



AJA Newsletter

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Training in Japanese Swordsmanship by Thomas Dineen

“What’s the point of learning about a weapon whose practical value mostly disappeared in the 19th century?” I wondered when my first ju-jitsu sensei, Professor Dennis McCurdy, appeared in our dojo with a bag of *bokken* (wooden swords) that we’d be using that day.

After several such classes, however, I became so fascinated by Japanese swordsmanship that I took a break of several years from ju-jitsu to get my *shodan* in *iaido* (ee-EYE-dough).

First, a description of this somewhat esoteric discipline. *Iaido* is the art of drawing the Japanese long sword, parrying attacks, cutting down imaginary opponents, flicking their blood (also imaginary) off the blade, and then resheathing the sword. Some practitioners use live blades, or *katana*, to maximize realism, but many prefer dull-edged swords (*iaito*) for a degree of safety.

This element of danger—seeking deep understanding of a deadly weapon—adds emotional gravity to training in *iaido*.

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Mixing Martial Arts: What's Your Cup of Matcha?

by Scott Anderson

Which flavor of martial art is best for a fight to the death? Okay, easier: Which one is perfect for self-defense? Oh, but now I’ve asked too broad a question, because there are so many responses that I can’t single out only one.

Martial arts have existed for as long as we’ve had history, but they seem to all develop some core techniques while embracing local needs, personal needs, or perhaps superstitions. That, at least, is the most politically correct answer. But have I really narrowed anything down?

Let’s try again.

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AJA Update

by Dave Boesel, President

I hardly need say that this year has forced all of us to rethink what was once "business as usual." But even as we see customs and strategies we once took for granted falling down, we're laying the foundations for a stronger future. And, despite the odds, we're still finding reasons to celebrate in the present. On Oct. 24, the AJA Board of Directors met to outline its priorities for the year ahead. Below I've listed two of the biggest changes we'll be enacting, as well as a shout-out to one of our members. You'll also find three pandemic promotions at the bottom of this page.

1. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the resultant suspension of activities in AJA dojos, our Board of Directors has decided to extend all AJA memberships—paid and in good standing in 2020—through 2021 at no cost. This applies to both dojo and individual memberships.

2. Kudos to Tom Dineen for his article on the [American Jujitsu Association on Wikipedia](#). It's a great way to inform the public about our organization and to attract new members. Tom is also working on a Wikipedia entry on Budoshin Ju-jitsu.

3. AJA is undertaking a major change in its outreach strategy. For decades, we have published the AJA Newsletter as a way to keep our members and the interested public informed about AJA news, events and Japanese ju-jitsu in general. However, newsletter readership has declined greatly over the years, and now only a small minority of members open the newsletter that is sent via email. Therefore, this current edition of the newsletter will be the last one. Instead, we will reach out to AJA members and to a much wider public through social media, e.g. Facebook, Instagram and YouTube. At its Oct. 24 meeting, the Board of Directors approved a motion to take the first steps to identify and hire an AJA Director of Digital Information. The transition from print to internet communication will be carefully thought through and will take some time. At the end of this process, we will be able to reach and engage a much wider audience, giving the AJA and its dojos a larger public presence.

Thanks to all our dedicated members, for remaining engaged with us during this tumultuous year. We'll get through the dark winter ahead and look forward to the day we can train together in person once more.

Sincerely,

Dave Boesel

Recent Promotions

Name	Rank	Month	Dojo
Dominic Calabria	Nidan	Oct. 2020	Ho'on Dojo
Nathan Bird	Sankyu	Aug. 2020	Ho'on Dojo
Will Harris	Hachidan	July 2020	Budoshin Ju-Jitsu Yudanshakai

Training in Japanese Swordsmanship

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A Japanese girl practices iaido with a custom-made katana. (Credit: Rodrigja)
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Few activities inspire such intense concentration. Advanced practitioners strive to appear to be fighting real, though invisible, opponents by cultivating *mushin*...a state of being focused yet open to all contingencies, free of distracting thoughts or emotions.

Like many Asian arts, *iaido* evolved from combat techniques (*jutsu*) into a martial path (*do*) that helps develop—in addition to coordination and good bearing—personal qualities such as respect and self-control. Even benevolence comes into play, as when a swordsman applies mental pressure to de-escalate a fight before he and his opponent have drawn swords, or when he chooses to spare a wounded enemy from a final, lethal thrust or cut.

The art has been influenced by Confucianism, Taoism, Zen, and the code of *bushido* (“way of the warrior”) adhered to by the samurai class.

A literal translation of *iaido* (“way of mental presence and immediate reaction”) conveys its more subtle psychological aspects. The sword offers a

way to heightened awareness and responsiveness, akin to the “sixth sense” that many martial artists seek to develop. Some *iaidoka* pursue the ideal of *ki ken tai icchi*, a feeling of the body, sword and spirit being seamlessly entwined.

Iaido training is based almost exclusively on solo kata, allowing you to practice alone. While I enjoy the camaraderie of ju-jitsu, the need for training partners can limit even the most committed *jujitsuka* to a few hours of class time per week. But with only your sword and a belt to hold it, you can practice *iaido* whenever you want, wherever space allows. It can be simultaneously relaxing and deeply focused, not unlike *qigong* or other meditative arts.

Iaido also has an element of time travel. Dressed in skirtlike trousers called *hakama*, which originated in the 6th century, you wield a sword whose design goes back at least to the 12th century. You study and endlessly refine the graceful, often complex movements used by samurai for hundreds of years.

It’s hard to overstate the veneration accorded the sword in Japanese culture. Katana made by famous swordsmiths are prized by collectors for the beauty of their *hamon* (visual outline of differential hardening of the steel blade) and other aesthetic qualities. As students of a Japanese art, all *jujitsuka* ought to be acquainted with the basic history and construction of katana.

Iaido deepens such understanding by observing the punctilious etiquette (*reishiki*) governing the handling of swords, which in turn reflects the formalities of samurai life.

I’ve seen people fail promotions over matters of etiquette...not bowing at proper times or sloppily handling a sheathed sword. You also can fail based on technical fine points, such as using a sword that is unacceptably short (and thus easier to handle), or executing forms too quickly or too slowly.

In fact, as rank goes up, so do failure rates, making high rank in *iaido* a rare distinction. In recent years, the pass rate for 8th dan in one major sword federation was less than 5%...and you have to travel to Japan to test for the highest ranks.

Promotions are more formal in *iaido* than in ju-jitsu and most other arts. In the Zen Nippon Kendo Renmai (ZNKR), which oversees much *iaido* training



An *iaido* sensei demonstrates a kata.
(Credit: Luis Mascaro)
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worldwide, exams in the U.S. are generally held twice a year as part of weekend-long seminars; there are no local exams conducted at individual dojo. Judges come from all over the U.S. and often Japan.

Through 3rd dan, in tests you execute only five randomly chosen techniques of the twelve *seitei-gata*, or standard forms. These were established in 1969 to consolidate elements from several major Japanese schools (*ryu*) of swordsmanship.

You have six minutes to bow in before the judges, complete the forms, and then bow out. If you take longer, you will likely fail. And if you appear rushed in avoiding going over six minutes, you may also fail. The goal is to come as close to finishing in exactly six minutes as possible...without being able to check your time during testing.

Compare this with a ju-jitsu promotion at your own dojo, where advanced ranks may be asked to perform dozens of techniques and improvise defenses over the course of an hour or more.

This contrast underscores the minimalist austerity of *iaido*. It may sound limited to practice only twelve forms thousands of times over many years, but this attention to detail reveals the subtleties of the draws, cuts, thrusts, weight shifts and footwork that go into apparently straightforward *kata*.

With experience, it's easy to discern a swordsman of high rank merely by the way he performs a basic horizontal draw. It will be smooth and effortless, with no tension or extraneous movement. (Serious music listeners may sense the same quality in a great violinist or guitarist playing a single note or chord.)

Although *iaido* concentrates on self-refinement, competitions (*taikai*) are often held at large seminars. Here, judges assess two *iaidoka* performing the same forms side by side. The better competitor advances to the next round until a single winner remains in each rank.

Iaido has much to offer as a complement to ju-jitsu. It reminds us that our art developed among armed and armored warriors and familiarizes us with a preeminent ancient combat weapon. *Iaido* also focuses strongly on the *tanden* as the place from which energy derives (a spot slightly below the belly, which also happens to be near the hilt of your sheathed sword).

As with many ju-jitsu techniques, in *iaido* it helps to imagine energy emanating from the *tanden* at the draw, then "recentering" that energy when resheathing your sword at the end of a technique. Careful breath control is also crucial in *iaido*, and reflects how it can apply in ju-jitsu (e.g., exhaling at the end of a form).

Because you must conjure opponents out of thin air, *iaido* compels you to develop “situational awareness” of how you may be attacked—an obvious complement to ju-jitsu practice. You also discover that some of the defensive positions we assume in ju-jitsu echo common stances in *iaido* (e.g., *chudan-no-kamae*).

Other Japanese sword arts of interest include *tamishigiri* (cutting targets—usually *tatami* mats—with a katana) and *kendo* (where two armored opponents fence using straight bamboo swords called *shinai*). The latter, of course, don’t look or feel like katana; as *kendo* gained great popularity as a 20th-century sport in Japan, *iaido* was promoted as a way to preserve a cultural connection with handling actual swords.

You don’t need expensive equipment to begin exploring. Go buy a \$10 *bokken* and pick up one of the well-known texts on swordsmanship noted below. *Bokken* have been used for centuries and, in 1612, legendary swordsman Miyamoto Musashi used one to defeat handily an opponent who was armed with a steel sword.

Ju-jitsu instructors could imitate Professor McCurdy and consider integrating a bit of sword training at their own dojo. Just don’t be surprised if one or two students slip off to train full-time in swordsmanship.

Thomas Dineen is the National Membership Director of the American Ju-jitsu Association and trains at the Baltimore School of Self-Defense in Middle River, Maryland. He can be reached at tg dineen3@gmail.com.

Mixing Martial Arts: What's Your Cup of *Matcha*?

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From Ju-Jitsu to Sambo to Savate

First, let's nod to the American Ju-Jitsu Association, which strives to further Japanese ju-jitsu. A noble calling, but is it redundant to write "Japanese ju-jitsu"? One would think so, until we read of Brazilian ju-jitsu. To make my head hurt even more, I once saw an article where a gentleman from Brazil wearing a kimono and frayed black belt said Brazilian ju-jitsu has nothing in common with Japanese ju-jitsu. My takeaway was that the effort by the Greeks to refine irony never crossed the cold Atlantic to Brazil.

Brazilian ju-jitsu stems from Japanese judo/ju-jitsu as briefly taught to members of the Gracie family in Brazil by Mitsuyo Maeda, fourth *dan* from the Kodokan, the headquarters of judo in Japan. With only a year to impart knowledge, Maeda's game plan was to tailor Kodokan judo to what could be grasped (if not mastered) in a short course—a "judo lite."

It's a tribute to the Gracie family that they did so much with what they had. However, they poured a lot of resources into mastering a slice of the pie, assuming that the slice could always substitute for the whole. This narrowing, instead of embracing a larger whole, is why Brazilian ju-jitsu just isn't my personal cup of *matcha*. My nephew practices it, and good on him, as they say, but I like the broader view. My view may not be a Brazilian's cup of *yerba mate*, but our differences are more in focus and philosophy than in technical content.

So by focusing on Japanese rather than Brazilian ju-jitsu, the American Ju-Jitsu Association (AJA) has adopted the broader view. That is not a dismissal of Brazilian ju-jitsu as much as embracing the broader, more three-dimensional view. I have trained in ju-jitsu in the AJA as well as American folkstyle and international styles of wrestling. I also have trained in judo and yudo, but do I bemoan that the sambo that I have studied, being a Russified ju-jitsu/judo, is not recognized by the AJA? I do not.



Mitsuyo Maeda (c. 1910), who helped bring judo to Brazil and is considered by some to be "the father of Brazilian ju-jitsu."

Photo: Public Domain

When creating sambo, the Soviets explored the martial arts of Japan to harvest what they could for what they perceived as modern combat. Like the Brazilians, they saw a need for greater mat work, for a couple underlying reasons:

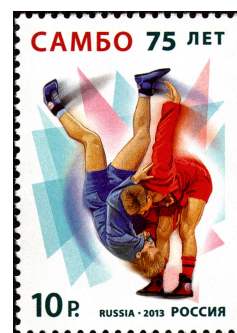
1) Traditional Japanese *tatami* mats were hard to find. Instead they had to substitute sand pits, wrestling mats, or even heavy blankets and mattresses. Those surfaces considerably slowed down the footwork for throws, but they did facilitate a comfortable means for developing mat work, including submission holds.

2) Vasily Oshchepkov, a Russian spy and self-defense instructor for the Red Army, earned his *nidan* in judo by studying at the Kodokan after the Russo-Japanese War. He was sure that the Soviet Union and Japan would soon be at war again. Oshchepkov understood judo founder Jigoro Kano's reluctance to devote too much study time to *ne waza* (ground techniques), so this was a theoretical area where Russians could surpass the Japanese. Unfortunately, this advantage did not come up so much on the battlefield, but rather in early judo competitions where the Japanese soon learned to negate the Russian edge in *ne waza*.

Oddly, the Japanese, in their quest for a better Olympic judo, studied sambo wrestling. For many it was their cup of Чай, or Russian tea. Many have admired the Russian's submission skills, but not all Russians so value these abilities.

In the 1960s, there was a great debate between two Russian martial arts masters over whether throwing or mat work should take primacy. Yevgeny Chumakov favored throwing. To allow more time to fine tune throwing skills, he tried to simplify mat work into 10 key techniques. On the other side, David Rudman, considered the king of Russian mat work, believed mat techniques were key for the Russians to beat the best *judokas* in the world—the Japanese. To free up more time for improving mat work, he tried to find the 10 most useful throwing and takedown techniques.

The takeaway from this story is that many systems may only have about 10 techniques that cover everything from standing to mat wrestling and everything in between. In the early 1920s, the goal of Victor Spiridonov's Russian ju-jitsu course for spies and the militia was to find a



Russian stamp from 2013, marking the 75th anniversary of sambo's recognition as an official sport by the USSR.

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dozen key techniques to build a system from. His basic dozen shot past the baker's dozen into 10 best standing, 10 best ground techniques from on top, and 10 best ground techniques from on bottom, etc. Both Chumakov and Rudman, while being diametrically opposite in the primacy of standing vs. mat wrestling, knew that a fighter must have depth. Limiting mat or standing wrestling to only 10 techniques to focus on the other aspects might seem a very narrow viewpoint, but 10 different techniques is still a considerable body of skill in any one aspect.

A sustainable world champion needs both standing and mat fighting skills. A combatant, on the other hand, might be able to get by with only standing techniques, because such is the nature of warfare—no one can charge across a battlefield in the “guard.”

The Russians also embraced the catch-as-catch-can philosophy of chain wrestling, where techniques seldom exist in isolation but instead work within a spectrum of actions, from gripping to evading with two fighters constantly interacting. Mastery of this flow supports moving from a failed technique to a successful technique.

Having a wrestling/sambo background (and somewhat ignoring or disremembering my judo), when I first began learning ju-jitsu in an AJA dojo, I was frustrated by a seemingly choppy, staccato rhythm in *kata* that I attributed to Japanese influences. I mentioned it to my instructor, so he picked one of our standards (right-hand punch blocked by a left forearm, right-hand strike to the face, *kubi-nage*, to body stomp to arm lock) and told me to perform as if I were doing sambo. Afterwards, he informed me that I had committed a mugging and not a *kata*.

Over time, I learned that this staccato style was more a characteristic of eastern AJA dojos, and it might have stemmed from a focus on self-defense competitions and making the actions clearly viewable and thus scorable for the judges. Then again, it might just have been a preference.

The Art of the Configuration Manager

If we speak of martial arts, we really aren't talking about military science—just the elements of hand-to-hand combat for self-defense. The military necessity, if not science, does come up with lots of things that the civilian world later snaps up for good purposes. One such concept (now loved by the aerospace and automotive industries) is called *configuration management*.

Configuration management defines the baseline for what a system is, and then, if need be, how to intelligently evolve the system to meet the latest needs. Change just for change is wasteful and can even introduce

flaws. For example, *savate* (French boxing) once had hand strikes that were more about rapid slapping than solid punching. Eventually, French boxing met English boxing (what we see as boxing today on TV). In a match between the two systems in the 1800s, the imagined advantage of the longer range for kicking was laid waste by the uppercut and, *voilà*, *savate* became a very successful integrator of French and English boxing.

Another modern combat system from Israel had a decent ground-fighting system based on ju-jitsu, but it suffered growing pains when the designers tried to integrate Brazilian ju-jitsu, considered the “most effective ground fighting system known to man.” The first take was a disaster, especially since the practitioners were soldiers. (It’s hard to drop into guard in full combat gear!)

The designers of the Israeli system had assumed a good standing fighting system would automatically mesh with a very good ground fighting system. The problem was that life is often not so much black and white but very many shades of gray. In this case, the Israeli system got back with the Brazilian school and worked to build an integrated bridge between the two systems. They understood that a fight can have ground and standing combat, but there are very many transitions between the two positions where inappropriate linkages in techniques can lead to loss, injury or death. Properly blended, the techniques of both systems were far more effective than assuming that knowing both separately would net the best and fastest responses.

I like the American Ju-Jitsu Association as an open forum that knows the limits of where it should begin and stop. We can wrestle with conundrums, like how all practitioners of Budoshin are AJA members, but all AJA members are not practitioners of Budoshin ju-jitsu, but we still share a lot in common, and our boards of directors are the configuration managers for their systems. They are gatekeepers that read the tea leaves to tell us what our system is and where it must be.

So, until next time, raise a glass to your favorite martial arts blend, and cheers to you!

Scott Anderson began his martial arts career 50 years ago as a high school wrestler, and continued to wrestle in college at George Mason University. He has since earned black belts in judo, sambo and multiple styles of ju-jitsu, and earned the title 1995 Sambo World Champion, Masters Division at 68 kg. He teaches at the Gulfcoast Judo and Ju-Jitsu Dojo in Ocean Springs, Mississippi. He can be reached at sasombo@msn.com.

About the American Ju-Jitsu Association

The American Ju-Jitsu Association was founded in 1972 by George Kirby and William Fromm at the request of their sensei, Jack Seki, for the purpose of bringing different *ryu* of the art together in an atmosphere of mutual cooperation and respect. Since that time it has grown from two dojo to approximately 30, plus international affiliates. The AJA has established itself as a reputable organization within the martial arts community and works closely with other major ju-jitsu organizations in the United States and internationally in areas of mutual concern.

The AJA is a non-profit amateur athletic association registered with both the state of California and the United States government [IRS code 501(c)(3)]. It is a non-profit corporation with a charitable foundation status. Although originally recognized by the IRS as a "social club," because there was no other way to recognize the AJA as an amateur athletic association, formal recognition of the AJA as a true amateur athletic association, according to the criteria of the United States government, was secured in 1976 under the Sports Act of that year. To our knowledge, the AJA is the only martial arts organization in the U.S. that is classified by the IRS as an amateur athletic association.

Board of Directors

Position	Name	Email
President & Chairman	David Boesel	President@AJA-email.org
Vice President	Jeff Wynn	VP@AJA-email.org
Secretary	Barry Stebbins	Secretary@AJA-email.org
Treasurer	Marc Tucker	Treasurer@AJA-email.org
Western Regional Director	Harold Zeidman	WRDirector@AJA-email.org
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Northern Regional Director	Paul Klara	NRDirector@AJA-email.org
Director	Gene Roos	Director@AJA-email.org
Director	Scott Finley	Webmaster@AJA-email.org

Administrative Staff

Position	Name	Email
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Certification Director	Barry Stebbins	Certificates@AJA-email.org
Communications Director	John M. Landry, Ph.D.	Communications@AJA-email.org
Historian	Mike Balog	Historian@AJA-email.org
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National Standards & Certification Board Chair	Jeff Wynn	NSCB@AJA-email.org
Webmaster	Scott Finley	Webmaster@AJA-email.org
Newsletter Editor	Kristen Minogue	Newsletter@AJA-email.org

