

## Shunsuke Mukai: From Tokyo to Rijeka: Teaching the Spirit of Kodokan Judo in Europe

In this second edition of JOY Talks, we explore a unique perspective on intercultural exchange through the lens of judo. Meet Mr Shunsuke Mukai, a 4<sup>th</sup> DAN judo coach from Tokyo, Japan. At just 29 years old, Mukai has spent the past two years living and working in Croatia with [Judo Club Rijeka](#).

Bringing with him the depth and tradition of [Kodokan judo](#), Mukai has fully immersed himself in the diversity and spirit of European judo culture. This conversation looks at how one coach is building a meaningful bridge between East and West, and how intercultural experiences can profoundly enrich not only coaching methods but also community life.

**You grew up with judo in Japan and now coach it in Europe, in Rijeka, Croatia. How does that experience compare?**

To begin, I'd like to compare the training environments of judo in Japan and Europe. I've been living in Croatia for over two years now, and I've noticed that in most European countries, not just here, people typically belong to a single judo club, where they train continuously from childhood through to adulthood.

In contrast, the training system in Japan is quite different. Children up to the age of 12 typically belong to local judo clubs in their town. When they enter junior high school (ages 13–15), they join school-based judo clubs as part of extracurricular activities. These clubs are usually run by schoolteachers. This structure is common across various sports in Japan. High school students (ages 16–18) and university students (ages 19–22) also practice judo as a school activity. Children who want to become stronger often choose to attend schools with strong judo programmes at each of these stages.

After becoming adults, competitive athletes often continue judo while working for companies that support the sport. Some of these companies even have their own dojos. Others keep training at their former schools while working. It's also common for people to become public servants, like police officers or members of the Self-Defence Forces, and continue practising judo. As you can see, the judo environments in Japan and Europe are very different. However, judo practice in clubs for primary school-aged children is quite similar in both regions.

**What do you think about judo as a sport for all ages?**

Judo training consists of four core elements: kata (forms), randori (free practice), lectures, and Q&A-style discussions. Ideally, a well-balanced judo programme should incorporate all four. But today, most sessions focus heavily on randori, especially due to the competitive nature of modern judo.

As we grow older, intense randori becomes more difficult, which is why it's essential

to place more emphasis on kata, theory, and discussions. These elements help deepen our understanding of judo. For this reason, I truly believe judo is a lifelong discipline, something you can practise and learn at any age.

### **In Japan, do children and older people sometimes train together? Is that common?**

Not really. In Japan, children and adults usually don't train together. Their physical ability and comprehension levels are quite different, so the training is adapted accordingly.

That said, there are occasional joint classes, like parent-child judo sessions, which are more relaxed and focus on having fun together. Also, sometimes children and adults will do randori together, but it's not a regular part of training.

### **What have you learned here in Europe, as a coach and as a person?**

To understand European life and culture more deeply, I've explored many things outside of judo. One thing that really stood out is how present religion is in people's daily lives. In Japan, although we have Shintoism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism, most people don't strongly identify with a specific faith or express it openly. In contrast, many Europeans actively practise a religion, which has helped me understand different value systems more clearly. Judo itself also varies from country to country, each has its own system, style, and challenges. These differences have taught me a lot, both as a coach and as a person.

### **What have you brought from Japan to your judo club in Rijeka, Croatia?**

Without a doubt, the biggest influence I've brought is the authentic Japanese style of judo. I've been practising at the Kodokan since I was a child. I still remember the words of Mr. Haruki Uemura, the president of the Kodokan, who often told us: *"Follow proper etiquette, grip correctly, and aim for an ippon with techniques that are logical and make sense."* That, to me, is the true spirit of Kodokan Judo. When I started teaching in Croatia, I was honestly surprised by how different the style was. Many techniques, like ippon-seoi-nage or harai-makikomi, were applied immediately upon contact, often with just one grip. At first, I wasn't sure how to communicate the Kodokan method, especially with the language barrier. But I trusted in my experience and used gestures, body language, and whatever tools I had to convey it. Even if results don't show immediately, I believe that learning authentic judo from a Japanese teacher is something that stays with students forever.

Outside of judo, I also try to share Japanese culture, like origami, traditional games, or cooking. These are experiences not easily found in Europe, and I hope they offer something special.

### **What surprised you the most about the children you teach here?**

One surprising thing is how many children don't clearly distinguish between left- and right-handed grips. Some train with one grip but switch during randori or competition.

In Japan, from the start, beginners are taught to choose their dominant grip and stick to it. They may execute techniques to either side, but the grip side stays consistent. Another thing is that children here often wait for instructions rather than thinking independently. Because they stay in the same club with the same coach for years, they sometimes lack initiative. Listening is important, of course, but I also think it's essential to encourage creativity, self-reflection, and learning through trial and error.

### **What surprised you about older judo practitioners or older coaches?**

Although I haven't had many chances to work closely with older coaches, I've been deeply inspired by their passion and commitment. Their dedication to judo is impressive.

### **How do you feel when you see a child training with a parent or grandparent?**

It's truly beautiful. Children bring so much energy and joy, and when they train alongside family members, it becomes a meaningful form of communication. It builds strong relationships across generations. I think judo is an amazing way to connect people, physically and emotionally.

### **If you could answer in one sentence – why is judo good for all generations?**

Because through the principle of "Mutual Welfare and Benefit" (Jita-Kyoei), judo helps people of all ages grow, connect, and contribute to society, together.

Interview conducted by  
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