

Profile: Eiko Shepherd to Lead Kata Clinic at Senior Nationals

Authority on Kata Didn't Always Love the Forms

Eiko Saito Shepherd understands completely -- there was a time when she didn't want to do kata either.

In fact, she disliked the prospect of studying kata so much that when she was told at the Kodokan that she would be required to demonstrate the forms to receive a black belt, she nearly declined. "I told the Kodokan that if I have to practice kata, I do not want to take the test!" she recalled. "All I wanted to do was randori and shiai!"

But at the Kodokan, there was no room for leniency, and Shepherd soon agreed. Not only did she train in kata and pass the test for Shodan, she went on to become an leading authority on kata. She is now a 7th dan, the vice-chairman of USA Judo's committee on kata and the chairman of the US Judo Federation's kata committee. She frequently conducts clinics on kata and will be leading one in conjunction with the upcoming Senior National Championships in Irving, TX, next Friday, April 20. For more on that, go to [KATA CLINIC](#). The seminar will include testing for certification as a national-level kata judge.

Kata was not on Shepherd's mind as young girl in Japan. She was focused on her older brother, Chu, a very successful young shiai competitor who was nine years her senior.

She followed Chu to the local dojo each evening, said Shepherd, who started judo at the age of 11. "He was my idol. I wanted to be like him. He was a very good competitor."

After a couple years, Shepherd began practicing at the Kodokan. "There I continued training in shiai. I loved shiai!"

A lot of people were loving shiai around the world and judo was to be introduced as an official Olympic sport at the Games in 1964 in Tokyo. The Kodokan wanted to be ready for the bus loads of people and competitors, including women, who would arrive at the dojo of judo's founder, Jigoro Kano, wanting to test their own skill. Kodokan officials decided that Eiko would be ready to spar with female fighters who wanted the quintessential experience of sparring at the Kodokan. First, however, she would need to earn her black belt. She was only a purple belt then and to accelerate her training she was granted special permission to train in the men's dojo, one of the earliest exceptions to the separation of men and women on those mats.

“I was honored by being asked to represent the Kodokan in the women’s division. My job would be to randori with any foreign female judoka,” Shepherd said. “I had to win. I was representing Judo, my country’s national sport. To prepare me for this challenge, I was given special permission to train in the men’s dojo. The men’s practice was the best and the training was grueling but I loved every bit of it.”

She was also told that to earn her black belt she would need to study kata – not what she wanted to do. “So I learned Ju no Kata, Nage no kata, and Goshin-ho kata. I did those but I did not have any heart in it. After practicing they gave me the test. I passed.”

Shepherd went on, though, to attend kata seminars conducted by famous shiai champions, fighters, such as Kotani Sensei, Mifune Sensei, Otaki Sensei and Takada Sensei. “After I was listening to their instruction I realized that my idea of kata was entirely wrong,” she said.

In kata, she practiced her favorite throw, morote seoi nage both right and left. Then in competition, without thinking, she found herself throwing from both sides. “I shocked myself, too! I was throwing the boys and men with this right side, left side combination from the nage no kata.”

Her interest peaked and she began attending many more seminars. Kata broadened her shiai and made it stronger.

In 1969 Shepherd came to the United States to compete and teach. She made the States her home and raised a family. Kata became an even bigger part of her life.

Included in the clinic that Shepherd will lead at the Senior Nationals will be a section on Katame no Kata, forms of grappling, followed by training and examination for certification of national kata judges.

Shepherd noted that good shiai referees typically come from shiai competition. “They know what to look for. And kata judges are the same way ... The knowledge they gain through practice allows them to be good judges.”

“My goal,” Shepherd said, “is to teach the katas properly and encourage all judges to practice themselves. Remember Dr. Kano said, ‘Practice Kata!’”