

From Spain, 7th DAN Enrique Eraña on How Welcoming Older Generations to the Tatami Transforms Lives – Including His Mother

In this JOY Talks interview, we explore the journey of **Mr. Enrique Eraña** and his work on the implementation of the [EDJCO project](#) in Spain, which first introduced judo to older practitioners. From this pioneering initiative to engaging younger generations, Eraña has consistently demonstrated how judo can foster physical activity, social connection, and intergenerational learning. He reflects on the transformative power of judo, both on and off the mat. Based at Gimnasio Wellness 2000 in Alcalá de Henares, Madrid, Eraña is a highly respected figure in Spanish judo and an experienced IJF referee with extensive international expertise.

Building on your incredible work with older practitioners, we have to start with congratulations! Last December, you received the Madridoca Award for introducing judo to older generations. How did it feel to be recognised in this way?

Honestly, I did not expect it, which made the award even more special. Since it recognises innovative projects with a strong social and cultural impact, I see it not just as a personal honour but as a collective one. It is a way to thank everyone who supported the project from the beginning, the participants, IJF, EJU, the Madrid Judo Federation, and above all, my family. Most importantly, this recognition belongs to the seniors themselves, who inspire the project every day.

Have online tools like EDJCO supported your coaching of older practitioners?

[The EDJCO online course](#) has been an invaluable tool. It's a living initiative that highlights judo's enormous social contribution. For coaches, it provides essential guidance and is becoming increasingly important for the future of inclusive judo training.

How many participants have joined your programme so far, and what progress do they make?

We began with pilot groups in Los Negrales, Villanueva del Pardillo, Alcalá de Henares, and Villaviciosa, later consolidating in Torrejón de Ardoz and Alcalá. Today, our groups include 20-30 participants, which helps maintain motivation and continuity.

The first and most visible outcome is socialisation. Participants feel part of a group, which helps reduce isolation. Physically and mentally, they gain strength, balance, and flexibility, which gives them greater confidence and security in daily life. Judo also teaches them how to fall and get up safely, a crucial skill for preventing injuries. Beyond the physical benefits, judo has provided significant emotional advantages: it reduces stress, boosts self-esteem, and fosters a strong sense of achievement.

Many worry that judo is too rough for seniors. How do you help participants feel safe and confident?

Many participants arrive with concerns, often associating judo with fighting or hard falls. But they soon discover it's far from aggressive. Instead, they realise it's an activity that improves both physical and emotional well-being – and it's fun too!

Their main fears usually involve balance and contact with the ground. We focus on teaching safe movement, how to fall and get up without risk, and gradually building self-confidence. We also introduce self-defence techniques, carefully adapted to their age and abilities, so participants feel empowered rather than intimidated.

Can you share a story that has deeply moved you?

Every participant has their own story, and each one moves me in different ways. After many years teaching judo, working with seniors affects me emotionally even more than other stages of my career. On the tatami, people with very different realities come together: some have never practiced sports, others live with illness or struggle with low confidence. What's truly wonderful is seeing them support one another.

For example, María, a woman over ninety, was overjoyed to practice judo because it allowed her to share the experience with her grandchildren, who were also training. That intergenerational connection was incredibly special.

If I had to pick one story that moves me the most, it would be that of my mother. After a lifetime in which my siblings, children, and nephews have practiced judo, she herself began at 84 years old. Watching her gain strength, confidence, and a renewed quality of life, overcoming her fear of falling and inactivity, is profoundly motivating. It's a beautiful example of how the project transforms lives, even within my own family.

How have seniors reacted to training alongside younger generations in JOY?

We've already seen very natural intergenerational moments, bringing grandparents, parents, and grandchildren together on the tatami. In the last two seasons, we organised special end-of-year celebrations where older practitioners trained alongside their family members. After practice, there's a belt and diploma ceremony, a beautiful moment where grandchildren participate enthusiastically and share in their grandparents' recognition.

We've also developed other experiences under the concept of **"Family Judo,"** where parents and children practise together. All of this highlights the enormous intergenerational value of judo: it's not just a sport, but a tool to unite generations, share values, and create special bonds.

With your long experience, including as an IJF referee, how has working with older practitioners changed your understanding of judo as a sport and as a tool for personal growth?

This is a very special question for me. Over the years, I have taught judo, competed

in both kata and shiai, and refereed internationally. These experiences have given me a broad perspective on the sport.

Working with older practitioners has surprised and moved me profoundly. It has helped me appreciate how great judo truly is, not only as an Olympic sport or martial art, but as a tool with far-reaching possibilities. It has shown me that judo can provide knowledge, culture, and a sense of belonging.

In my classes with seniors, I include simple refereeing concepts: learning what a waza-ari is, what an ippon means, or why the referee calls mate. This allows them not only to train but also to enjoy watching competitions, even following the Olympics while understanding what happens on the tatami. I have even developed a refereeing kata at different levels. The basic version serves as a warm-up and coordination exercise while teaching gestures, scoring, and rules.

Senior practitioners not only practise judo but also contribute greatly to the sport. They help in competitions, with timekeeping, scoreboards, or refereeing support, and feel like active members of the judo community. This project has been truly enriching in combining all of these aspects.

What are the most common misconceptions about older people in judo, and how can projects like JOY help clubs and coaches worldwide rethink age, ability, and inclusion while strengthening intergenerational solidarity?

A common misconception is that older people do not belong on the tatami or that judo is too demanding for them. In reality, seniors gain physical, social, and emotional benefits, while also contributing their experience, consistency, and wisdom to the community.

Both the EDJCO and JOY projects represent an important shift in judo education, proving that judo has no age limits and can be practised, enjoyed, and shared at any stage of life. JOY adds an intergenerational dimension that enriches teaching and practice. I hope coaches worldwide will be inspired to welcome older practitioners, recognising that judo is not only a sport, but a lifelong tool that unites and empowers everyone. Many will also benefit from the online course JOY will offer, helping bring this vision to life in their own dojos.

Your final message for judo coaches?

My message is simple: *open your tatami. Invite older generations in. **You will not only transform their lives, they will transform yours, and the future of judo.***

Interview conducted by
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