

Menden Judoki

In Myanmar, 4,364 km away from Japan. 🇲🇻 vol.19

Photo 1: Commemorative photo with tournament officials and Bago District representatives



Introduction – What an Unexpected Host City Taught Us	2
Chapter 1: Challenge in Bago – The Potential for Judo to Take Root in a New Land	2
Chapter 2: SEA Games Selection – Fierce Rivalries Born from Pride and Passion	4
Chapter 3: More Than Just a Tournament – Judo as a Bridge Between Communities and People	5
Chapter 4: Reflecting on My Role – Bearing the Weight Beyond “Head Coach”	6
Chapter 5: From Dots to Lines to Surfaces – The Phased Expansion of Judo’s Reach	8
Conclusion – Believing in the Future that Judo Can Shape	9

Introduction – What an Unexpected Host City Taught Us

In July 2025, a major turning point arrived for the judo community in Myanmar.

The annual State & Division Games, along with the second SEA Games national team selection tournament, had long been scheduled to take place in Naypyidaw. However, due to a large-scale earthquake in March, the event had to be urgently relocated to Bago District.

Up until now, judo tournaments in Myanmar were typically held only in major cities such as Yangon and Naypyidaw. For many people in more rural areas, judo remained unfamiliar—something distant and unrelated to their everyday lives. That changed when the tournament was held in Bago for the very first time. For many, this was their first real encounter with judo, and it sparked curiosity, interest, and even admiration.

In this report, I would like to share more than just the tournament results. I also reflect on the significance of this event, the current state of my role as the national team head coach, and where I believe the path of Myanmar judo may lead next.

Chapter 1: Challenge in Bago – The Potential for Judo to Take Root in a New Land

The decision to hold a judo tournament in Bago came in the wake of the large earthquake that struck Myanmar in March 2025. Traditionally, this national tournament was always held in the capital city of Naypyidaw. However, the damage to key facilities made it impossible, and we were forced to find an alternative venue.

One option that surfaced was Bago—a city that had never before hosted a judo tournament. When this decision was made, I had many concerns:

1. How would we transport judo uniforms and tatami mats?
2. Would there be sufficient transportation for athletes from various regions?
3. Were the facilities truly capable of supporting a tournament?
4. And most of all, what about local safety and security?

It was a series of firsts and unknowns. Yet once the tournament began, we were met with unexpected enthusiasm and hospitality. Local officials visited the venue in large numbers, and children watching judo for the first time had bright, excited expressions on their faces—something I will never forget.

One particularly memorable moment came when the governor of Bago expressed interest in expanding judo in the region and asked whether we could support them with tatami mats and uniforms. While no formal support structure has been established yet, the fact that such a request came from a top regional official gave me great hope for the future of judo here.

Another unforgettable moment was when a Bago native reached the final match. The local crowd erupted in cheers. It was the first time I had felt such passionate, unified support for judo in Myanmar. In that moment, judo transcended the competition—it became a source of regional pride.

While the overall skill level is still developing, the enthusiasm and engagement we witnessed hold immense value. If regional development continues and these athletes gain experience, I have no doubt that we'll see not only stronger competitors but also deeper cultural roots for judo.

This experience has convinced me that future tournaments should not be limited to Naypyidaw or Yangon. As long as we address safety and logistical issues, rotating through different regions will be invaluable for both judo development and regional revitalization.

The opportunity to “watch judo” is becoming the opportunity to “do judo”—and eventually, the opportunity to “support judo.” That cycle was sparked in Bago, and it reminded me again of the question: What is judo?

Judo is not just a sport. It is a culture that nurtures people and connects communities. This tournament allowed many people to experience its true potential.

Photo 2: Opening ceremony scene



Chapter 2: SEA Games Selection – Fierce Rivalries Born from Pride and Passion

Following the national tournament, the second SEA Games selection event took place. The goal was to determine Myanmar's official representatives for each weight category.

Tension peaked during the matches between the winners of the first selection round and their previous opponents. For the former, a second victory would clinch their spot on the team. For the latter, this was a do-or-die moment to avoid elimination. These were not just battles to win—they were matches no one could afford to lose.

Each athlete fought with everything they had, showcasing their months of preparation. The spectators, too, were pulled into the intensity of the competition. What we witnessed went far beyond simple wins and losses—it was about the growth of each athlete, their determination, and emotional resolve.

To be candid, the energy of this event didn't quite match the fervor we saw during the national tournament. However, this contrast made it even more clear to me what spectators are really looking for, and how we can better frame and present such events. As an organizer, it was a valuable learning experience.

For athletes, this was a high-stakes stage where a single win determined their fate.

For coaches and officials, it became a moment to rethink how we showcase judo—not just as a sport to compete in, but as one to experience and enjoy watching.

Through this event, we've taken another firm step toward the SEA Games in December. The individual and team-level challenges are clearer than ever, and we now have a roadmap for what must be done next.

Video 1: Performance at the opening ceremony



Chapter 3: More Than Just a Tournament – Judo as a Bridge Between Communities and People

What made this tournament in Bago truly meaningful was the opportunity to meet people who had never encountered judo before. Until now, judo in Myanmar was mostly confined to cities like Naypyidaw and Yangon. For many people in other areas, it was unfamiliar and inaccessible.

But the unexpected relocation of the tournament to Bago changed that. For the first time, judo existed there—not as something on a poster or in a video, but right in front of their eyes.

More local residents than we anticipated came to the venue. They watched the matches attentively, clapped, cheered, and even said things like, “I want my child to try this,” or “Where can we learn judo?” Hearing those comments made me realize how much potential this sport holds to inspire and unite.

This was not just about judo as a competition. What we saw were the emotional and educational values judo brings when people encounter it for the first time. It showed us the true meaning of jita-kyoei—mutual prosperity for self and others.

We even received comments from educators and government officials:

“Can judo be introduced into school programs?”

“Can this be expanded as a local youth activity?”

These suggestions may not become reality overnight, but the fact that such ideas surfaced at all shows that judo is beginning to take root here—as a culture.

The next step is clear. We must not allow this momentum to fade. Establishing a permanent dojo in Bago, launching regular classes, and staying involved with the region are essential if we want this to be more than just a one-time event.

Yes, developing judo as a sport is important. But more than that, judo as a place—where people connect, grow, and find common ground—may be its most enduring value.

This tournament taught me that. It was more than a competition; it was a lesson in how judo can change lives and communities.

Photo 3: Students of Hiranuma Dojo who participated in “Nage-no-kata” demonstration



Chapter 4: Reflecting on My Role – Bearing the Weight Beyond “Head Coach”

As of now, I serve as the head coach of the Myanmar National Judo Team. My primary mission is to strengthen the team and deliver results at international competitions. That much is clear on paper.

But in reality, my day-to-day work has far surpassed those original boundaries.

From promoting youth judo, establishing new dojos, arranging the delivery of judo uniforms and tatami, assisting with regional tournaments, to building partnerships with Japanese businesses for employment support—my role now includes far more than what “head coach” usually implies.

In an ideal system, each of these areas would have its own dedicated person. I would focus solely on training athletes, developing tactics, and supporting mental performance.

But here in Myanmar, the foundation is still fragile. Simply focusing on top athletes isn’t enough to build long-term strength. If there’s no youth program, we have no future athletes. If there’s no equipment, there’s no training. If local support is missing, the program can’t survive.

That’s why I had to act—not just as a coach, but as a judoka who believes in building judo’s future in this country.

That said, there have been moments where I've felt overwhelmed by the sheer number of roles I've taken on. Trying to do everything can spread your energy thin. It can even distract from the very goals you're trying to reach.

If I'm feeling exhausted or conflicted, that may be a signal I'm doing too much.

Judo teaches us seiryoku zenyo—to use energy in the most efficient and effective way. This applies not just to techniques, but also to leadership, time, and people.

Going forward, I believe I need to reflect on what only I can do, what I should do, and what I can delegate. There's a limit to what one person can build alone. That's why I must trust others, build a team, and prepare to pass the torch to the next generation.

Behind the title “head coach” lies a web of responsibilities. I'm now asking myself how best to carry them—and how to let go when the time comes.

Photo 4: Group photo of Hiranuma Dojo students from different branches



Photo 5: Donated judogi supported by JUDO's organization



Chapter 5: From Dots to Lines to Surfaces – The Phased Expansion of Judo’s Reach

The development of judo always starts with a single “dot.”

A dojo. A student. A tournament.

Each may seem small and isolated at first, but within them lies the seed of something much larger.

In 2023, we laid down tatami in a small corner of Naypyidaw and launched a youth judo class. That first “dot”—with just a few children and no clear roadmap—has since expanded to Yangon, Ayeyarwady, and now Bago. Eventually, dots become lines.

Communication between dojos improves. Joint training becomes possible. We begin to share goals, challenges, and knowledge across regions. Over the last one to two years, we’ve truly felt this transition from isolated points to meaningful connections.

But now, I am aiming for something greater—the transformation from lines into “surfaces.”

In this stage, judo is no longer just a sport. It becomes a social presence—embedded in culture, education, and even diplomacy. Children casually join judo through school.

Workplace values shaped by judo—respect, patience, perseverance—find their way into local companies. Cross-cultural understanding deepens through judo-led exchange programs.

Education. Economy. International relations.

Judo can connect them all, silently but powerfully. That is what I envision as the “surface” stage.

This is not just a dream. The job-placement partnership we’ve begun with Japanese companies like ALSOK Myanmar is already taking shape. The relationship with Bago’s administration is another early indicator.

Of course, many challenges remain—lack of systems, funding, manpower. But as long as we continue planting dots and drawing lines, I believe the surface will eventually emerge.

I will keep going. Quietly, steadily, and with belief in the possibilities that lie ahead.

Conclusion – Believing in the Future that Judo Can Shape

It’s hard to believe that my journey through judo in Myanmar is now entering its third year.

What began as a small “dot” has connected people, places, and dreams—forming lines. Now, those lines are beginning to widen into a surface.

This year’s tournament in Bago, and the SEA Games selection, were milestones in that journey.

Born from the necessity of an earthquake, this unexpected opportunity turned into a deeply meaningful event. It reminded me—and many others—of judo’s potential to nurture people, bind communities, and inspire.

At the same time, this chapter prompted me to reevaluate my own role. While my title may be “head coach,” I’ve stepped into many more arenas: promoting, organizing, negotiating, educating. And with that has come both fulfillment and fatigue.

Still, I believe there is meaning in continuing.

Because judo is more than competition. It is a way of life—a way to grow alongside others.

I don’t know how far I’ll be able to go, or what I’ll ultimately achieve.

But I do know that each dot, each connection, and each step forward carries hope.

And with that hope, I will once again step onto the tatami—and take the next action.

Until the day I leave Myanmar, I will walk this path with the spirit of seiryoku zenyo and jita kyoei, connecting people, communities, and nations through judo.

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.