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# Changing judo in changing Europe On the identity of combat sports in the era of integration and globalisation

**Authors' contributions:**

**A** Study design  
**B** Data collection  
**C** Statistical analysis  
**D** Data interpretation  
**E** Literature search  
**F** Manuscript preparation  
**G** Funds collection

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## Summary

Judo of the 21<sup>st</sup> century keeps changing in diverse areas. First of all, it has gained prestige and popularity upon having entered the Olympic programme. Then, it has transformed from a martial art into elite sport, evolving in various directions: the number of weight categories increased, the contest duration decreased, two colours of judogi, as well as some changes in contest rules and regulations of international tournaments were introduced. Japanese dominance in world championships and Olympic Games has been fading with time. Nevertheless, Japanese judoists are still at the top of all international events. The growing popularity of judo throughout the world contributed to its quality. A mixture of various combat styles, use of modern training methods, taking advantage of applied science, etc., resulted in Olympic and world championship medals becoming the domain of the most talented individuals instead of countries regarded as the strongest in judo.

**Key words:**

**Judo • Dominance • Globalisation**

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The elite sport of 21<sup>st</sup> century has undergone a profound change compared with that of first modern Olympic Games. Improvements in equipment, like Reuter's gymnastic floor, pole vaults made of coal fibre, artificial tracks, and so forth, are followed by changes in technical performance, training methods, nutrition, modes of recovery, bringing about increasingly better sport results [7]. And last but not least, global mass media broadcasting and often sponsoring great international events make them more dramatic and competitive.

However, had the founder of judo Jigoro Kano or his pupils been able to watch the recently concluded Olympic Games Judo Tournament, they would have been probably more surprised by the popularity of judo than by changes in the performance of throws and grasps, judogi, etiquette and refereeing [9]. Even the supremacy of Japanese judoists in Athens would have convinced Kano that judo had changed much, although 122 years elapsed since the first judo school, Kodokan, had been established [4].

It is worth remembering that judo descends from various martial arts having been a martial art at the beginning. Therefore, the main objective of judo was striving for perfection, both spiritual and physical [5], a success in combat being then of minor importance. Thus, striving for perfection through practice of judo, always observing universal human principles, is being considered by judoists a way of life [3]. These principles are [2]:

*Juno-ri* (“yield to win”) – pull when pushed and push when pulled;

*Jita kyoei* (“practice for mutual welfare”);

*Seryoku zen`yo* (“maximum efficiency with minimum effort”).

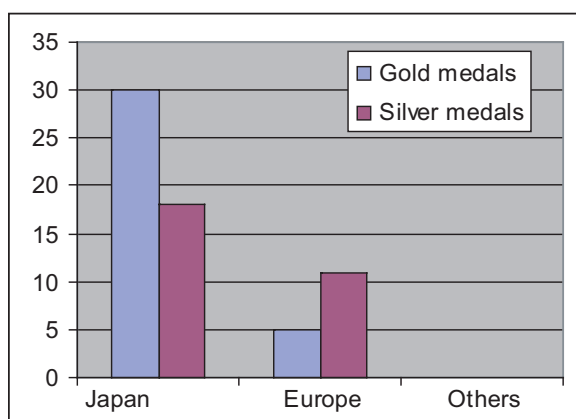
Jigoro Kano, being well educated, clever and far-sighted, was aware that the best way of popularising

judo in the world would consist of organising world championships and next of including judo into the Olympic programme. The latter had eventually been achieved in 1964 in Tokyo.

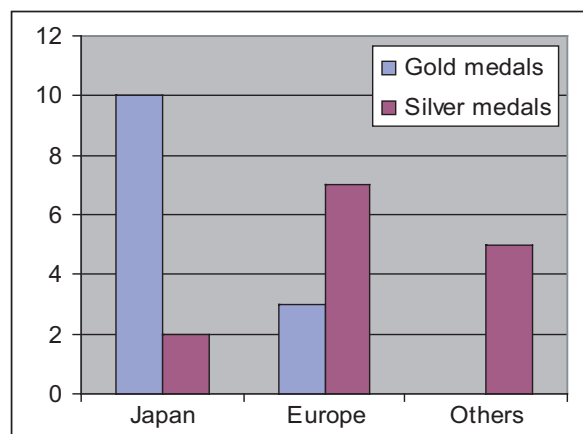
Since the first World Championships in Tokyo in 1956, judo has been evolving in various directions: the number of weight categories increased from one to 8 since 1997, the duration of contests decreased from 20 to 5 min, two colours of judogi became obligatory and a number of changes in contest rules were introduced to enliven the contests and to make them more spectacular and attractive for the spectators. Those changes, made by the European Judo Union, were contested by the Japanese Federation for tradition reasons. Yet, in European view, the Japanese objected to any change in order not to loose their dominance. And their dominance during the first 8 World Championships since (1956 – 1979) and three consecutive Olympic Games (1964, 1972 and 1976) was indisputable, as shown in Figs. 1 and 2.

European competitors tried hard to break the dominance of Japanese judoists since the first World Championships but for 23 years they succeeded only twice. A huge and powerful Dutch judoist, Anton Geesink, won gold medals at the World Championships in 1961 and at the Olympic Games in 1964, where judo was present for the first time. He won the most prestigious weight category – open. It is worth mentioning that Geesink, highly talented and physically fit, spent most of the time in Japan learning technique and competing with top Japanese judoists.

The increasing popularity of judo in the world, but first of all in Europe, increased the numbers of events and of well trained competitors representing various styles of combat.

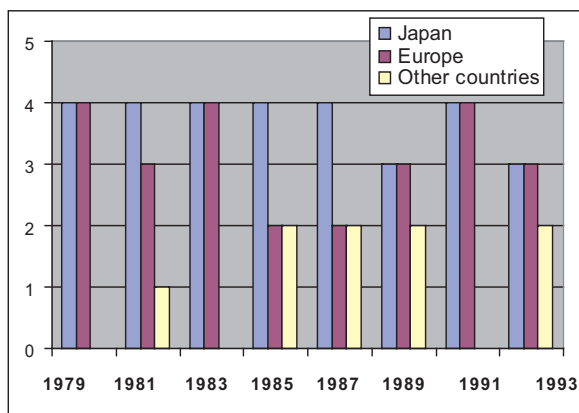


**Figure 1.** Numbers of gold and silver medals won at World Championships in Judo (1956 – 1975). Source: International Judo Federation [10].



**Figure 2.** Numbers of gold and silver medals won at Olympic Games 1964, 1972 and 1976. Source: International Judo Federation [10].





**Figure 3.** Numbers of gold medals won at World Championships in Judo (1979 – 1993), illustrating a neck-to-neck competition between Japan and Europe. Source: International Judo Federation [10].

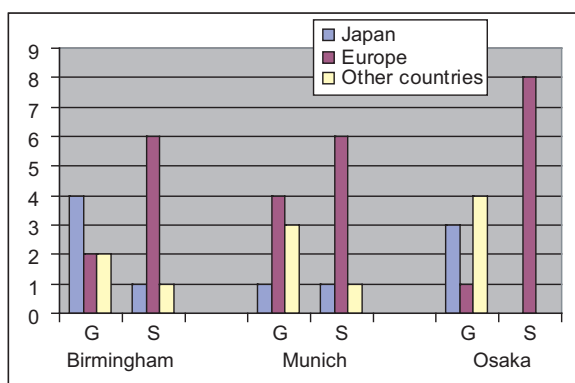
French competitors became famous for their tactical skill and Russians were pretty good in physical preparation to the main events; the Georgian style of combat was similar to sambo in a strong defence and the ability to apply untypical techniques, while the style of Polish, German and Dutch judoists was similar to the Japanese combat technique.

The research in judo was conducted in many European countries, a summary of which being presented at the first International Congress on Judo in Spala, Poland, in 1987.

Political and economical integration of Europe has also affected sports including judo and, gradually, the heterogeneity developed into a new quality and European judo has begun to dominate. As a result of internal European competition, application of modern training methods and introducing a mixture of various combat styles, European judoists started achieving successes in the encounters with Japanese ones since the eighties until the beginning of this century as shown in Figs. 3 and 4.

Notwithstanding all those facts, Japan is a single country, while Europe consists of many countries, so it may be easier to select talented individuals from a larger population. Japanese judoists are known to employ training methods which differ from European ones and which make them outstanding for their brilliant technique and valiancy [8]. Japanese are well known for their long and exhausting *randori* aimed at the development of technical skills, while *randori* practiced by European judoists, who rather develop anaerobic power, resembles *shiai* [1].

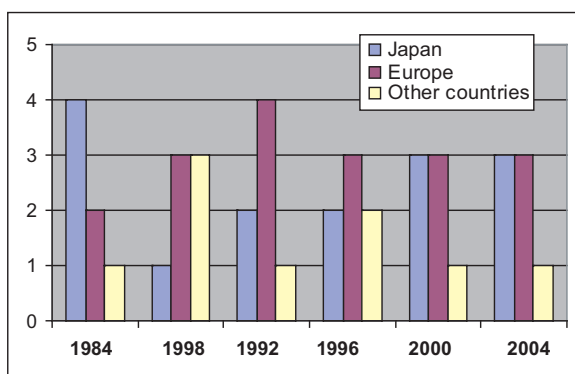
The results of the last two Olympic Games show that Japanese male judoists have resumed their strength as illustrated by having won as many gold medals as the European ones (Fig. 5).



**Figure 4.** Numbers of gold (G) and silver (S) medals won at 3 consecutive World Championships, illustrating a continuing competition for dominance between Japan and Europe. Source: International Judo Federation [10].

Since 1988, European judoists began to win more medals at the Olympic Games than the Japanese ones. Other countries joined the Europe – Japan competition. Not only Europe has overtaken Japan but also judoists from non-European countries have been winning bronze, silver and gold medals. With the integration of Europe, the process of globalisation has been going on touching also judo. At the World Championships in Paris in 1997, competitors from 98 countries participated in the tournament.

With the progressing globalisation, mass media started to play an increasingly important role in all sports, promoting the spectacular value and investing heavily in their development. In era of globalisation, all combat sports, including judo, ought to seek their way to become more spectacular and direct in reception for non-professional onlookers. Sport events nowadays are like a stage spectacle [6] and the play of actors must be intelligible for the spectators giving them aesthetic and emotional satisfaction.



**Figure 5.** Numbers of gold medals won at Olympic Games in 1984, 1988, 1992, 1996, 2000 and 2004. Source: International Judo Federation [10].

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