

Judo on TV (2)

WORLD CHAMPIONSHIPS 2010 TOKYO

TV judo has suddenly perked up! Six weeks ago I had a call from Eurosport TV asking me to do a live satellite commentary on the 2010 WC from Tokyo. It has been about two and a half years since I last commentated on a judo championships so felt distinctly rusty. (The recession has certainly axed the amount of judo/sumo etc broadcast on TV).

As usual TV technology moves on and you have to update yourself which can be nerve wracking especially when you near the actual time of the broadcast. This often happens when there is nobody in the office to explain it, particularly at night or on the weekends. For example all paperwork connected with a programme (script, running order, draw, results and biogs etc) will be in the computer waiting to be down loaded *provided you have remembered the password and they have not changed it* and if you can get the photocopier to work!! Then in the recording booth there are lots of buttons and switches. Luckily I found my way around despite the fact that a new French system had just been put in place. The commentators' assistant gave me the wrong directions but she was new.

Before that I had to update my Results database (which had lain dormant for 30 months) and add in the results of some of the new championships such as the Grand Slam/Grand Prix/World Cups etc. Then I re-read the IJF rules which are in a bit of a mess. They do not represent the reality of contest judo at all. Rule-drift prevails. The IJF should talk to the Olympic Taekwondo people (WTF) about the rules to see how badly drafted rules and procedures caused very major problems for Taekwondo during the 2008 Olympics.

Once upon a time it was relatively simple. There were Olympics, World championships, Continental and national championships and a couple of smaller but significant events such as the Paris Tournament. Now we have in addition Grand Slams, Grand Prix, World Cups and Masters Tournaments. But how does one compare one against another in any meaningful way. Which is stronger a World champion or a Grand Prix champion? I suppose the main intended effect is to give more top contest experience to far flung countries on the basis that if those remote countries cannot afford to travel to the events bring the events to them.

I notice that Olympic wrestling has a similar structure of events. It is getting more and more noticeable how judo is being affected by Olympic wrestling these days. Is there a hidden agenda here I wonder or am I just jumpy? Maybe the next step is to ban leg-to-leg attacks (ie O-uchi-gari etc) so as to create something very similar to Greco-roman wrestling. Perhaps the IOC wants to trim the wrestling or the judo event?

Personally I am in favour of bringing back the lottery of the draw regardless of past results. It adds to the excitement of the event if any competitor is able to think... with

a good draw I could win a gold medal!' Let the law of unintended consequences reign!

When commentating it is always difficult to judge just how much the viewers want to hear of a multi-medal competitors' past results and when to reel them off. I prefer to go for the best or most recent result. The competitors' judo should speak for itself so I try to analyse the strengths and weaknesses of the competitors as it goes along. The fight is here and now and it is not a good idea to spend too long on any one coincidental story. Something is bound to happen which needs an instant explanation. Incidentally the Japanese for commentator is Kaisetsu-sha which literally means *explainer*.

More popular sports tend to have two or even three commentators per programme. This allows one person to sort out the paper-work and pool sheets as the preliminaries and repechage progress and it allows for informed chat and corrections between two commentators about the actual event. The pressure on a single commentator is quite big. It is very much like being a competitor again.

The big question hanging over this WC was the change in the IJF rules. Analysis of the proposed changes on the internet before the event was not favourable. It all sounded like a disaster waiting to happen. However at the end of the first day's programme I found myself pleasantly surprised. The judo was sharp, clean, upright and leg grabs had virtually disappeared. My guess is that most competitors opted for the safe option of not going for the legs at all. Whether it will stay like this is anybody's guess. However, there are a couple of changes worth mentioning.

Firstly the new rule allowing countries two competitors per weight category (four in the Open) had predictable consequences. This was a situation that existed quite some years ago in world judo and it was very common to see Japanese taking 1st and 2nd places in a lot of categories. This new rule would suit those countries with a lot of judo participants (and money?) but there are not so many of them around. When the system changed to one competitor per country per weight category it was very noticeable how hard the sole Japanese had to fight to get a medal. Possibly having two fighters from the same federation in one weight category increases the possibilities of tactical play if one is slightly injured or below par. The coach might prefer one fighter to have an easier run through to the final? As I understand it the Japanese jumped at this rule change and the change may have been made to bring them on side with other rule changes that they may have objected to?

It was interesting to see a number of top Japanese judoka fighting each other but it did not always provide exciting judo which may have been one of the reasons for the changes. One boring final between two Japanese competitors consisted of about eight minutes of nothing but grip fighting.

One predictable side effect was that the increased number of participants has made the event much longer (there were about 64 competitors in the Mens Open). Previously TV usually showed the Semi-finals, the two Bronze repechage fights and the Final, per category which made for a nice compact five match TV programme of about one hour which could be increased by showing more categories (male or female).

As a commentator one thing I did not like was the small country markings on the back of the judogi. When the contestants twirled around it was harder to identify them and it was too easy to slip into racial stereotyping ie. that blonde one must be the Swede.....and that oriental one must be Korean but how to separate them if they both look similar such as two Asians? Of course one can look at the screen scoreboard and identify which country they came from but it takes your eyes away from the action which is dangerous. I found it much easier to identify them when the marking on the back was big and bold ie. GBR, USA, NED etc. It seems that the marking has been shrunk to free up some advertising space but I doubt that the change will bring in much increased advertising revenue.

The blue and white judogi make for clear distinctions between the competitors' actions especially in groundwork but I am not that convinced that they do in general. I thought that the combination of the mat colours, the white judogi and the bright lighting in Tokyo made the white gi stand out. It looked stylish and it was complemented by the background music. Talking of advertising etc I did not like the placards the players showed at the medal ceremony with x-thousand dollars written on them. Perhaps the money should go to the individual federation in the form of a cheque. Leave it to them to deal with the players' reward. It looked a bit cheap, as if the player concerned was up for sale.

Referees at the big events often give me the impression that they are too timid to make a call or challenge a call on their own so what about making it compulsory for the referee and the corner judges to make all their calls either electronically or by flags, as it happens. This could then go on the TV screens instantly. All TV sport commentating refers to what the viewer can see on his/her screen. There is no point in talking about what is not being shown. With our present system a mysterious judo score may pop up on the scoreboard with no obvious screen action to justify it. It needs a good cameraman and a bold refereeing team.

Also the free warning (shido) was not obvious on the scoreboard. My understanding was that it would be marked by a vertical bar and would only translate into a number with subsequent scores or penalties.

There were some clear fouls such as deep defensive postures, a few leg grabs and pat-a-cake style grip fighting which were mostly overlooked by the referee or corrected by the competitor very quickly. In particular in the final between two Japanese which was 8 minutes of non-stop grip fighting I wonder why the ref did not stop the action, order them to take a standard lapel and sleeve grip and then re-start them with suitable penalties – Sono-mama - Yoshi. This happens in Olympic wrestling in certain Greco-roman situations where the first one to lose a particular grip gets penalized.

One curious result was that in one of the weight categories most of the IJF top ranking competitors were not the ones that came through. I think this needs careful monitoring in all the weights. If the ranking system does not work there is not much point in using it for seeding etc.

Overall my impression was that the judo looked clean, sharp and upright. There were some signs of tactical adaptation to the new rules especially on the outside edge of the

fighting area. Only time will tell how the new rules embed in and how they may be exploited.

Talking of judo styles, Japanese judo is often described as clean, upright and technically precise in contrast to the crabby and sticky strong European style. However looking at some of the fights on the last day there were some instances of Japanese heavy players taking a grip and wandering slowly around the contest area. Mostly these were heavy fighters who had learned to use their weight to stop smaller guys in their home dojos but who had not woken up to the fact that major international competition often throws up big guys who can move well like Teddy Riner of France for example.

Also many Japanese fighters were catching hold of the end of the sleeves which I thought should have been penalized according to the present rules. This is the 'rule – drift' I mentioned earlier. In fact I am in favour of using such grips because judo is a form of jacket wrestling and catching hold of the sleeves ends is an important tactic.

The eventual Japanese twelve gold medal haul in the weight categories and Open was phenomenal – I don't think I have ever seen them wins so many in previous competitions although in a couple of early WCs they took all the gold medals going but in fewer categories.

It was good to see some old friends on the screen such Sato Nobuyuki & Yamashita handing out some medals prizes. Thinking about it afterwards I didn't recall seeing anybody from the Kodokan handing them out although there were quite a few others who represented the All Japan Judo Federation handing them out. Curious.

The Brits did not do so well only bringing back one bronze medal (Euan Burton). Considering the amount of tax-payers money that is being spent on them this is not much of a return. Well it is twenty two months and days till the London 2012 Olympics. This is just about enough time to analyse results so far, ruthlessly cull those coaches and administrators paid to produce results, bring in fresh blood and perhaps make a significant difference in London in 2012. Wake up GB judo - it's the last chance saloon.

Long term Tokyo resident and former British International John Bowen told me that from 2012 judo, sumo and karate would become compulsory sports in ALL Japanese schools which would massively enlarge the participation base of Japanese judo. Along with Kendo it was compulsory in schools in the past but lost its semi-monopoly position shortly after the Pacific war. The golden age of Japanese judo was said to be when judo and kendo were compulsory in all schools. History does indeed repeat itself.

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