

## **Judo Beyond the Tatami – Leadership, Gender Equality, and Lifelong Values with Ms. Kristiina Pekkola**

In every judo club, beyond medals and rankings, there are people, young and old, who return to the tatami week after week, driven by something deeper. It's in these shared moments, between generations and across experiences, that the true power of judo is revealed.

In the third edition of JOY Talks, we speak with **Ms. Kristiina Pekkola**, Vice President of the [European Judo Union \(EJU\)](#), whose leadership and vision reflect this deeper meaning. She shares insight into intergenerational learning, gender equality in leadership, and the EJU's strategic direction, while highlighting how the JOY project supports long-term goals for inclusive judo development across Europe. From coaching education to community building, this conversation offers valuable guidance for anyone committed to building a more inclusive and sustainable future for our sport.

**How have you experienced intergenerational learning during your judo journey? Could you share a memory that highlights judo's core values of respect and harmony?**

Judo naturally fosters intergenerational learning. Whether it's a grandparent practicing ukemi (falling techniques) alongside a grandchild, or a seasoned judoka mentoring a young beginner, the dojo becomes a space where age dissolves in mutual respect. One memory that captures this spirit is a shared kata demonstration, where a young judoka and an older practitioner move together in harmony. In these moments, judo's core values truly come alive: respect, mutual benefit, and harmony. Judo builds bridges between generations, showing us that learning is lifelong and that everyone, regardless of age, has something meaningful to offer.

**In what ways can intergenerational initiatives support the European Judo Union's vision of judo as a lifelong sport and foster stronger, more connected communities across Europe?**

JOY beautifully embodies the EJU's vision of judo as a lifelong practice. By creating inclusive training environments, it encourages lifelong physical activity and builds social bridges between generations. It also promotes mental well-being through a shared sense of purpose and community. In doing so, JOY strengthens not only judo clubs but also the social fabric of communities across Europe.

**As a strong advocate for women's visibility and leadership in judo, how do you see projects like JOY advancing the EJU's gender equality goals and encouraging women of all ages to take leadership roles on and off the tatami?**

I have long been passionate about promoting women's visibility and leadership in judo. JOY is all about creating safe and inclusive spaces where women of all ages feel welcome to train and develop. The project highlights female role models, from young girls to older women, who embody courage and leadership. We also encourage female

coaches and leaders to take active roles in intergenerational programmes. In doing so, JOY closely aligns with the EJU's gender equality goals and inspires women to step confidently onto the tatami and into leadership roles.

**Why is it important to recognize the everyday heroes of judo – people of all ages training with courage and dedication? How can sharing their stories reshape public perception and attract new generations to the sport?**

JOY gently shifts the spotlight away from elite athletes to everyday judoka: children, parents, grandparents, who show up with courage and commitment. These stories humanise the sport, making it more relatable and accessible. They inspire newcomers who might otherwise feel intimidated by competitive judo and reinforce the core values of perseverance, humility, and mutual respect that judo teaches. By celebrating these quiet heroes, JOY helps reshape public perception and attract new generations to our sport. The project consortium is developing an online educational tool for coaches to enhance training quality and promote inclusive, intergenerational practice.

**How do you envision this innovation influencing coaching standards and contributing to judo's growth?**

The JOY project is creating an evidence-based online educational tool for coaches that will be hosted on the IJF Academy platform. I see this innovation as a key step in standardizing coaching practices, especially for intergenerational groups. It will improve the quality and safety of training while equipping coaches with the knowledge and skills to foster inclusive, age-diverse dojos. Ultimately, this tool will help make judo more accessible and sustainable across Europe.

**With your extensive experience in sport development, what advice would you give to national federations and local clubs aiming to promote inclusive, intergenerational judo? What practical first steps can help overcome challenges such as engaging older practitioners or encouraging more women to participate?**

From my experience in sport development, I believe the key is to start small and build gradually. Introducing a weekly intergenerational class or open mat session can be a great first step. It's also crucial to train coaches properly, and tools like JOY's educational resources can really help prepare them to work with diverse age groups. Sharing local success stories is another powerful way to inspire participation and show what's possible. Partnering with community centres can help reach older adults and families who might not yet be involved in judo. Ultimately, the goal is to create welcoming, flexible environments where everyone feels they belong.

**Could you share a personal story from your time with the EJU where judo's ability to connect generations or empower women deeply inspired you? How has this experience shaped your ongoing work and vision?**

Every year at the European Championships, the EJU hosts a "kids camp" that brings together children from all across Europe. It's truly inspiring to see moments where a grandmother and granddaughter practice side by side, laughing, learning, and growing

together. These moments really fuel my passion for inclusive judo and help shape the vision we have at the EJU for a sport that welcomes everyone, regardless of age or background.

**Finally, if you could speak directly to women, older adults, and young people across Europe asking themselves, “Is judo really for me?” what heartfelt message would you share?**

Judo is not just a sport, it’s a way of life. It welcomes you exactly as you are, at any age and from any background. Whether you’re 7 or 70, judo offers you strength, confidence, and a true sense of community.

*So, step onto the tatami, **you belong here!***

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