

JOY Talk No. 11

Judo as a Compass in a Changing World; dr. Simone Ciaccioni, University of Rome Foro Italico

Dr. Simone Ciaccioni, 4th DAN and researcher at the the [University of Rome Foro Italico](#), works at the intersection of sport science, education, and philosophy. Through European research and academic practice, he explores how movement shapes not only performance, but also relationships, health, and our understanding of ourselves and others.

In a time marked by growing distance between people, his perspective returns to a simple but demanding question: *what does it mean to remain human through practice?*

Judo is often described as more than a sport. How do you see judo as a bridge between generations, bringing together children, adults, and older people on the tatami?

“Judo – More than Sport” is not merely a successful slogan of the European Judo Union; it is also a fortunate reality and a delicate necessity. Most judoka worldwide experience this every day.

I'd say intergenerational judo is another intriguing reality: it is often part of our daily experience, yet we do not always pay sufficient attention to it. Look into the eyes of participants in many judo classes where children and adults practise together. You will perceive the tension and excitement of beginning an activity that promises to be disruptive – and it will be: it disrupts outdated patterns and age stereotypes and, as you rightly noted, it builds bridges between generations.

What, until a few decades ago, was everyday life has become the exception. In a digital world, the simple act of physical contact between human beings is paradoxically becoming less common and increasingly complex. When 15, 30, 50, or more years of age difference are involved, everything becomes even more complex.

Judo can break through these barriers and create new spaces for contact and communication. In judo, people are in contact: they touch one another, look at one another, and sense one another at an intimate distance. They reclaim their own humanity and, ultimately, come to understand the humanity of others. The most moving aspect is that nothing new needs to be invented. We simply need to practise... judo.

You've spoken about the two principles of judo: *Jita-Kyoei* and *Seiryoku-Zenyo* as a kind of compass, a stable and reassuring beacon in a stormy sea. What did you mean by that, and how do these principles influence the way you approach both sport and life?

Unlike many other disciplines, judo is grounded in two very strong principles that must be studied and applied. They are often translated as “maximum efficient use of energy” and “mutual welfare and benefit.” They are, in fact, a compass – and is it not true that life, regardless of one’s condition, individual circumstances, age, sex, geographical position, and so forth, often appears as a stormy sea?

In the past, there were great ideologies that inspired humankind. Some are chilling, while others still appeal to the instincts or the intellectual sensibilities of certain thinkers. In practical terms, however, we live in a postmodern and post-ideological world. Yet, in my view, these two principles explain how to live while remaining resilient and evergreen across the centuries.

Life is a continuous search for dynamic balance. Judo enables us to experience physically that, to remain standing, we must learn to use our energy as effectively as possible, step by step, movement after movement, breath after breath. If we do not, we are very likely to end up on the ground, thrown by some external force. The fall is not the end; it can even become an ally. If we reflect and train, we learn that we can improve and use our energy well.

Judo then explains a second aspect, which is inseparable from the first: only together can we grow and progress. We may become very strong, very fast, and as hard as small diamonds, but life, sometimes sooner and sometimes later, reveals all our fragilities, fears, limitations, and inadequacies. Then there is only one way to gain strength, find courage, and build ourselves as men and women: through the help of others. Our discipline makes this clear without words, without explanations, and without intermediaries. In a stormy sea, we have a compass.

You are also involved in the HOPE – *Hospital schools’ guidelines On Physical Education*, a European project supported by the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions programme at the University of Rome Foro Italico. What inspired you to start working on bringing movement and physical education into hospital environments?

Between 2019 and 2020, during the onset and first major wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, I worked as a physical education teacher in the two main hospitals of Rome. In Italy, physical education is also provided in hospitals for young patients. Due to the specific nature of that context, I immediately realized the need to develop guidelines for teachers who interact with and teach young patients every day. I saw the considerable potential that physical education has in this setting, and from this insight, a project proposal was developed.

The European Commission positively evaluated the proposal and approved its funding. At present, we are developing the HOPE project in Bern, Switzerland, where I am currently based. The project consortium also includes prestigious universities in Portugal and Brazil, as well as my alma mater, the University of Rome “Foro Italico”, and sports associations in Croatia, with the support of the International Judo Federation.

In fact, many sports can be adapted for use in hospital schools, but certain Eastern disciplines seem particularly effective due to the nature of their exercises. They also tend to integrate body and mind as a unified system. Yoga and martial arts, for example, are increasingly supported by scientific research. I believe judo has strong potential that deserves further exploration.

We have only just begun this path. Therefore, I would be pleased if those interested in this initiative contacted us to explore opportunities for collaboration. We are looking for experts such as physicians, nurses, teachers, sport coaches, psychologists, and family members who can share their experience in this field. The HOPE project can be followed through its social media channels, including its [Instagram account](#), as well as [the University website](#).

Working in such a sensitive context as hospitals must bring unique human experiences. What has stayed with you most from the HOPE project so far?

After just over five months in the HOPE project, what stands out most to me is the complexity of the topic. While all countries aim to protect the fundamental rights to health and education, they do so in very different ways. Focusing on Europe, I have observed that each country's historical development, culture, economic resources, healthcare and social systems, and many other factors shape unique approaches. These differences make the work both challenging and fascinating.

I consider myself very fortunate and, in a certain sense, privileged. The people I have met along this journey are truly remarkable. They share a deep inner motivation and a strong commitment to creating meaningful impact in the social, academic, and healthcare sectors.

At the same time, this is a particularly sensitive field. We are fully aware that the young patients at the centre of our work are among the most vulnerable members of society. Working with them requires empathy, compassion, and dedication. However, this empathy is inevitably accompanied by the awareness that some patients may face life-threatening conditions.

Forming a bond with a young patient is often unavoidable, yet confronting the possibility of losing them is one of the most challenging aspects of this work. It requires emotional resilience and psychological preparation, which may not always be sufficient to ease the pain of loss.

As one of the main creators and driving forces behind both the JOY project and its predecessor EDJCO – *Educating Judo Coaches for Older Practitioners*, when you think back to the beginning, what moment or experience first made you believe these projects were needed?

Behind HOPE, JOY, EdJCO, and even my initial doctoral project, there is a common thread: a collective effort to understand reality and respond to it through meaningful action. This has always been a team endeavour. No project of this kind can succeed

without a shared commitment and the contribution of many people working towards a common goal.

We began with the awareness that Europe, and much of the world, is facing a rapidly ageing population. This raised an important question: what can we do to support healthy and active ageing? Research has shown that judo can be particularly effective in promoting health, well-being, and quality of life among people over the age of 65. For this reason, it became essential to strengthen the knowledge, skills, and competences of judo coaches, who play a key role as catalysts for positive change. This was the main objective of EdJCO.

Then came the pandemic, which accelerated processes of social isolation that were already affecting both younger and older generations. At the same time, the European Union increasingly emphasized the importance of strengthening connections between generations. JOY emerged within this context, making intergenerational dialogue and cooperation a natural focus of our work.

Today, through HOPE, I aspire to contribute to the well-being of young patients. I firmly believe that a society can be considered truly healthy and equitable only when it is able to care for its most vulnerable members.

When you reflect on your work, what do research projects represent to you personally beyond their formal goals and outcomes?

For a researcher, research means a great deal, perhaps everything. It is about discovering, learning, and building connections. It is about embracing moments of serendipity, making mistakes and learning from them, striving to grow while remaining aware of one's limitations, and persevering despite inevitable setbacks. Above all, it is about continually seeking a deeper understanding of reality and nurturing, day after day, a sense of wonder which gives meaning to both research and life itself.

If a young judoka in the future never hears about JOY, EDJCO, or HOPE directly, what would you still hope they experience because of them?

I imagine a young judoka who, even in the years to come, discovers a discipline that helps them reach their full potential. A practice that supports those who feel weak, restores balance to those who are uncertain, and brings together children and adults, beginners and advanced practitioners alike.

I imagine a young judoka who grows in a respectful and safe environment, guided by a sensei who shows the way forward, and surrounded by companions who share essential values: courage, respect, humility, friendship, honour, sincerity, self-control, and kindness.

JOY, EdJCO, and HOPE may one day fade from memory, but if the values that inspired them remain alive, judo will continue to serve its true purpose.

*Interview conducted by
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