

Coach, I Want To Be A Champion!

by Gerald Lafon

Vice Chairman, USJA Coach Education Committee

Those words can be music to my ears or they can be the prelude to another disappointment. Claiming to want to be a champion is the easy part. Understanding what is actually required to be a champion requires more work. Finally, the will to do what is necessary to become a champion is the greatest stumbling block.

Wanting to be a champion, wanting to excel at anything, whether it is in the arts, in education, in business or in sports requires the same basic ingredients; an aptitude for the subject, a love for the subject, a strong work ethic, and a willingness to sacrifice in order to achieve excellence.

“Excellence can be attained if you care more than others think is wise, risk more than others think is safe, dream more than others think is practical, and expect more than others think is possible.”

It is rare when a participant in sport knows from the onset that he wants to be a champion. Usually, he stumbles upon the notion of being a champion after years of playing a sport or has it thrust upon him by parents, coaches and sports directors who recognize his potential. In the end, it doesn't matter how the decision came about because the requirements of being a champion will remain the same.

Although athletes at the highest level of competition are remaining in their sport of choice until an older age, the window of opportunity in sports is still small compared to other endeavors we may undertake in life. To make the most of that small window of opportunity, especially in a Judo poor country like the United States, adherence to the basic elements listed below will go a long way toward helping you reach the goal of being a champion.

Sacrifices

What you are willing to sacrifice may ultimately be the deciding factor in achieving your competitive goal. Are you willing to change clubs or move out-of-state to provide yourself with a better training environment? Are you willing to be home schooled while still in your teens or to delay your college education for a few years? Are you prepared to max out your credit card if need be? Will you train while your friends party, celebrate or go on vacation? Will you give up friends or perhaps jeopardize a steady relationship to pursue your passion? These are just a few of the sacrifices you may have to make if you want to reach your goal.

“If you’re going to be a champion, you must be willing to pay a greater price than your opponent.” Bud Wilkinson, University of Oklahoma Football Coach

Once you understand the sacrifices necessary to become a champion, you are ready to plan for your success.

Goal Setting and Planning

The first order of business is knowing where you want to go, when you want to get there, and how you plan on getting there. While goal setting and planning in vague and general terms can certainly be implemented for athletes as young as 6-10 years old, the type of goal setting and planning we will address is more appropriate for the player with a substantial background in competition and a level of maturity that make it possible to achieve his goal within 4-8 years. To make more sense of the planning involved, let's assume we have a 14-year old competitor who has repeatedly placed at the junior national level but doesn't dominate the division. This player wants to be an Olympian.

"The reason most people never reach their goals is that they don't define them, or ever seriously consider them as believable or achievable. Winners can tell you where they are going, what they plan to do along the way, and who will be sharing the adventure with them." Denis Waitley, author of *The Psychology of Winning*

The Olympic cycle is a four-year cycle, with two world championships and four national championships contained within. This cycle, the Olympic quadrennium, should form the basis for your plan. The first decision is whether the goal is to make the 2008 or 2012 Olympic team. Frankly, when you take into consideration the qualifying standards for the Olympic Games which involve a quota system based on points earned in international competition, making the 2012 team is more reasonable than making the 2008 team. So now we have to create a 7-year plan that will culminate with an Olympic berth in 2012. The levels of performance might look something like this:

- 2005 Top 3 at junior nationals
- 2006 Participates in first senior nationals, junior national champion, participates in some junior international events
- 2007 Top 5 at senior nationals, junior national champion, places in some junior international events
- 2008 Top 3 at senior nationals, participates in some senior international events and U.S. Olympic Trials
- 2009 Top 3 at senior nationals, junior world championships participant, places in some senior international events
- 2010 Senior national champion, #1 ranked U.S. athlete in the division
- 2011 World championships participant
- 2012 Olympic team berth winner

Of course, the above is just one of many scenarios. For some precocious 14-year-old phenom, 2008 might be a reasonable long shot. For others, 2012 might be too soon. At any rate, once you have established a timeframe for your performance objectives, plan for achieving them. Set up short-term goals that will lead to your long-term goal. Set goals for camps and tournaments to attend, training volume and intensity, physical fitness, technical acquisition, mental skill training, rest and recuperation modalities, cross-training, etc.

Warning! Be careful when emulating the training of champions. How a seasoned, 25-year-old world champion trains should not entirely form the basis for how you train as a 13-year-old junior player or as an 18-year-old national level player. All athletic training should be progressive and should be governed by the principles of individuality and overload, which can be summed up by different strokes for different folks. For example, don't fall into the trap of going to Europe or Japan to train before you are ready to benefit from such an exposure. Exhaust your domestic resources before you spend a fortune going overseas. When you do go overseas, make sure that it is somewhere that is appropriate for your level of skill, training and fitness. Along the same lines, don't get caught up in the notion that if something is good, more of it is better. If one and one-half hour of randori is good for you, two hours may not be better. In fact, it may be detrimental to your progress. You will understand these issues better when you become a student of the game.

Student of the Game

While you will undoubtedly receive guidance and advice, and learn from many sources, it is important that you become a student of the game (Judo) and of the field (athletic performance) in your own right. Read as much as you can on all the subjects that will affect your competitive career. Among many topics, this would include literature on athletic training methods, nutrition, sports medicine, and sports psychology. Biographies of champions or coaches should also be part of your research. Find out what other champions have had to do in order to accomplish their goals, or what made them continue after setbacks. Learn about the function and roles of top-level coaches. Understand what drives them to drive you to achieve your goals. There is no need to reinvent the wheel, so learn from their mistakes.

Supplement your readings with audio-visual materials. Watch the very best model of Judo. That's competition at the Olympics and World Championships. Watch yourself on videotape. Compare yourself with the players at the world level. What performance traits do they have that you lack? Do you look like them or perform like them? Are they doing a whole range of techniques you are not even familiar with?

There is much technical and training information in other sports that is also very pertinent to Judo. Watch drill training for wrestlers. Find out how Olympic weightlifters perform their lifts since Olympic weightlifting should form a large part of your physical preparation. Learn more about plyometric, flexibility and agility training. To help control monotony, find different exercises, drills and ways to accomplish the same goals. And if you won't or can't cross-train in other combative sports like wrestling or Brazilian jiu-jitsu, at least watch and analyze their bodies of techniques so it won't come as a complete shock when you get slammed with a technique you have not seen in traditional Judo.

Becoming an Athlete

Once you make the decision to become an Olympian, you must transform yourself from mere judoplayer to Judo athlete. Being a Judo athlete is no longer a hobby; it's a job. I can't tell you how many American judo players think they can do well internationally merely by doing Judo two to three times a week, hopping from one club to another, with little coaching, and minimal supplementary training other than perhaps a little running on the side to maintain weight. I call these players Judo tourists. They talk a good story and go through some of the motions, but clearly they don't train, think or act as successful athletes do. They simply haven't become students of the game or the field.

All athletic performance, regardless of the sport, will be ruled by the technical, psychological and physiological demands of the sport. However, the athletic background you bring with you to the sport of Judo might also affect your potential in Judo. It's the old dispute pitting proponents of early specialization vs. proponents of late specialization. I must admit that, considering the athletic demands of the sport, and the conditions of the sport within the United States, that I favor a more general athletic development with late specialization. If everything else is equal, I believe that the player with the more varied athletic background will beat a player who has only played Judo. Having said that, let's now focus on the technical, psychological and physiological demands of the sport.

Technical development

Because of our small numbers of players and our lack of depth all across the board, our national technical development as a general rule has suffered. The bottom line is that in the United States you can win national junior championship titles with one throw, usually a dropping shoulder throw. Our over-reliance on a tiny number of techniques, and our desire at the local club level for the "short-term, immediate gratification" development program at the expense of a more fruitful "long-term, delayed gratification" development program set us up for failure in the senior international arena. Thus, here are my recommendations for long-term success, which is the only success that really matters:

1. Develop as large an inventory of skills in several directions as possible before specializing in a smaller number of effective tournament skills. Since there is but a limited amount of training time on the mat, supplement your learning by watching videotapes to discover techniques that are not being taught to you in your club.
2. Defer your study of what I call "flop and drop" throws until you have a good command of the tachi waza (standing) throws. The early study and use of "flop and drop" throws like dropping shoulder throw, kata guruma and most sutemi (sacrifice) throws make it more difficult to develop decent tachi waza skills.
3. Force yourself to vary the skills in practice and competition, or to handicap your tournament performance by putting limits on what you can or can't use, even if it means the risk of losing a match here and there. Remember that most tournaments should be treated as nothing more than another workout to gauge your progress. It is far better to miss out on an inconsequential trophy than to have your technical development stagnate due to technical over-reliance.
4. Judo performance includes nage waza and ne waza. Don't neglect either one in training or in competition. Why players go into battle armed with fewer weapons than the opponent baffles me.
5. Don't wait until you are thirteen to learn chokes and seventeen to learn armbars. Other countries don't have those arbitrary limitations.
6. Train the way you are expected to compete. This is almost always not the case in your average Judo club, and requires a serious change of attitude to overcome.
7. Don't put up with training that makes little sense. Time spent on static uchi komis and mat bashing (ukemi) should instead be spent on dynamic drills involving entire skills or sequences of skills, and learning to not fall on your back.
8. Cross-train in similar combative arts like wrestling or Brazilian jiujitsu if you can. If you can't, try to involve wrestlers and jiujitsukas in your program. Learn to recognize and be ready for unusual grappling skills. If you can't do either one, study videotapes of wrestling and jiu jitsu competitions

9. Emphasize quality over quantity in your training. Ten well done, complete throws are better than fifty, sloppy, static uchi komis. Remember, more is not better.
10. Practice what you don't know. Baseball super-star Pete Rose said it best,

"Practice what you don't know more than what you do know. It's easy to practice something you're already good at, and that's what most people do. What's tough is to go out and to work hard on the things that you don't do very well."

Psychological development

This is one aspect of training that unfortunately few pay attention to. It is either neglected on purpose- I call this the macho or bushido syndrome- or often it is not even thought of. After all, what does psychology have to do with how the body performs physically? The answer, of course, is that it has everything to do with how the body performs. Psychological training is just as important, if not more important, as your physical preparation. Through this type of training you will learn:

1. How to think and act like a champion
2. Coping skills to minimize anxiety and fear
3. Pre-competition strategies
4. Positive mental imagery to enhance performance
5. Positive self-talk to keep you focused and on task
6. Goal setting to help you achieve your performance goals
7. How to increase the positive aspects of a sporting experience
8. How to debrief a performance

Physiological development

Physiological development deals with the basic components of sports fitness:

1. Cardio-respiratory endurance
2. Muscular endurance
3. Muscular strength
4. Muscular speed, which when coupled with strength becomes muscular power
5. Flexibility

The physiological demands of Judo are enormous and at times on opposite ends of the spectrum. Judo requires both anaerobic and aerobic endurance. It requires short outbursts of explosive speed with longer periods of lower intensity grunt work. While Judo practice by itself develops many of these components to a great degree, supplementary training in strength and conditioning is required to reach the highest levels of athletic performance. Powerlifting, Olympic Weightlifting, strong man competition type lifts and an array of aerobic exercises and circuits will make up the bulk of this training.

As far as flexibility training is concerned, the practice of Judo will improve general flexibility. However, for many players, a more extensive dose of flexibility training may be required. This might more appropriately be addressed by participating in yoga or ballet classes, or merely by undertaking additional sessions of flexibility training consisting of slow, dynamic or PNF (proprioceptive neuromuscular facilitation) stretching outside of regular Judo practice.

Your Support Staff

You will not become a champion by yourself. It is going to take an entire team of specialists, supporters and training partners to help you reach your goal. It will be prudent to understand very early that the national governing body will do very little for you. You will have to fend for yourself, especially at the beginning of your competitive career. Here are some of the experts and supporters you will need.

Judo coach

Your choice of Judo coach might be the most important decision you make. Choose a knowledgeable coach, capable of getting you to the level you desire, and willing to work with outside experts.

Training environment/partners

Contrary to common opinion, you don't need to rush out to one of the big training centers (i.e. OTC or San Jose State) nor do you necessarily need lots of partners. Quality programs exist in all sizes in many areas of the United States. Success can be achieved with just a handful of good home-based training partners provided the training environment and the coaching are of high quality. It's also a common misconception that you only need people who can beat you up in order to improve. While it's important to have a few people who can push you and get the best of you, it is more important that you have good drill and randori partners to enable you to successfully ply your skills. Remember, skill improvement occurs when your skills can be performed repeatedly, correctly, in their entirety, under the conditions in which they will ultimately be performed. This won't happen very often with superior players but it will with equal or inferior partners. Training camps, both domestic and foreign, will also be a big part of your training. This is where you will find and take advantage of better players than yourself.

Sports psychologist

This is a job for a specialist. Don't choose a psychology generalist who masquerades as a sports psychologist. Find one who has worked successfully with other athletes. Ask other athletes or coaches for recommendations.

Strength and conditioning coach

This is more than likely a job for another specialist, or two, since your Judo coach may not have the time or the knowledge to address this very important component of your training. Find someone who works with athletes rather than the general population. Too many certified personal trainers have no idea how to train athletes. Get a good Olympic weightlifting coach to teach you the correct mechanics of the Olympic lifts. A general strength and conditioning coach, such as one certified by the National Strength and Conditioning Association (NSCA,) should be able to handle your needs. You can gain a lot of knowledge from track and field coaches as well, although many of them will be too busy to work directly with you.

Medical staff

It's always good to have someone who can put your body back together and make it feel better after all the beatings you take in practice. A good physical therapist, chiropractor or massage therapist can do wonders. Find someone who understands your needs as an athlete.

Nutritionist

Many athletes are clueless about diet and weight control. Spare yourself a lot of grief, hard work and starvation by learning more about your nutritional needs and how they affect your weight.

Fundraisers

Without money to train, travel and live, it won't matter how gifted you are. Be prepared to have to raise from \$5,000 to \$10,000 per year once you are at the national level of competition. Besides the obvious sources of income- you and your parents- your club, yudanshakai, state or national organization, and community should also be part of the equation.

Public relations

Nobody said you have to toil in anonymity. It helps fundraising efforts if the Judo community and the general public recognize your name and are familiar with your accomplishments. Find a person willing to help you with this aspect of your competitive career. Create a portfolio of professionally done photos that can be used for a web site, fan club, press releases, articles, and requests for funding.

Conclusion

Although I have covered a lot of information in this article, it was never meant to be all-inclusive, nor was it meant to give you all the answers on how to be a champion. Hopefully, what it has provided you is a reality check, a push in the right direction, and perhaps a sense that, armed with a plan, you too can become a champion.

“On the road to success, you can be sure of one thing. There is never a crowd on the extra mile.”

Become a student of the game and pursue your dreams!