

Club Profile: Barstow Judo

Barstow, California

All it took was one ippon and he was hooked.

“I was a Marine stationed in Japan in 1955,” said Ernie Smith, founder and head instructor of the Barstow Judo Club. “My camp was near the base of Mt. Fuji.” A Japanese instructor was brought on base to teach judo.

“The first time I unconsciously executed an ippon throw, I was hooked. I have been involved with Judo ever since,” Smith said, now an 8th Dan.

“Hooked” big time. Back and forth between various military bases in the States (Pendleton, Lejeune, El Toro), Japan and Vietnam, Smith found dojos nearly everywhere he went, competing, training and coaching all along the way ... until he reached Barstow and the Marine Corps Logistics Base in 1971, his second time there. “They didn’t have a club and I wanted to continue to practice judo,” Smith said. “I formed a club so that I’d have someone to work out with.”

Smith went on to win the All Marine Grand Championship title in 1974, which means that he not only won his weight division, under 205 lbs., but that he also defeated the winners of all the other weight divisions.

Eventually, Smith started teaching the kids of military personnel. All his training and coaching and expertise went to those young students, many of whom went on to fight on national and international teams. Among those “kids” were Delores Brodie, Barbara Cabrera, Helena Ybarra, Belinda Binkley, Chuck Jefferson and Lafo Apineru.

Meanwhile, Smith retired from the Marines in 1975 as a master sergeant. He’d been on the Barstow police reserves and became a regular officer on the force in 1979. When the base finally removed the building where the club trained, the dojo moved to a city park and recreation center where it is now.

Smith said he has a relatively small club, and yet he puts out some tough young competitors who regularly medal at junior national events. Barstow Judo has developed over 60 junior and senior national champions since 1973. “Our current Jr. National Champions include Isaiah Ramirez, Elizabeth Wright, Adam Valdez, John Wright and William Wright.” Nine-year-old Ramirez took gold in four major junior events last year, including USA Judo’s Junior Olympics, and he placed in all four this year, including gold at two.

This is how it works. Smith was a physical fitness instructor for the Marines. When boys and girls in his club decide to compete at the national level, he puts them a special training program, six days a week, twice a day. “They also go to many, many

tournaments, at least 30 tournaments a year.” They see techniques at tournaments that become their own. “They adopt it, add it to their repertoire,” Smith said.

Why they win isn’t always because of technique, Smith said. “It’s because they were in better condition and stronger than the other kids they fought.”

In addition to being a coach, Smith is a national level referee and officiates at numerous tournaments a year. The Pacific Southwest Judo Association in November recognized Smith with their prestigious Ambassador of Judo award, presented to only about a dozen people since the organization was founded in the early 1960s.