

Menden Judoki

In Myanmar, 4,364 km away from Japan. 🇲🇲 vol.18

Photo 1: A Myanmar coach giving instruction before departure.
This was personally the scene I had most hoped to witness.



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~ Two and a Half Years Since Zero, and the Road Ahead ~

Introduction: From “That Day” to the Present

Hello everyone. I’m Yamato Hiranuma, head coach of the Myanmar National Judo Team.

In the summer of 2023, we laid down a few tatami mats in a small corner of Naypyidaw and started a children’s judo class. The very first group had only a few students. They didn’t own judo uniforms and didn’t even know the rules. I still vividly remember those early days, starting from the basics — like how to fall safely.

Now, a year and a half has passed. Those first students have grown in both skill and character, and our circle of judokas has expanded. In addition to the main dojo in Naypyidaw, we’ve established new locations in Yangon and Ayeyarwady, with approximately 80 children currently training. We are also planning to launch new dojos in Mandalay and Mawlamyine.

More students are now participating in tournaments, and we’ve achieved one of our early goals: conducting joint training sessions across dojos. Gradually but steadily, I feel that “the seeds of judo culture” are beginning to take root here in Myanmar — and those seeds are now showing signs of real promise.

This volume focuses on the Under-20 Judo Tournament held in Yangon in May 2025 and shares the developments of the past year and a half, as well as the new possibilities that are emerging. Compared to the same tournament a year ago — our dojo’s first — the growth of the children and the evolution of our environment are undeniable.

Photo 2: The very first junior judo class session
(Taken on August 31, 2023).



Chapter 1: Yangon U20 Tournament – A Proof of Growth

In May, young judokas from across Myanmar gathered at a sports hall in Yangon for the Under-20 Judo Tournament. Organized jointly by the Yangon regional government and the Myanmar Judo Federation, the tournament aimed to nurture the next generation of athletes. The number of participants and weight categories have increased year by year, clearly reflecting the expanding foundation of judo in the country.

From the Hiranuma Dojo, about 30 students from our three branches — Naypyidaw, Yangon, and Ayeyarwady — took part. Just a year and a half ago, we had only 8 competitors. Seeing all those children now standing proudly in matching uniforms brought me an overwhelming sense of joy and gratitude as a coach. (Reference: JUDOs Journal vol.10)

Photo 3: A photo from last year's tournament appearance.



Photo 4: Group photo of this year's participants and instructors from Hiranuma Dojo branches



One standout achievement was that a student from our Ayeyarwady branch won the “Best Judoka Award.” He is the son of the local dojo instructor and is known for his exceptional dedication to training. Interestingly, his father is also a former SEA Games gold medalist. Seeing this generational continuity — from parent to child — was profoundly moving for me.

This wasn’t just a single event or moment; it was a tangible reminder of how judo can become a lasting thread that connects lives, families, and communities. It underscored the importance of viewing sports not only as isolated events but as long-term “stories” built on continuity and purpose.

Other students, many of whom were competing for the first time, also did their best on the mat. Some were visibly nervous before their matches, while others stood firm and performed with confidence. Their efforts — winning by ippon, shedding tears in defeat, and being quietly supported by their fellow dojo mates — truly embodied the essence of judo: learning that transcends victory and loss.

Photo 5: The Ayeyarwady student who received the Best Judoka Award.



Chapter 2: From 5 to 80 – The Growth of Junior Judo

We officially launched our junior judo class at the end of August 2023. Back then, the idea was simple: “Even if just one child joins, let’s begin.” It was a modest first step.

(Reference: JUDOs Journal vol.4 – <https://judos.jp/myanmar4/>)



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2023年9月13日



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【Reference : JUDOs寄稿第4回 (vol.4) 】。 <https://judos.jp/myanmar4/>

From that humble beginning, the program has steadily grown over the past two and a half years through word of mouth and community referrals. In addition to our main dojo in Naypyidaw, we've expanded into Yangon and Ayeyarwady. Today, across the three locations, roughly 80 children are practicing judo.

However, due to the current economic situation in Myanmar, charging tuition fees is not a viable option. As a result, all of our coaching staff continue to work on a voluntary basis. While this spirit of dedication is inspiring, the reality is that we need financial support in order to sustain and grow these activities over the long term. This challenge remains one of our most pressing concerns.

To address this, we have started experimenting with small income-generating initiatives at our Naypyidaw dojo. For example, we've begun raising catfish and chickens using vacant land near the dojo. These are trial efforts — an exploration of how we might support our judo operations through alternative means. The difficulty of earning a living solely through judo is not unique to Myanmar; it is a reality shared in Japan and around the world.

Photo 7: Chickens being raised near the dojo.



Photo 8: Catfish being farmed as part of a self-sustaining initiative



That's why I believe in building a "judo-plus" model — a second pillar or complementary system that supports sustainability. If the true value of sports lies not only in competition but also in character development and social connection, then creating small, locally integrated economic models around the dojo is not a diversion from our mission — it's a reinforcement of it.

These efforts have only been possible thanks to the understanding of parents, the cooperation of local communities, and the dedication of our volunteer coaches. We are also deeply grateful to JUDOs and its "Judo Uniform Transportation Project", which has made an immeasurable contribution to the spread of judo in Myanmar.

There are many things I simply could not do on my own. But with the cooperation of people from both Japan and Myanmar, we've been able to make progress, step by step. In particular, Japanese businesspeople stationed in Myanmar have brought judo uniforms with them on return trips from Japan. Thanks to their generosity, many of our students now have access to proper equipment.

This kind of invisible yet essential support is what allows us to continue moving forward. I truly feel that judo is beginning to take root here in Myanmar — not just as a sport, but as a culture.

Of course, many challenges remain: securing enough uniforms and tatami mats, arranging transportation for students in remote areas, and building a stable coaching infrastructure. We grapple with these issues every day. Still, what gives me hope is that more and more children are gathering with a pure and simple wish:

"I want to do judo." "I want to get stronger." "I want to learn." I want our dojo to be more than just a place to practice sport. I want it to be a space where people connect through judo — where friendships are formed, and where opportunities are born. I believe that for these children, practicing judo today will one day lead to something deeply meaningful in their lives.

Photo 9: Transporting judo uniforms with the support of Japan-based expatriates.



Chapter 3: Joint Practice – A Dream Realized

From the beginning of our junior judo project, I always dreamed of creating an environment where children from different dojos could come together for joint practice — breaking down walls between locations and training as one.

This idea was rooted in my own experience. When I was younger, I trained at Yoshida Dojo, which at the time had multiple branches. Every Friday, we held joint training sessions at the main dojo, and once a year, we held a dojo-wide tournament called the “Dojo Cup.” These events left a deep impression on me.

Through those experiences, I learned that judo wasn’t just about getting stronger — it was also about building bonds. We formed real friendships through sweat and effort. That sense of shared purpose stayed with me, and I’ve long hoped to one day recreate something similar: a place where young judokas, regardless of where they trained, could feel part of the same family.

That dream finally came true this year. Students from Naypyidaw, Yangon, and Ayeyarwady gathered in Yangon for our first-ever joint practice session across the three branches. Children who normally trained in isolation came face-to-face, shared the tatami, and exchanged techniques through randori, groundwork, and uchikomi. It was a powerful sight — and a moment I’ll never forget.

Even if they speak different dialects or come from different regions, on the tatami, everyone is equal. Judo’s shared language of movement and respect naturally fosters connection. I saw not only technical growth during that session, but also the beginnings of friendships. Through judo, our dojos are not just growing in numbers — they are becoming true communities.

Photo 10: Teaching harai-goshi (sweeping hip throw) during the joint training session.



Looking ahead, I believe our activities will expand even further. The number of students will likely increase, but more importantly, I want to create an environment where judo becomes a long-term part of their lives. My goal is not just to have more children start judo — but to ensure they keep doing it. That continuity, I believe, is where real value is born.

Ultimately, I hope we can build bridges across borders. If Myanmar and Japan can connect through junior judo exchange programs, the benefits would be immense — not just for the students, but for both societies. Such opportunities could become invaluable sources of growth and mutual understanding.

Thanks to this joint practice, new support and ideas have started flowing in from judo supporters in Japan. People have reached out about providing judo uniforms and tatami mats, helping to organize tournaments, and even sending coaches abroad. The future we once imagined is gradually becoming real.

Having a direct connection with Japan — the home of judo — is a huge source of motivation for the children here. If this continues, I believe it's entirely possible to establish a grassroots international exchange model, such as a Japan–Myanmar Junior Judo Exchange Program.

Judo is a shared language — one that transcends national borders and builds human connection. That vision is now taking shape before our eyes.

Of course, given the current political and economic instability in Myanmar, there are many barriers to overcome. For now, these ideas remain in the planning stage. Still, having seen even a piece of the dream come true, I now believe more strongly than ever in the possibilities that lie ahead. I will continue to take steady steps forward, trusting in the vision we've built together.

Conclusion: When Points Become Lines

It has now been about two and a half years since I first took that small step in Naypyidaw. What began as a single “point” — one child, one tatami — has gradually grown into something larger, connecting into a visible “line” of progress.

Of course, the journey is far from over. In December of this year, we face one of our biggest challenges yet: the SEA Games. Both as the national team coach and as someone supporting grassroots judo, I know there are many issues still to tackle in the months ahead.

Even so, I will continue to walk this path of judo — not alone, but side by side with the children who stand in front of me each day. I want to face the future with them, step by step, with care and resolve. This experience has reminded me how important it is to build steadily, to accumulate efforts with consistency and heart.

Through all of our efforts — the early morning training, the financial struggles, the shared meals, the laughter and tears — I've come to see that these small moments are not isolated. They connect. They matter. They form a thread of meaning that runs deeper than medals or rankings.

As I look forward to what comes next, I hope that you will continue to follow our journey and lend your warm support.

【References】

- ▶ (JUDOs Report No.4) <https://judos.jp/myanmar4/>
- ▶ (JUDOs Report No.10) <https://judos.jp/myanmar10/>

Yamato Hiranuma

Born in 1997 in Hokkaido, Japan. In 2023, I became the head coach of the Myanmar Judo Federation National Team. I graduated from Chuo University with a degree in Accounting from the Faculty of Commerce and was a member of the university's Judo Club. After competing as a corporate judo athlete and being affiliated with the Sports Hinomaru Kids Association, I served as an assistant coach for the Canadian Judo Federation National Team before assuming his current position.