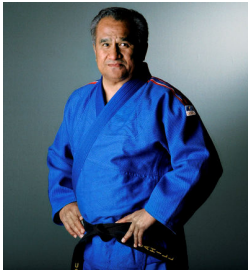
Impairment – involves any loss or abnormality of psychological, physiological or anatomical structure or function

Disability – is any restriction or lack of capability to perform activities within a range considered normal

Handicap – is an impairment or disability that limits the role of a person in society and/or social integration.

*“Champions are not born,  
They possess a desire to excel.  
To be successful in anything,  
It takes quality hard work,  
Self discipline and  
Careful planning.”*

**Author—Willy Cahill**



**Coach Willy Cahill**  
**Former US Olympic and**  
**US Paralympic Judo Coach**

Disabilities make sports like Judo more valuable, especially among the blind and visually impaired. What a wonderful “equalizer” and resource for enhancing independence in the blind community.

There are many great and memorable stories surrounding the Paralympic Judo players (Judokas). One of these stories is of a girl named Lori, who was born prematurely and given too much oxygen, which permanently damaged her vision. When her biological mother heard that her baby was blind, she decided that her baby was “defective” and advised the hospital to “give her away.” She never returned to bring her new baby daughter home.

After several months Lori was adopted by a very loving family with seven children of their own. At the age of sixteen, she was presented with the opportunity to begin practicing Judo. She and her family accepted the challenge and began Judo training. A year later, at the age of seventeen, this young lady won the Gold Medal at the World Judo Championships in Rome, Italy while representing the USA.

Two years after Rome, Lori represented the USA as a member of the US Paralympic Judo Team at the 2004 Games in Athens, Greece. Here she won the Silver Medal for her team and the USA in the sport of Judo. Is this an extreme case? No, this is just one story of a blind individual finding value, building her confidence, and enhancing her independence from the lessons of Judo. Lori is now in college heading towards the completion of her BA Degree. Her parents have indicated several times that Coach Cahill and the sport of Judo “have changed their daughter’s life.”

Not all individuals learning the sport of Judo will go to the Paralympics, but all who dare to step onto the Judo mat will learn the Tenets of Judo.

### **Where Does the Name “Paralympics” Derive From?**

The Paralympics are not to be confused with the Special Olympics. Paralympians have physical disabilities and not intellectual disabilities. Special Olympics have more to do with participation, whereas Paralympics is strictly about competition.

The word Paralympic is made up of three words: “par” or “para” meaning similar or “next-to” or in “parallel with” and “Olympic” which indicates the Paralympic Games take place alongside or in parallel with the Olympics. The Paralympic Games are at the same venue as the Olympics and begin two weeks after the official closing of the Olympic Games



## When Did the Paralympic Games Originate?

The Paralympic Games were founded at the close of World War II by Dr. Ludwig Guttmann at the Stokes Mandeville Hospital in Aylesbury, England. Dr. Guttmann, a Neurologist, was dealing with spinal cord injuries from the war and felt that sports would be a great rehabilitator for his patients. These patients were wheelchair bound and not only needed clinical help, but morale and self esteem building as well.

The year was 1948 and these Stoke Mandeville Games were perceived to run in parallel with the Olympics being held in the UK at the same time. Sports spread to include wheelchair basketball, wheelchair fencing, and wheelchair snooker. Word was spreading and the Dutch paraplegics joined the competition in 1952. The “Stoke Mandeville Games” were now an international competition, and they were growing not only in therapeutic value, but also in rehabilitative value.

One thing lead to another and in 1952 the World Veteran Federation met in Paris to organize the rules for other sports that could be adapted for athletes with spinal cord injuries. It wasn't until 1958 that Dr. Guttmann and Antonio Maglio, an Italian, came up with the idea of organizing the Stoke Mandeville Games to be held in the same city as the 1960 Olympics, which were to be held in Rome that year. Hence, some consider the first Paralympic Games to have taken place in Rome in 1960.

At those Games there were 23 countries represented with a total of 400 athletes competing. They were only spinal cord injury athletes. Moving forward several years to the summer 2008 Paralympic Games in Beijing, there were 146 countries represented, with almost 4000 athletes competing in 19 different sports, including Judo.

The sport of Judo was first introduced at the Olympics in 1964 in Japan...the home country for the sport of Judo. It wasn't until 1988 in Korea that Judo was introduced to the Paralympic Games, and then only for male Judokas. In 2004, female athletes were finally allowed to compete. That first female was Lori Pierce<sup>(3)</sup> a member of the US Paralympic Judo Team to represent the USA in Athens, Greece. Not only was she the first female for the US but she brought home the Silver Medal. The highest Medal won by the sighted US Olympic Judo Team was Bronze. What a thrill for this young blind and visually impaired Judoka. There is even a greater story about Lorena (Lori) Pierce that has been written about by this author<sup>(3)</sup>.

Since the sport of Judo was introduced to the Olympics in 1964, the Gold Medal has managed to elude the sighted US Olympic Judo Team. Yet, after Judo was introduced to the Paralympic Games in 1988, the US Paralympic Judo Team managed to earn two Gold Medals at the 2000 Paralympic Games in Sidney, Australia under the coaching leadership of Willy Cahill. They also brought home one Silver Medal and one Bronze



Photo: Ron Peck

**Lorena (Lori) Pierce**

**2004 US Paralympic Judo Team**

**Silver Medalist**



Gold, Silver and Bronze  
Medals

**Vince Lombardi (1913-1970)**  
**said:**

*“It’s not whether you  
get knocked down.  
It’s whether you get  
back up again.”*

Medal. Not too bad for a sport that most do not associate with blind and visually impaired individuals.

### **How do you find a Judo Gym called a Dojo?**

So what is a Dojo? A dojo is merely a “Judo gym” where martial artists of all levels meet to learn, practice and build their skills in the sport of Judo.

Learning martial arts is often a life-long adventure and holistic way of finding balance among family life, work, and fellowship, spirituality, and overall well-being. It can become a passion that transcends life itself. Children and especially blind children build the Tenets of Judo (mentioned earlier in this article) by attending classes regularly.

You might believe that “team sports” would be the most beneficial for your child....only you can judge those benefits. Consider, however, Judo is a 12 month sport and is not seasonal. Gaining confidence, self-respect and discipline is not a once-a-week, one hour activity seasonal activity. It requires regular practice!

### **What is the First Step?**

The first step in introducing your child to Judo is locating a Dojo. Not all Dojos are created equal, which is also true of instructors or sensei's.

So to help your child or loved one find a “home – dojo” you will need to ask questions and visit with various instructors at several dojos. If you know another parent who has their child enrolled in a Dojo, however, it may be helpful to ask them about their perceptions. When it comes to teaching the sport of Judo, a black belt does not necessarily indicate that someone is qualified to work with blind and visually impaired individuals. Teaching to the blind is a very tactile skill and not visual skill as one might perceive.

Safety is paramount at any dojo when training in any sport especially Judo. Therefore, be sure to speak with the head instructor or sensei about safety issues and how they are handled. Spend time observing others and how instruction is given at your dojo of choice. All instructors and student (Judokas) are always willing to share their thoughts.

Observe a few classes and listen to how training and routines in a daily workout take place. Does it make sense for your child or young adult to be enrolled in a particular class, or is it better to be with individuals of the same age group? Your instructor will be able to advise you best as they know the make up of the classes and the type of instruction offered.

The floor of a dojo is made up of mats. These are special mats to absorb a throw or fall. If the class is using regular gymnastics mats, this is un-

**BEN FRANKLIN ONCE SAID**

“He who is good at making excuses is seldom good at anything else.”



acceptable. All individuals will at one time or another be thrown and will be “taken-to-the-mat”. A concern of blind and visually impaired individuals is falling. Judo is a sport of “falls” and it is important to have the right tools, Tatami mats, for protection. What better way to learn how to properly fall as a blind or visually impaired person then through the sport of Judo.

If you think you might have found the right dojo for your child visit the dojo at off hours and speak with the owner or head instructor about your child and any special needs or concerns. You will usually find that they are very interested in the overall welfare of your child.

### **Are There Injuries with the Sport of Judo and How are they Handled?**

Judo is a sport and like most sports there is a chance of getting injured. Not life threatening but hurt none the less. How does an instructor respond to such needs; how qualified is he or she for handling such emergencies? Talk to your instructors at the dojo to find out.

Think of the sport of Judo as an adventure not only for the individual but for the parents as well. You will see the best develop in your children. It will warm your heart and bring tears to your eyes to see them prepare for increased independence and confidence as they head out into the world.

Ben Franklin once said, “He who is good at making excuses is seldom good at anything else.” See you on the Tatami...

The **Blind Judo Foundation** is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization whose purpose is to create champions of blind and visually impaired individuals through the sport of Judo. More information can be found at [www.blindjudofoundation.org](http://www.blindjudofoundation.org) or by calling Coach Willy Cahill at 650-589-0724 or Ron Peck at 425-444-8256 or [roncepek@earthlink.net](mailto:roncepek@earthlink.net) Both are Co-Founders of the Blind Judo Foundation.

#### **References:**

- (1) Statistics American Foundation for the Blind
- (2) Use of a Blue Judogi was first brought to light by Anton Geesink in 1986 at an International Judo Federation match.
- (3) <http://www.blindjudofoundation.org/Championsinthemaking.pdf>
- (4) [http://www.who.int/bulletin/archives/79\(11\)1047.pdf](http://www.who.int/bulletin/archives/79(11)1047.pdf)

Revised March 2010