

Removing Barriers Through Teaching the Spirit of Judo

Female Japanese coach FUJII Yuko is leading the men's national team from judo powerhouse Brazil. Her focus is on guiding her students to Tokyo 2020 to more widely inform the world about the essentials of judo, which encompass mind, technique and body, as well as deep humanity.

Brazil's national judo team held a camp at a *dojo* (training hall) in Nara. In between rounds of free practice against *judoka* (judo practitioners) from Japan, France, Ukraine and elsewhere, the team's members took their turns going to FUJII Yuko to seek advice. Fujii listened attentively to what each person had to say, and gave specific suggestions in her fluent Portuguese.

Fujii, who went to Brazil in 2013 as a technical coach, was appointed head coach of Brazil's national men's judo team in May 2018. It was the first time a foreigner, much less a woman, had become the head coach of the men's team from Brazil, a judo powerhouse. It is rare anywhere in the world for a female coach to

Fujii takes care to engage in close communication with the athletes who learn from her. Due to their closeness, they are all smiles in between rounds of practice with their international rivals.

lead a men's sports team. When Fujii was appointed to the position, the Brazilian Judo Confederation told her, "Yuko, as the technical coach, you have proven that a foreigner would give her blood, sweat, and tears for Brazil. It is for this reason that we want you to change everyone's preconceptions by teaching the male *judoka*." Naturally, Fujii accepted immediately.

After an athletic career with accomplishments including a third-

place finish at Japan's national high school championships, Fujii retired from competition at the age of 24, when she finished graduate school. While studying English abroad at the University of Bath in Britain, she had a part-time job teaching at the university's judo club. This work put her on the path toward becoming an instructor.

However, she was unable to communicate effectively in English, and she had no prior experience teaching. Each day was a struggle running up against the barriers in her way, but it also led her to ponder the significance of teaching judo. What was the judo that she wanted to convey? Fujii reflected on the "rational judo" she herself had learned in Japan. Outside her homeland, judo was mostly about power, and the fundamentals were given scant attention, but she

concluded that it was important to be faithful to the fundamentals and to teach the deeper aspects of the art. Figuring out what she wanted to teach opened her eyes, and every day since then she has devoted all the powers of her intellect to building and applying her own teaching method.

Since arriving in Brazil, Fujii has taught at clubs around the country as a technical coach. She has also provided free sports lessons to support children in poor parts of Brazil. Judo has become especially popular since Rafaela Silva, who is from one of those poverty-stricken areas, won a gold medal at the 2016 Rio de Janeiro Olympic Games (she also happened to receive instruction from Fujii). In the past, Fujii occasionally told children who were not trying hard enough not to come to practice anymore. However, she noticed that it

is important for children who cannot escape from their state of poverty to come to the *dojo* and see the world outside. Since then, Fujii says that she has made it a point to use judo as a means for teaching what it means to be a member of society.

As the head coach, she often talks with the national team about the mind and soul. Fujii says that in Brazil, where judo was brought over by Japanese immigrants who came to the country 110 years ago, *judoka* are viewed with respect. She says she wants to carry on the spirit cultivated by their predecessors and that she wants to train who are not only strong, but who also excel in their humanity and make a positive contribution to society. At Tokyo 2020, the Brazilian team will be outstanding for its powerful combination of mind, technique and body, as well as deep humanity. ✨



Fujii sometimes teaches at "Reaction Institute," one of the social projects for teaching sports for free.



Rafael Silva, a *judoka* in the over 100 kg division who stands more than two meters tall, listens attentively to Fujii's advice.



At the 2019 World Judo Championships in Tokyo, Brazil took a bronze medal in the mixed team event. Fujii is at the far right in the front row.



FUJII Yuko

Having practiced judo from the age of five, she retired when she was 24. She moved to Brazil in 2013, where she was involved in technical instruction around the country. At the 2016 Rio Olympics, she helped the women's team win gold and bronze medals as a coach, and in 2018 was selected as the head coach for the men's national team.