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# Applicable research in judo

Editors: Hrvoje Sertić, Sanda Čorak, Ivan Segedi



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Hrvoje Sertić, Sanda Čorak and Ivan Segedi

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## SARAH MAYER AND THE KŌDŌKAN: EARLY EUROPEAN WOMEN'S JUDO IN JAPAN

Mike Callan<sup>1</sup>, Amanda Spenn<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Department of Sport Development and Management, University of Chichester, Chichester, United Kingdom*

<sup>2</sup>*International Centre for Sports History and Culture, De Montfort University, Leicester, United Kingdom*

### ABSTRACT

Sarah Mayer was the first foreign woman in Japan to be awarded a shōdan (black belt) for judo. She was awarded shōdan by Isogai Hajime at the Dai Nippon Butoku Kai in March 1935, having earlier trained at the Kōdōkan, and met Professor Kano. Mayer is an important figure in the history of women's judo internationally. This research focusses on Mayer's relationships with senior figures in the Kōdōkan at that time. Hatta Ichiro, Samura Kaichiro, Mifune Kyuzo, Isogai Hajime and Nagaoka Hideichi. Four of whom went on to be awarded 10<sup>th</sup> dan. There is discussion about the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Kōdōkan.

Based on original primary biographical research material, understanding her relationships gives insight into global gender issues in sports history. Sources include: Kōdōkan Library and Archive, National Archives of UK, and Mayer Letters in the Bowen Archive, Bath

The way Mayer was treated in Japan was highly unusual. She was not separated from the men, but expected to fight against and even bathe with them. All of the male teachers under whom she learnt in Japan, accepted her, not as a woman, but as if she had no gender, despite her being attractive and feminine in western terms. The research is presented in the context of the positive influence made by women's sport on the struggle for female emancipation during the early 20th century. Her journey is an important example of historical global interaction in the sporting arena. The efforts of Mrs. Mayer led the way for all the female judoka in Europe.

*Key words: judo, Kōdōkan, history, women, Kano, biography, gender*

### SARAH MAYER

Mrs Sarah Mayer was an English woman who visited Japan in the 1930s to practise judo. Several authors have commented on her life. (Brousse, 2015; Callan & Spenn, 2009, 2011; Miarka, Marques, & Franchini, 2011; Mizoguchi, 2013; Williams, 2014) She is most famous as the first western woman to achieve the grade of shōdan whilst in Japan. (Anon, 1935)

This paper focusses on the interaction of Mrs Mayer with five highly respected senior judoka from the Kōdōkan, Tōkyō, the institution founded by Professor Kano Jigoro in 1882 as a place to study the way of judo. The five individuals discussed in this paper are; Hatta Ichiro, Mifune Kyuzo, Samura Kaichiro, Nagaoka Hideichi and Isogai Hajime. (Callan & Spenn, 2016)

### HATTA ICHIRO

Sarah had met Hatta Ichiro in London when he had visited the Budokwai. They had got on very well and Ichiro was pleased that Sarah was visiting his country. She received letters from him inviting her to Tōkyō. He insisted that she stay with him at his parent's home. So she accompanied him back to his house in Setagaya.

Hatta Ichiro was a graduate of Waseda University, who practiced judo at the Kōdōkan. He was known as a hard trainer. (Leggett, 1952) Hatta was to go on to found the All-Japan Wrestling Association. (Nagashima & Tomozoe, 2015)

A short time later Professor Kano, arrived back after an extensive trip abroad promoting judo. (Bennett, 2009) Sarah was anxious about meeting this most important of all the judo men, but Hatta said it was essential that she did so.

*„I met Professor Kano for the first time. I had expected to meet a very aloof person for everyone seems to stand in such awe of him that I felt quite nervous. Instead I found a charming old gentleman with European manners who greeted me warmly and made me feel quite at home.“ (Mayer, 1934)*

She found him a charismatic man, and he seemed genuinely interested in Sarah's progress in judo.

*„He seems most anxious to help me and asked me whether I only wished to get some practice or whether I wanted to learn as much about the real meaning of judo as was possible in a short time. I told him that I was as much interested in the philosophical side as in the actual practice which seemed to please him and he asked me to come again when he had had time to formulate a plan for my study.“ (Mayer, 1934)*

Sarah had avoided the Kōdōkan, as they would not allow her or any other women in to the main dojo. The women's dojo seemed to her like a „young ladies school“ but after meeting Sarah, Professor Kano was very happy for her to join in with the men's practice sessions and „gave orders“ that she should be allowed access to the main dojo. He also told her that she should practice with Mr Mifune and with Mr Hatta whenever possible, and he was insistent that she practice her kata in all its forms as he believed it was the only true way to improve understanding and technique.

Her first session at the Kōdōkan was a great success. She practiced with a man of 6<sup>th</sup> dan who made her work really hard. Tired out she went to sit down and regain her composure, but almost immediately a man of 8<sup>th</sup> dan came to offer her a bout. She asked him if he would mind if she had a little rest first, however...

*„Afterwards Ichiro said that if I was asked to practice by any of these exalted ones, I mustn't refuse -- but if the Prince of Wales had come up at that minute and asked me to dance I should have had to make some excuse!“ (Mayer, 1934)*

## MIFUNE KYUZO

Mr Mifune, seemed old and frail to Sarah, with a tiny physique, but on the judo mat he was spectacularly fast and skillful. She managed to get a practice with him quite soon after her arrival in Tōkyō, and there was no sign of the gentle way most of the judo men started with her.

*„He was in a playful mood when I practiced with him. He just threw me round the room as if I were an India rubber ball, and when I tried any throw, he simply wasn't there any longer.“ (Mayer, 1934)*

Mr Mifune offered to teach her alone once a week, and he told her that she could follow him around to the many clubs he taught at on the other days. In the afternoons she went to Waseda University with Hatta to practice. The boys at the university took great delight in having a western woman in their midst, rushing to her side if she carried a bag, they would jostle for position and the winning boy would seize the bag and hold it aloft, with the other boys cheering, and if a boy were to hold a door open for her, they would all laugh.

## SAMURA KAICHIRO

In November 1934 the Kōdōkan had recently moved to a new site close to Suidobashi station, which had delayed the celebrations planned for 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. (Bennett, 2009) It was a national occasion and Emperor Hirohito sent a gift with the Imperial Prince Kan'in Kotohito. Mr Yamashita Yoshiaki, one of the Kōdōkan Shitennō (four heavenly gods), made one of the speeches. (Kōdōkan, 1935) Mr Yamashita had been in America for some time and taught judo to President Theodore Roosevelt. (Stevens, 2013) He was elderly and his voice wasn't strong, so

Mr Munakata Ichiro read his words for him. (Kōdōkan, 1935) After some beautiful kata displays, it was Sarah's turn to demonstrate randori with Samura Kaichiro. (Kōdōkan, 1935; Mayer, 1934)

*„I was so frightened by the instructions I had been given (how to bow and which mat to stand on in a hall of 500 mats each indistinguishable from the next) that I was more inclined to collapse on his bosom than engage him in combat. However, despair gave me strength and I got through somehow although Ichiro said afterwards that I „made him some awful pants“ by which he meant that he was as nervous as I was.“ (Mayer, 1934)*

A couple of weeks before the celebrations, Sarah had dislocated her shoulder. She was attended to by the club's 'bonesetter' and after stopping her from practising until the anniversary he strapped her up ready for her big moment.

*„As I was about to enter the dojo he begged me to fight with might and main adding that if I put my shoulder out again he would soon mend it!“ (Mayer, 1934)*

All went well and they had put on a good show, thankfully managing not to damage her shoulder again. Afterwards Professor Kano and Mr Yamashita came to congratulate her. When it was all over, her 'bonesetter' had another look at her injury and told her she must have another week away from practice to make sure it was fully strong.

### NAGAOKA HIDEICHI

One of the men who returned to Japan for the anniversary, was Mr Nagaoka. He had just been in London (Mayer, 1934) where he had spent some time with Mr Koizumi at the Budokwai. (Budokwai, 1932) He gave a talk about his travels at the Anniversary. (Kōdōkan, 1935) Once Sarah was fit enough to return to practice, Mr Nagaoka seemed to think that she needed looking after, perhaps Mr Koizumi had asked him to keep an eye on her.

*„He bestows the same care upon me as a hen with one chicken, and if he sees me alone in the Kōdōkan he calls loudly and demands to know the reason that I am being neglected. The other men who are quite accustomed to me look very surprised and rather at a loss.“ (Mayer, 1934)*

Back in Tōkyō at the Kōdōkan, she told reporters that she was hoping to take her skill and knowledge back to the Budokwai in London, and help out with the teaching there, adding;

*„Judo is a more personal thing to me. It is a process of building up spiritual, mental, and physical health. It gives me a greater enjoyment of life.“ (Anon, 1935)*

### ISOGAI HAJIME

Sarah visited Kyoto when Ichiro Hatta had sent her an introduction to Professor Isogai. She presented Ichiro's introduction but he showed great indifference. She was shown to the changing area, a room full of men in various states of undress.

A local headmaster had been called in to help her with translation and she was partnered with a „strapping young man of 5<sup>th</sup> dan“. He was initially very kind as they began to practice together, until a nod from Mr Isogai gave him permission to slam her around the mat with

*„that extra push when I was on my way down that makes the floor come up quicker than usual.“ (Mayer, 1934)*

Sarah started to worry that she was going to get hurt, however,

*„when I considered the matter later, I found that I hadn't so much as a bruise or a scratch beyond the usual ones on my shins and my left collarbone which are no doing of mine. After I had a short rest, they told me to try again and this time the Professor stopped us every time I tried to do a throw and corrected me carefully. He taught me quite a lot in a very short time.“ (Mayer, 1934)*

Sarah met Mr Isogai again at the Kōdōkan 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary celebration. Afterwards she invited him to lunch at the Frank Lloyd Wright designed Imperial Hotel, along with Professor Iizuka. At the lunch Sarah saw a very different

man away from the dojo, Professor Isogai was relaxed and funny, and several cocktails later he offered her a fifth dan if she went back to Kyoto.

„He broke his leg a short while ago and arrived leaning heavily upon a stick, but he left the hotel waving it in the air. When I remember how terrified I was of him in Kyoto I can't help laughing. As for Prof. Iizuka - I've never been able to take him very seriously since I taught him the Charleston.” (Mayer, 1934)

In Kyoto, Professor Isogai was not so tightly tied to Professor Kano's standards on gradings. The Butoku Kai system had broken away from promotions through the Kōdōkan. (Hoare, 2009) Professor Kano had become disappointed with the way the standards were slipping for promotions and had disassociated himself with the Butoku Kai grades. In March 1935, Sarah took a trip back to Kyoto, and over four days she took part in a grading. (Anon, 1935)

„Her tests included 50 movements and holds. Twenty of the movements were in kime-no-kata, where her ability was tested for self-defence against such weapons as sticks, swords and daggers. Fifteen movements were in nage-no-kata, or various types of throwing the opponent. The last 15 movements were tests in katame-no-kata or floor work, which include strangle holds, arm and head lock, and pinning and holding opponents on the floor.” (Anon, 1935)

Mr Isogai stepped forward and smiled and Sarah's heart leapt as she was finally awarded her shōdan. The award ceremony took place immediately, and the certificate was presented by Prince Nashimoto. (Anon, 1935)

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