

Nice guys CAN win!!

By Dominic King

(This account was written by Dominic early in 2005 so things have moved on since then but it makes interesting reading especially for anybody believing that the sport of Judo is one of the "softer" martial arts!)

I'm not exaggerating when I say that I can't remember life without Judo. Many of my training partners joke that I was probably born on the mat, coming from the womb already kitted out in full judogi, ready for the evening session. But this isn't far from the truth. My brother Adam was first taken to the local Judo club in 1980 when my parents feared that he'd be bullied at school because of his soft nature. He was only six at the time and both my parents went along to watch him practise. I was only two years old which meant that I went along with them also. They sat me on a blue mat up one end of the dojo and while other kids played together, run around and generally got up to mischief, I was watching the Judo. These were some of my earliest memories and although I don't recall my first session, learning breakfalls or my first throws, I do remember the instructor - he was around twenty and called Mel Church (later coach for Goshindo Judo Club for more than 20 years!)

I competed in my first competition at the age of five when I weighed about 16kg. In fact I fought in the under 20kg category so was at a slight disadvantage but I was so good that I managed to win a silver medal. (alright, so there were only two of us competing but he was an orange belt!!)

Over the next year and a half I competed on several occasions and managed to win a few gold medals. I progressed fairly quickly and despite not being a natural fighter like some kids, my Judo skills were certainly above average. A few weeks before my seventh birthday I competed in the regional championships which I had a good chance of winning. I reached the final where I sustained my first Judo injury. I fell awkwardly and my left arm snapped in two making a horrific cracking noise and ended up shaped like a banana. Enough to put anyone off, right? WRONG!! The local newspaper reported that six-year-old Dominic was already doing one-armed press-ups in preparation for his return.

Once back to fitness my enthusiasm grew and I was keen to train more than just once a week. I started training at the Budokan Judo Club on Mondays and then shortly after adding a Wednesday and Friday night to the list.

So now I was already training four nights a week but couldn't get enough. The Budokan was considered one of the best clubs in the BJC (British Judo Council). The discipline and competitiveness of the club was excellent and gave me my first taste of hard training. I really enjoyed it and found that I could push myself harder than any of the other kids which made me more confident.

By the time I was ten I'd won almost everything there was to win in BJC including the Nationals (which looking back, was just a "Mickey Mouse" competition) Even at this early age I had ambitions of going to the Olympics one day but realised that to do this I had to join the BJA. The best BJA club in the area was the Norwich YMCA which a few of the Budokan seniors would attend on Tuesday nights. I joined the club but was worried about being out of my depth because the reputation and standard of the BJA was far higher. Shortly after joining I competed in the BJA Area championships. I hadn't yet been graded in the BJA so I wore my white belt and I was so nervous that I felt like one! I entered expecting to get beat up as I was giving 5kg away to higher graded players but as it happened I won the gold medal. The Eastern Area squad manager at that time just happened to watch me fight and thought I had a lot of potential. He asked me to go to the Area squad training even though I was officially two years too young.

I competed in my first junior Nationals at Crystal Palace aged twelve and despite being very nervous came 5th. For someone from the Eastern area at that time, 5th place wasn't a bad result. I started travelling out of the area for competitions more frequently and it was like being at the bottom of the ladder again. I then stepped up the training to five nights a week and many parents thought that my mum and dad pushed me into it. What a load of rubbish!! I'd have trained eight nights a week if I could!

By the time the 1991 Nationals came round I'd improved loads and I picked up a bronze. In 1992 I improved again and won the silver which got me onto the British Cadet Squad. In 1993 I was really dominant and won all my competitions abroad with the Squad. This won me selection as a reserve for the Youth Olympics. The Youth Olympics is for under eighteen's so at only just fifteen, I was chuffed to bits to be a reserve. In November that year fighting in my age group I won the Junior Nationals to become National Champion which at the time was as big as it got.

Perhaps my wins in 1993 had made me a bit complacent because 1994 wasn't such a good year. This made me more determined than ever to make 1995 my year. Training started on January 2nd in Kendal and all my years of hard training could not prepare me for this. We stayed for a week in a hut in snowy mountains and I was the youngest there at sixteen. On that

camp were several who ended up going to the Atlanta Olympics and some who later went to Sydney in 2000. I spent the first day trying to stop myself bursting into tears. It was the coldest, scariest, hardest training I'd ever done and I thought I was on an SAS selection. "It's character building" they said. That week helped me through hard times for years and as much as I wanted my mummy, I'm so glad I did it.

As it turned out, 1995 was one of my most successful years. That January I started the ball rolling by getting my black belt. In April I fought in Wilrijk (Belgium) for the Cadet squad. All my main rivals were there and we were told the winner would be selected for the Youth Olympics in July - so no pressure! I won the competition and went to the Games.

To this day, that week in July '95 remains one of the most exciting weeks of my life. In the run up to the games, I'd been interviewed on TV and radio giving me my first real taste of recognition, but during that week it was as though I'd been transformed into a celebrity. I'll never forget that feeling when we were paraded through the streets on the way to the opening ceremony. They were lined with hundreds of unknown faces all cheering and shouting as we marched past, all decked out in our Olympic tracksuits. I was surprised at the amount of people, ranging from grannies to young girls who wanted to kiss, cuddle and be pictured with a future Olympic Champion - it was mad! Unknown to me at the time was that I was strolling along just inches away from a 100-metre runner called Dwaine Chambers. Chambers is currently one of the fastest men on earth and has beaten World and Olympic Champion Maurice Greene on several occasions. (Unfortunately, he has subsequently tested positive for using a banned substance and has been banned!) I went to the games with no pressure on my shoulders at all, and if I'm honest, I never really believed that I'd come away with a medal at that level. After the opening ceremony though, I was so hyped up by the occasion that I'd convinced myself that I was going to win it and that no one could possibly stand in my way. I'd trained really hard for it so why not? I was in, what athletes call, "the zone". There's something magic about the word "Olympics" that brings the best out in people. It didn't matter to me that this wasn't the real thing - this was my Olympics and it was as big as it could get for me at that time. I remember warming up and saying to myself "OK Dom mate, this might be as close as you ever get to an Olympics so don't waste it!" And I didn't. I'm sure if it had been called the World Games instead of the Olympics then I wouldn't have done so well but that magic word made all the difference. If someone had shot me that day I'm sure I'd have carried on fighting. The only way I'd have been beaten on that day was to be outclassed by a better judo player but never on spirit alone.

I strangled a Danish boy in my first fight and from then on it was just a complete battle. My second fight was against an Azerbaijan gorilla who looked about thirty and was probably my hardest fight of the lot. I was convinced his lunchbox was full of steroids but used my skill and speed to eventually win the fight. I then won another hard fight against a Latvian which put me in the semi-final against a Fin. I went a koka up early on and despite him being an excellent player, I think I intimidated him from the start and he struggled to find his form. He got a chui with only fourteen seconds to go which meant I could afford to get a shido penalty. It was the longest fourteen seconds of my life as I ran round the mat looking like a cross between Muhammad Ali and a scared rabbit. When the bell went I was in the Youth Olympic final and I just lost it big time. Even now when I watch the video I can't believe it's really me. I've never been a drama queen as far as wins are concerned, but here I was running around and punching the air like I'd scored in the World Cup Final. The less said about the final, the better. In short, I got whipped! My Spanish opponent was, and still is, one of the best fighters in the World. This wasn't helped by my mental approach to the contest. There was a fairly long break before the final and what I had already achieved had too much time to sink in. I'd already surpassed my and everybody else's expectations of me and I was slipping into celebration mode. That evening I planned to have a major celebration in the Olympic village but when the time came, I just flaked out on my bed nursing a stress headache.

When I got back from the games I realised that this result had changed my Judo a lot. Not only was I more confident but players were now afraid to fight me. I finished '95 with a win in Switzerland and a bronze in the Junior Nationals which was a great achievement considering only a week earlier I couldn't walk due to an injury.

In 1996 I trained for two weeks in China with their Olympic squad and later I was picked as reserve for the Junior World and European Championships to a lad called Andrew Machin. He also beat me in the final of the British Championships in December but Machin was very strong and a year older than me. '96 was special for me because it was then that I started going out with Claire. For those who don't know Claire, we're still going strong and got engaged in December 2001. Claire started at Goshindo Judo Club when she was just ten. I remember watching her bash up all the boys and even then I loved her attitude to training. Her dad Mark was a physical training instructor at Blundeston prison and he offered to let me use the gym facilities there. He spent a lot of his time helping with my training and organising programmes for me. As we spent more time together and I benefited from his training, I felt that in return I should help Claire more with her Judo. A short time later I heard rumours that she fancied the

pants off me (well she is only human I guess!) and of course the rest is history.

The next couple of years were spent climbing yet another ladder in the shape of the senior ranks. This of course was a totally different ball game, but slowly and steadily I worked my way up, scraping on to the Senior Squad by winning a few minor ranking events. By the end of '98 I'd more or less established myself in the Squad but at twenty years old I was by no means the main man. The British No.1 at the time was David Somerville who later went to the World Championships and the 2000 Sydney Olympics. In November 1998 I fought in the Western Area ranking event which is nothing special in itself, but I had one of my best days to date. Not only did I throw my old rival Andrew Machin for ippon in the semi-final but I was to meet and beat David Somerville in the final. Somerville remained as No.1 for the next couple of years until James Warren took over the top spot. Warren went to the 2001 World Championships in the October and then in December I faced him at the British closed Championships. Again I had an excellent day and threw Warren for ippon and managed to clinch the British title. At last I was No.1 and not only had I won gold but I also won myself a trip to Japan to compete in the Japan Cup (formerly the Kano Cup). This is famous for being probably as hard as any competition in the World, arguably stronger than the Olympics. I went for two and a half weeks as there was a training camp following the competition. Unfortunately, in the first round I drew the Korean who was the World Bronze Medallist. I fought well and it took him nearly three minutes before he launched me with a drop seoi nage.

The training camp was unbelievable, split into two weeks, one at the Kodokan and the other at the Tokai University. In Japan, the training consists of three hours Judo in the morning and three hours in the afternoon. Kodokan was really tough but it just got harder when I went to Tokai. I'd been to some of the hardest training camps in the World, China, Sweden, Germany, America and Sardinia to name but a few. In Kendal I had laid on my bed in the freezing cold hut forcing myself to stay awake for ten minutes or so just to enjoy relaxing. I knew if I let myself drop off too quickly it would suddenly be morning again and that meant more pain. On a hard training camp in Belgium I remember that with several days still to go, myself and a couple of the other lads on the squad spent our short rest period working out how many seconds we had left before it was time to return home.

I should have been well used to the hard training by now but once again I found that this was yet another new level of intensity. Tokai University is the best and toughest place for Judo in the World and is home to countless World and Olympic Champions. I just knew it was going to be a nightmare

when I spotted the graffiti on the desks in my room (which was specially for foreign Judo players). Instead of "I woz 'ere", I read things like "Help" and "I want to go home!!" I was even more worried when I read who'd signed them. Great Olympic Champions such as Mark Huzinger (Holland) and our very own World Champion and Olympic medallist Kate Howey.

I wasn't disappointed! During my first session, I was sent out the front with a red belt for ten six-minute randoris against some of the best fighters in the World. I fought out of my skin and it took until the seventh fight to even be caught for a koka. After the tenth fight I flopped against the wall really chuffed with myself. Billy Cusack came over and said "as soon as you're ready, get back out there". Mentally I was finished and when I finally did get back out there with the Japanese No.2 at 66kg, I could have done with a parachute. At Tokai University, each student studies Judo for four years. Two weeks was more than enough for me. In fact, when we all sat down and discussed this, most of us came to the conclusion that four years in prison would be the preferred option.

2002 was spent at "A" tournaments fighting for supremacy with Warren for the Commonwealth games place. At one such event, he managed to throw the World Silver Medallist for ippon which secured him the place, leaving me as reserve. He went on to win the Games which in a way was a feather in my cap as I could say that I'd thrown him for ippon in our last meeting just a few months earlier.

For the most part, 2003 is best forgotten. During May, whilst having an excellent National squad training session at High Wycombe (probably one of my best sessions ever, I was dumping everyone in sight), two 90kg players driving at full speed across the mat, landed on the side of my knee bending it at 90° in the wrong direction snapping my cruciate ligament. Although I was able to see a consultant almost immediately, due to the severity of the injury, I had to have my leg in a brace for 6 weeks before it could be operated on and I was told it would be a further year before I could commence training. That was a challenge in itself and I was back working on my fitness a few days after the operation but it was still December before I was back into full training on the mat.

Probably for many people an injury of this magnitude would have spelt the end of an active judo career but I look upon it as an extra hurdle along the way (albeit a high one!!). My first competition after the injury was the North-west open in January 2004 where I won Bronze, next came the Northern Home Counties open in February where I was placed 5th followed by the Ipswich open in March where I got back to my winning ways by winning the Gold. The first major International Tournament was the British

open in April but although I beat a top French player in the first fight, I was caught by Colin Oates who went out in the next round leaving us both unplaced. In the Irish open the following month I was back to something like my form before my injury getting through to the final with relative ease. I was comfortably beating Richard Phillips in the final but with only seconds to go I put in a weak attack to earn a dropping penalty to put me behind in the contest with only ONE second left on the clock! The Silver medal was no consolation for making such a basic error. I was gutted!

Reasonable results were gained at the next few competitions with Bronzes at the English open and the Heart of England finishing on a high at the end of October with a win in Edinburgh earning the title of Scottish open champion. This result secured a place in the Grand Finals by finishing in 2nd place in the National ranking list.

Unfortunately, the Grand Finals didn't happen for me with a bad bout of flu peaking at the time I should have been fighting. I didn't even have the strength to get out of bed let alone fight some of the top players in the country. As it happened, I was selected by the BJA board of directors to be part of the 2005 Elite National Squad so it is nice to know that my reputation and previous performances have secured me a place in the Squad.

The first International competition in 2005 was the Belgium open; I won the first fight then lost to Fredrick Gregory, Belgian No.1 who I have fought a few times. I find his style very difficult but each time I get closer to beating him. Maybe next time!!

So what about the future? Well, to my mind, I've got the ability to go all the way but I've always struggled to believe in myself as much as I should. I've seen a sports psychologist to put me on the right track and I've seen some positive results. If, at the end of the day, I don't reach the very top as I would like, all is not lost. I now know that I can make a living using my judo skills as a coach and hopefully, one day, myself and Claire will produce super Judo babies. The reason I say this is because we both have special qualities that the other doesn't have. I have natural skill, speed and fitness but I've always lacked what Claire has in the shape of natural strength, aggression and killer instinct. Dom + Claire = Champion!

**Watch this space!!
(in the near future!!)**