

## **Chicago's Menomonee Judo builds history with "blood, sweat and tears."**

You feel the history the moment you walk through the dojo doors, said Brett Wolf, head instructor of Menomonee Judo Club in Chicago.

There definitely are more modern accommodations than the Old Town Triangle building near North and Wells on the city's Northside, Wolf said. But club members love the feel of its early stomping grounds. In 2004, when many programs offered by the overarching Menomonee Club for Boys and Girls moved to the world-class Drucker Center, a state of the art multi-purpose sports facility, judokas asked that their classes stay put in the Old Town, while adding three new classes at the Drucker.

Literally thousands of judokas have passed through those doors over the years, "leaving their blood, sweat and tears" – mostly sweat, Wolf said. Some of that history comes from the club's founder, Sensei Henry Okamura Sr., a legendary judo figure not only in Chicago but worldwide, who started the club 30 years ago.

Sensei Okamura ran several dojos throughout the greater Chicago area from the 1940's through the 1990's. In addition to Menomonee, he headed the judo clubs at the New City YMCA, Lawson YMCA, and Wright College among others. Over the years many of Chicago's prominent judokas were introduced to the sport by Sensei Okamura. Wolf began taking Judo from Sensei Okamura at Lawson YMCA in 1979.

The dojo's home since the very beginning has been the cozy Old Town Triangle building. Of course, it's not all about history. Many people will recognize the club's name for some of its current champions, namely 17-year-old Max Schneider, a rising star who recently took gold at the Youth Olympics in Singapore. Other top Menomonee competitors include two time Junior Pan Am team member Andrew Varga, 16, Junior World Team member and Junior Pan Am silver medalist Lydia Au, 17, and former Junior National champions Max Bermont, 15, and Ben Feiger, 16.

The club now has about 130 active judo players and since the summer of 1997 Menomonee has earned more than 150 national and international medals.

In addition to producing top athletes, Menomonee is home to one of the broadest, busiest paralympic programs for judokas with disabilities in the country. The club partnered with World Sport Chicago and the Chicago Park District to run seven programs specifically geared towards athletes with some type of visual, physical or intellectual disability.

Those seven programs are in the process of becoming USA Judo certified clubs, Wolf said. They count 150 active judokas with various disabilities, Wolf said. Many of Menomonee's more advanced students help teach and mentor these

classes. “They exemplify the true meaning of ‘Mutual Welfare and Benefit,’” a guiding tenet of judo’s founder, Jigoro Kano, he said.

The Menomonee Judo Club is part of the greater Menomonee Club for Boys and Girls, a non-profit established in 1946 to provide sports and other activities for urban kids on Chicago’s north side.

For more information on Menomonee Judo, click [HERE](#) for Menomonee Judo’s Facebook page.