

Finding JOY on the Tatami with Ms. Licia Maristella, 85

From Rome, Italy, **Ms Licia Maristella** began her judo journey at [Scuola Judo Tomita](#) at the remarkable age of 76. Her inspiring story shows how judo can open new doors at any stage of life, bringing JOY strength, and a deep sense of connection. Discover her experience, the challenges she faced, and the wisdom she has gained both on and off the tatami.

Licia, looking back, how would you describe your life before judo? What characterised the years before you started practising sport?

I've always done sport, but I would never have imagined doing judo.

At 76, you did something many people would never dare, you started practising judo. What led you to this decision?

It was a fortunate coincidence. My son called me and invited me to watch my six-year-old grandson's judo demonstration. I agreed, and that was where it all began. At the end of the demonstration, there was an announcement, they were looking for people aged between 60 and 75 to join a judo course, led by judo instructor Simone Ciaccioni, as part of his [PhD research project](#) at the University of Rome "Foro Italico". My son encouraged me to sign up, but I told him I was already past the age limit. As we were leaving, he spoke directly to the instructor, who kindly agreed to accept me despite my age. And that's how my completely unexpected judo journey began.

Do you remember your first training session? How did you feel, physically, emotionally, and in relation to others?

I remember feeling uncomfortable during my first training session. We had to practise gripping the judogi in pairs, hugging perfect strangers. But that discomfort quickly disappeared. Everyone was extremely kind and respectful.

What does judo represent for you today? Is it just physical movement, or something deeper?

Practising judo has given me a greater sense of security and self-esteem. Hearing my grandson proudly say, "I'm the only one who has a grandmother who does judo," and training with young people who say, "I wish my grandparents practised judo too," is truly motivating. I really enjoy this sport because it's based on precise and educational behavioural rules.

Many people think it's too late to start exercising at an advanced age. What would you say to them?

I would say that it's never too late! There are many levels of judo, and everyone can adapt to their own abilities. As for breakfall techniques, they're an excellent way to learn how to fall without getting fractures, which is especially important as we age.

I've actually fallen several times, but my body remembered how to do it safely. Even the brain stays active because you have to memorise all the kata movements and judo techniques perfectly.

In the EDJCO project, a predecessor of the JOY project, you were part of a group that changed how people see ageing through sport. How did you experience it? What did it leave you with?

I'm living proof that practising judo, even at 85, brings both satisfaction and a stronger sense of personal safety, including in terms of self-defence. The judo coaches often say, *"If there's danger, don't hesitate, run away."* I always reply, *"If I can't run, maybe something I've practised in judo will help me."*

You now participate in the new JOY project, where you train alongside younger people. How do you experience this meeting of generations? What do young people mean to you? Do you sometimes feel like a grandmother, a guide, or a friend?

I get a great deal of satisfaction from training with children, and even more so with teenagers. On many occasions, they've pointed out small details in my movements, which has helped me refine my techniques and improve their effectiveness.

What do you think you learn from them, and what do you believe you pass on to them? Can you share a moment that surprised or moved you?

As I mentioned earlier, there's so much to learn from them. What I hope to pass on is the idea that, no matter how many years go by, you can remain active and keep a positive outlook on life.

What do you find most difficult, and most beautiful about judo? Are there moments when you feel tired? What keeps you going?

The most difficult part is remembering all the terms and the movements of the techniques. Judo kata, on the other hand, are very relaxing for me. I don't feel tired when I practise judo. What keeps me going is the atmosphere, my training partners are kind, always smiling, and ready to help when needed. And of course, we have excellent judo coaches at Scuola Judo Tomita.

If you could speak to all the elderly people across Europe, what would you say to them?

I would encourage them, ***"Go and try judo!"*** It will bring you great satisfaction and can help prevent future fractures, of the neck, limbs, and more. And your grandchildren will have something to proudly tell their friends, *"My grandparents do judo."*

Interview conducted by
Ms. Špela Lampe Cakići (Judo Club Golovec)