

～めんでん¹柔道記～4,364km 離れた ミャンマーの地でMMvol.2 3～

Photograph 1. A moment welcoming the New Year of 2025.



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¹ 漢字表記でミャンマーを指す。

Introduction

This article marks the final chapter of Menden Judo Ki . which I have been writing over the course of three years. On the day I left for Myanmar in 2023, I made a firm resolution in my heart:

“One day, I will leave Myanmar. Until that day comes, I will dedicate myself to the promotion and development of judo in Myanmar.”

Myanmar is a country where, depending on the situation, it would not be surprising to suddenly be told, “Japanese nationals are advised to evacuate and return home.” In addition, there was always the possibility that my work itself could abruptly become impossible to continue.

I was not sent by any organization such as the Kodokan or JICA. I came without any clear institutional backing or affiliation.

As an individual—Yamato Hiranuma—I signed a direct contract with the Ministry of Sports of Myanmar and stood on this land.

Because of this, I always carried the awareness that “I could be forced to leave at any time.” However, at that time, I could not specifically imagine how that “someday” would actually arrive.

Three years have passed since then.

During my time in Myanmar, while judo brought me countless encounters and moments of joy, I also faced difficulties far greater than I had imagined. Even so, the fact that I was able to continue facing judo until the very end remains, even now, a source of pride and an irreplaceable asset in my life.

In this final chapter, rather than organizing results or achievements, I would like to write about what I felt during the process, what supported me, and what has remained in my heart.

The moments that made me happy.

The moments that were painful.

And the moments that were joyful.

I quietly look back on my time at the judo frontlines in Myanmar —both as a coach and as a human being.

Chapter 1: Moments That Made Me Happy

As mentioned in my previous reports, for the first time in the history of Myanmar judo, we were able to win a medal in a team competition.

After the matches ended, the athletes stepped onto the podium. They took out their smartphones and began taking commemorative photos of one another. I watched this scene from a slight distance.

I was not the one standing there.

It was the athletes—those who had spent three years sweating on the tatami, enduring pain, hardship, defeat, frustration, and inner conflict, yet continued to rise again and again. They had earned that moment through their own efforts.

Watching them from a distance, I felt from the bottom of my heart,

“I’m truly glad.”

“We did everything we could.”

To be honest, as an athlete myself, I don’t think I ever reached a point where I could truly say, “I gave it my all.” Yet in that moment, for the first time in my life, I may have felt that sense of fulfillment.

Having worked as a coach in Japan, Canada, and Myanmar, I came to understand—perhaps for the first time—the joy of seeing athletes stand at the forefront.

I felt similar happiness in other moments as well.

Photograph 2: The medal ceremony at the 2025 SEA Games in Thailand



At the Japan Cup, co-hosted by the Embassy of Japan in Myanmar and Hiranuma Dojo, there was a moment when a young girl committed fully to her technique and threw her opponent decisively. A photographer captured that exact instant, and the photo was later shared at a post-event gathering.

Despite being surrounded by many people, I felt tears welling up. It wasn't because she won, but because that single moment seemed to contain the entire process leading up to it.

Photograph 3: The moment a student from Hiranuma Dojo executes a throw at the Japan Cup.



During a training camp in Yangon, the athletes 'accommodation had no air conditioning. During the hottest part of the day, the boys gathered in my room, which had air conditioning, and before long, we were all sleeping together on the floor.

At that time, I was writing *Menden Judo ki*. When I looked up and saw that scene before me, an indescribable feeling welled up in my chest. I was reminded of my own childhood, when I too had been cared for by my teachers in much the same way.

Photograph 4:
Students sleeping together in my room.



Watching ordinary training sessions—nothing special, nothing extraordinary—also brought me happiness. Standing at the edge of the tatami, quietly watching the boys devote themselves to practice.

Those unremarkable moments may, in fact, have been the happiest of all.

Photograph 5: Young judo students lined up during practice.



Chapter 2: Moments That Were Painful

Looking back, the painful moments were not defined by a single event, but rather by many events overlapping and quietly accumulating over time.

What I write here is not meant to criticize anyone, but simply to record the facts of what occurred at one site, and my personal feelings at that time.

One major event was the magnitude 7.7 earthquake that struck near Mandalay in central Myanmar on March 28, 2025. According to ASEAN data released on April 22, 2025, approximately 3,800 people were killed, 5,100 were injured, 116 were missing, and around 857,000 people were affected across urban and rural areas.

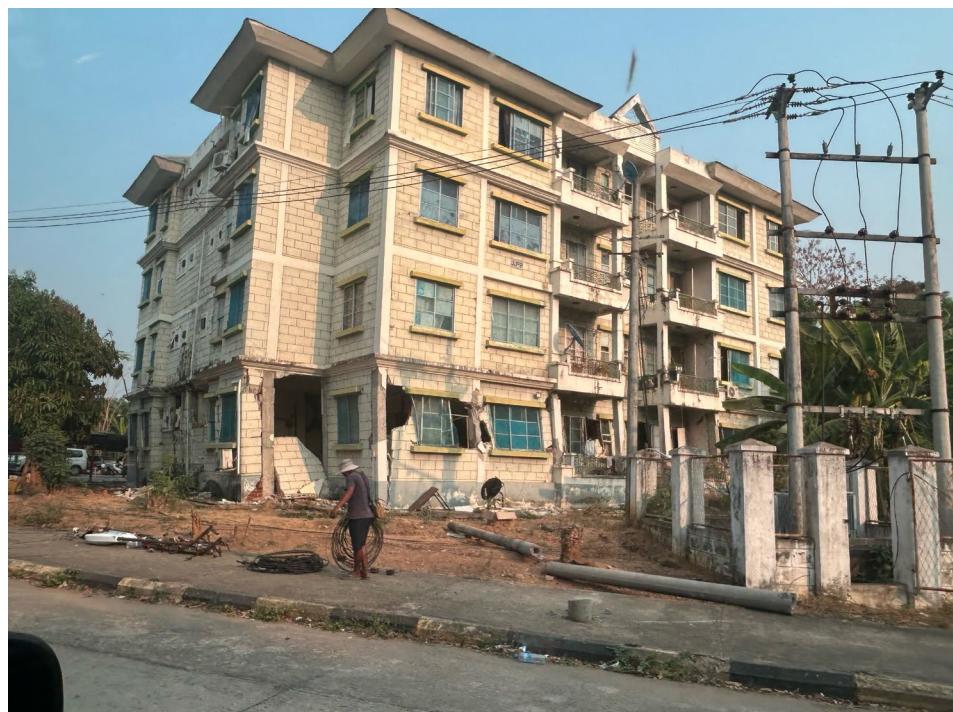
Naypyidaw, where I lived, is located in a neighboring region, and the damage there was severe. A four-story government housing complex just two or three minutes away by motorcycle suffered a “pancake collapse,” where the first floor was completely crushed and the upper floors fell straight down, resulting in many deaths.

For some time after the disaster, the smell of decomposing bodies—those we could not help even if we wanted to—hung heavily in the air.

Water and electricity were restored about a month after the earthquake. Life and work were far from easy.

Still, I was not enduring that time alone. I shared the same environment and the same anxieties as the people of Myanmar, overcoming the situation together. Though our nationalities differed, we stood on the same ground when it came to figuring out how to get through the present.

Photograph 6: A government housing complex on the verge of collapse after the major earthquake.



At the same time, I became the only Japanese person remaining in Naypyidaw. Talking to someone would not have solved anything, but there were moments when an inexpressible loneliness quietly crept in.

In the midst of this, one day, a unilateral decision to replace the head coach was suddenly raised. Without proper explanation or discussion, I was handed a letter just as I was about to begin weight training at the gym.

I felt that matters were being driven by power dynamics outside the sport and behind-the-scenes maneuvering. Unable to remain calm, I remember clearly how my anger suddenly boiled over.

Discussions about contract renewal were minimal and largely one-sided. The original contract was reused until the end, with detailed conditions determined according to Myanmar's convenience.

There were also frequent overreaches that showed little respect for the position of national team head coach—training plans changed unilaterally, selection criteria altered on the spot, and even interference in team lineups.

The way things ended was far from ideal. Relationships I had trusted collapsed, and there were moments that felt like a betrayal. Money I had personally advanced to purchase black belts for athletes was never returned by the person entrusted with exchanging it.

Individually, these may seem like small incidents. But as they accumulated, the burden on my mind and body steadily increased.

Even so, I never once felt like stepping away from judo or doubting its value. When standing on the tatami, unnecessary thoughts faded away. Regardless of position or circumstance, what needed to be done became clear.

Throughout these three years, in every situation, what supported me and remained my core was undoubtedly judo.

Chapter 3: Moments That Were Fun

Even so—just as vividly as the painful memories, or perhaps even more so—I clearly remember moments that were genuinely fun.

One of those was drinking gatherings with the people of Myanmar. In Myanmar, there is a custom where the person whose birthday it is treats everyone.

On my birthday, nearly fifty people gathered, and we enjoyed a lively hot pot meal together. There was nothing particularly special planned. We simply shared the same pot, drank, laughed, and talked about trivial things.

In that space, the feeling that “it’s okay for me to be here” came naturally—and that meant more to me than anything else.

Photograph 7: A group photo taken after the hot pot party held for my birthday.



Because of this work, I met people I never would have otherwise, and gained knowledge and experiences I could not have obtained elsewhere.

Honestly, if I had been the same age in Japan, I might not have been treated with such respect by so many people. That was not because of my personal achievements, but because of the title “National Team Head Coach.” That title opened doors—not only in Myanmar, but in other countries as well.

However, it was not just the title protecting me. By standing on the ground, speaking, acting, and shaping things through judo as a common language, connections naturally led to new people and new opportunities.

What I gained over these three years was not just medals or results, but relationships, cross-cultural understanding, and a sense of how I should conduct myself in different positions.

Looking back, simply having been able to experience and enjoy a world I never would have touched otherwise feels like the greatest treasure of all.

Conclusion

Reflecting on my three years in Myanmar, what remains cannot be described by simple words like success or failure. Joy, pain, and fun are all inseparably intertwined, shaping who I am today.

When leaving Myanmar, I asked myself, “Is there anything left undone?”

Honestly, it wasn’t perfect. Still, I feel that I faced the role I was given and walked with judo until the very end. Judo was never just about winning or losing for me. It connected people, transcended

cultures, and at times supported me personally. I believe I was reminded of its true value once again in Myanmar.

I do not yet know where I will be or what I will be doing in the future. But one thing is certain: wherever I am, in whatever form, I want to continue judo.

“Someday I will leave Myanmar. Until then, I will work for the promotion and development of Myanmar judo.”

At last, I am able to bring closure to the words I wrote three years ago.

If this record can offer even a small reference or encouragement to those who have been involved in Myanmar judo, or to anyone preparing to challenge themselves in a foreign land, I would be deeply grateful.

With heartfelt thanks to everyone who supported me.

Kyay zu tin ba de !

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