

## Referee Profile: Dr. Gary Berliner

Gary Berliner got the call on Friday to be in Paris on Monday.

He was in medical residency in Atlanta at the time but didn't hesitate to make the trip. The call was from then USA Judo President Frank Fullerton telling Berliner that he'd be taking the referee exam for his International A-level license.

"Testing in Paris at the Tournoi de Paris, the toughest tournament in the world, was daunting," said Berliner, who was selected there to officiate the gold-medal match between two French fighters for a berth on their Olympic team. "I asserted myself on a boundary call, to declare Ippon for the underdog. It was the right call, replayed on camera a dozen times, before a crowd of 10,000 in the old Coubertin Stadium. This clinched my exam."

For Berliner, earning his A-Level license was another beginning on a journey that's a long way from over, a journey that he hopes will lead to a position officiating at the Olympics in Rio de Janeiro in 2016. "I have been refereeing internationally 26 years, and would like to complete 30 years on the International A circuit with a chance at working the conventional Olympic Games in Rio." After that, Berliner said, he'd like to serve on the U.S. or Pan American Referee Commissions.

Berliner began refereeing when he was 16 in Hawaii – "it was expected as one of the criteria for obtaining shodan rank." He quickly became a regional referee, competing consistently along the way, learning from leaders in the sport like George Uchida and emulating styles of IJF-A referees like Tim Dalton, Tom Seabasty, Joon Chi, Martin Bregman and Mel Appelbaum. Frequently, Berliner said, he would fight one day in a tournament and officiate final rounds the next.

The same year that he passed the A-Level exam in Paris, Berliner worked the '96 Olympic Games in Atlanta as a technical official, then went on to a number of international A-level and paralympic events, including the '99 Pan American Games in Winnipeg and the '99 Junior World Championships in Tunisia. "I also worked the 1998 Pan Am Blind Championships, and was invited to work the 1999 Blind World Games in Madrid," where he was awarded his International Blind Sports Federation (IBSA) A-level license.

In 2001, Berliner refereed at the Senior World Championships in Munich. "On the last day, I was given the center for the last gold medal match of the tournament. It was a highlight of my refereeing career. That night in the 1972 Olympic Stadium's Crystal Palace I sang with a live oom-pah band for my collected colleagues from around the world."

He has now worked the Senior World Championships once, the Blind World Championships five times, the 2004 Paralympics in Athens, the 2008 Paralympics in Beijing. He's officiated at Pan American Games twice, the Panamerican Judo Union Championships twice, the four Grand Slams (Paris, Moscow, Rio de Janeiro and Tokyo) a combined dozen times, dozens of World Cups and Grand Prix. Berliner said he averages about six international and as many as 20 domestic tournaments a year. And when he's not working on the mat, he's acting as a jurist or head referee, as he did at the recent Senior National Championships in Irving, TX.

"My career has been a journey, not a *fait accompli*, with lots of disappointments and bumps along with the great successes," he said. Berliner shared a few more highlights:

- Taking the center position in Moscow for the gold medal between France and Russia with Vladimir Putin in the audience – "Good thing Russia won."
- Officiating in the Paralympic gold medal men's heavy weight final in Beijing when the totally blind (B1) Brazilian athlete fulfilled his Olympic dream, beating the former Olympic medalist, all featured in the climactic scene of the must-see movie "B1."
- Being "treated like a prince in Tbilisi," calling some of the most dynamic judo in the world between Georgia and Japan before a dour audience of 8,000 central Asian grapplers.
- "Seeing my colleagues from around the world again and again in critical meets, and each of us helping the others to arrive at the right decision."

Asked why he referees, Berliner pointed to the celebrated sensei Jimmy Takemori, four of whose students became level-A referees. The qualities of fairness and duty were essential to Takemori. "As a former international fighter and medalist with 15 years on the international circuit, I could appreciate fair, impartial and competent referees. As a fighter, I only ever wanted an even chance at beating my opponent. As a referee I try to ensure that even chance, justice and respect for the players and my sport, judo."

*Story by Ernest Pund*