

the **CrossFit** JOURNAL ARTICLES

Strength on the Mat

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Physical strength may or may not be the most important thing in life, as Rip says, but there is no questions that is vitally important in martial arts, especially judo.

Judo, like any worthwhile sport, favors strong, fit athletes with good technique. While some martial arts, like Brazilian jiu-jitsu, are highly technique-driven, Judo requires strength, power, and conditioning—in addition to technique—to be successful.

Gerald Lafon, a United States Judo Association Master Coach, explains that Judo has thirteen major variables, basic psychomotor skills, agility, kinesthetic awareness, techniques, flexibility, endurance, strength, speed, power, health, mental skills, tactics, and environment (very much like CrossFit, except you beat up *other* people).

Judo is simple (not to be confused with easy). You win by throwing your opponent to the ground, pinning him to the mat, or subduing him with a grappling technique. Basically, you impose your will upon your opponent while he tries to do the same to you. Obviously, there's going to be some disagreement about who does what to whom, and the player with greater skill in the above-mentioned areas usually gets to make those decisions.

Technique, skills, and tactics are dependent on mat time, so progress in these areas is fairly linear over the first few years. Some of the other attributes, like strength, agility, endurance, speed, and power, can be developed off the mat and independent of the others. Among the novice to intermediate ranks (those with less than three years of experience), aptitude in these other areas lead to greater early success. Indeed, there is at least one beginner at every tournament who dominates his class, defeating

players with many more months and years of experience. More often than not, this upstart is the strongest athlete on the mat.

The importance of strength in Judo cannot be overstated. Strength is the sine qua non of international competition. Elite players must marshal all their strength just to get in position to execute a good technique. And for the exceptionally strong, a well-executed technique can become something special. Masahiko Kimura is regarded as one of Japan's greatest champions. The 85kg judoka was incredibly strong, even among elite competitors in his weight class. He seamlessly blended his tremendous functional strength with superior technique to the point that he regularly administered about ten concussions per training session. It got to the point where some judoka refused to train with him unless he refrained from using his special *Oсотogari* (a leg throw) that he developed by practicing against a tree. Kimura is perhaps most famous for defeating Helio Gracie in a jiu-jitsu vs. judo match in 1951. Gracie, creator of Gracie (Brazilian) jiu-jitsu, regularly defeated larger, stronger opponents but reported that there was little he could do to combat the strength and ferocity of the Japanese champion.

Strength is even more important to the novice player. While strength makes good throws great, it can also make shaky throws good and poor throws possible. Beginners have a hard enough time executing a good technique in practice, much less when they're chasing somebody around the mat. The stronger players are able to compensate for imperfect postures or throwing angles by manhandling their opponents into position. They can also better control the shoving match that ensues when the players first clinch. A weaker opponent usually responds

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to this show of strength with a desperate application of opposing force (similar to oversteering when driving a car). In highway driving, this leads to a rollover. In Judo, this leads to an easy counter and a full point.

In some cases, superior strength trumps all other abilities. I vividly recall a training session almost a decade ago when I was free-sparring with a classmate named Brad Sanchez. Brad had studied Judo for only a few months, but he had won his weight class (over 100kg, open division) at several tournaments and even defeated a national ladder champion along the way. Brad was a natural martial artist and a quick study, but he owed his success to the fact that he looked and fought like a Kodiak bear. He simply mauled anyone who stood across from him.

At the time, I could deadlift 500 pounds, was benching in the low 300s, and was very fit from playing rugby. I was new to Judo but had substantial mat experience from jiu-jitsu and Kenpo. I liked my odds against the bear. In our first match, I actually blocked one of his throws (which shocked him more than anything) and countered him for a full point. The second match progressed like the first one. I blocked his throw and went for a counter. That's when my feet separated from the mat. Until that moment, I never conceptualized the power of a man who could bench press over 500 pounds and had functional strength to boot. Until that moment, I had never had my 215-pound frame lifted up with one arm and forcefully choke-slammed to the mat. And until that moment, I had no idea the human body could bounce almost a foot off of a gymnastics floor.

Brad taught me a simple lesson that night (ok, two lessons, the first being not to counter Osotogari with Tani otoshi twice in a row). The lesson was strength wins, especially at the novice and intermediate levels. It didn't just give Brad an edge; his strength advantage was so big that it allowed him to manhandle every opponent across from him, regardless of fitness, speed, or technique. And it was a lesson I never forgot.

People familiar with Judo remark on the conspicuous absence of any real strength-training program in the community. This is because elite judoka are already strong from years of pushing, pulling, and throwing their bodyweight around a mat. Their training time is better spent practicing and refining sophisticated counter-techniques. Unfortunately, this mentality has trickled down and caused a de-emphasis on strength training at the novice levels to the detriment of aspiring judoka everywhere. Novice players while away the hours practicing technique after technique. Many of these novices quit the sport, frustrated by their lack of improvement or at the chronic injuries they suffer (largely because of gaps in their strength and conditioning). These aspiring judoka would be better served by balancing their technical practice with a fitness routine comprising gymnastics, metabolic conditioning, power, and, most importantly, functional strength.



Gant Grimes is a products liability attorney in Wichita Falls, Texas, who CrossFits so he can keep up with his kids. He played all the organized sports in high school before finding rugby, and he has trained in Kenpo, jiu-jitsu, judo, and tae kwon do.