

# STRONGER TOGETHER

An interview with All-Japan Judo Champion, founder of "Global Kids Judo Network," and Instructor/Junior Development Director of Tohkon Judo Academy in Chicago,

**Megumi Ishikawa**



This month's interview is with a truly extraordinary athlete—not only for her accomplishments in national and international competitions, but also for her dedication to sharing martial arts with the rest of the world. Today we interview Megumi Ishikawa, Asian Championship and Kodokan Cup (All-Japan Championship) winning judoka—a person who practices Judo—who will share stories about some of her most memorable matches while talking about her love for the sport as well as her new goals to share her passion for Judo with athletes in Chicago, the Midwest, and around the globe.

**\*This month's interview was conducted in Japanese. Quotes included have been translated to English.**

# A SPARK IGNITED

Megumi, whose father is also a judoka, has been practicing Judo since the age of ten. However, she tells us that her passion for the sport did not truly manifest until a few years later. She recalls how a single match when she was fourteen became the catalyst for her dream.

“At first, I didn’t like Judo. I really only practiced it because my father was a coach. But I can remember one match in particular from when I was fourteen years old that changed everything. Actually, I lost that match to an opponent, even though I knew I was stronger than her, and I felt so frustrated afterwards. I walked away telling myself that I needed to become much better and work harder. That was the moment I realized that maybe I did care about the sport a lot. For me, that was the true beginning of my Judo career.”

From that moment forward, Megumi was determined to give her all to becoming a better athlete. She began to take her training more seriously, holding onto her dream of becoming great. With a new dedication, Megumi steadily improved her skills. Training was physically and mentally exhausting, but Megumi refused to let hardship or disappointments get the best of her.

“There were moments when I felt discouraged, and sometimes I worried that maybe I would never reach my goal. But the truth is, I never once thought about quitting. I never gave up.”



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# STRENGTH OF BODY AND SPIRIT

Training with a new sense of purpose also gave Megumi a deeper appreciation for the sport and the strength it fosters—both physical strength and strength of character. Megumi talks with great enthusiasm about what she thinks makes Judo special:

“I think one thing that sets Judo apart is an emphasis on respect for your opponent. This is why bowing to show respect is an important part of Judo matches. It’s very important to view them as a partner, not an enemy. Then, as you train and have matches with more judoka, it’s like building a bigger and bigger circle of people who can support your growth as an athlete and as a person.”



Megumi took this philosophy very seriously, learning from her training partners and opponents each time. Her hard work soon paid off, and Megumi rose to the top of the ranks among judoka. In 2011 she won the Kodokan Cup (All-Japan National Championships) for the first time, solidifying her status as the top female judoka of her weight class in Japan. Of all the matches in her time as a judoka, Megumi says that this match is the one she is most proud of.

“That was my first time competing in the All-Japan National Championships, and I had to face off against the World Champion, Kaori Matsumoto, during the tournament. I remember after I won I thought to myself, ‘I just became number one in Japan,’ and the realization gave me such a sense of accomplishment that I will remember that moment forever. It’s the match that I feel the happiest about when I think of my career.”

# A NEW DREAM



*Training with young judoka at Tohkon Judo Academy, 07/2018*

Megumi's success did not end with victory in 2011. After the competition, she joined Komatsu Women's Judo Club from 2011-2020. Komatsu is a Japanese multinational corporation that manufactures construction and mining machinery. In 1991, Komatsu formed the Women's Judo Club and continues support for development of women's Judo. Komatsu America hosted JCCC/Komatsu Cup in Chicago in 2018 and 2019. As a club member, Megumi went on to win the Kodokan Cup in 2015 and 2016 as well as a number of international competitions. Despite her extensive international experience, however, it wasn't until much later that she had her first chance to practice Judo in the United States. In 2018, Megumi and other members of her Judo club were invited to Chicago to teach a clinic at the Komatsu Cup, a friendly Japan-U.S. Judo tournament for younger athletes. Megumi says her time with American children at the clinic left a strong impression upon her.

"I had such a wonderful time in the U.S. and I remember something that stood out to me was how much energy the American children had. Not only were they excited about Judo, but I noticed a real sense of freedom with them. They weren't afraid to ask lots of questions or try new things. Of course, I know Japanese athletes also love Judo (I am one of them!), but what impressed me about my American students was how easy it was to see their love for the sport."

Megumi says she was touched not only by the athletes, but the people of the Midwest in general for their outgoing, friendly nature.

"Everybody was so welcoming and kind to me. I remember, even outside of the tournament, people on the street would stop to say hello, ask me where I bought my coat, or make conversation. I felt very welcome here."

Inspired by the enthusiasm of the children and the warm welcome she received in the Midwest, Megumi decided upon a new goal: she wanted to work with kids from other countries to try and share her love for Judo with them. Chicago and the Midwest seemed like the perfect place to start her new mission.

"I always want to challenge myself and I feel a strong calling to try that in a new environment in Chicago. I think coming to the U.S. would be a great next step. Since Judo is not a major sport in the U.S., it has the biggest potential to grow there!"



*Megumi with Consul-General Okada, 01/2020*



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*Tohkon Judo Academy, 07/2019*

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Megumi believes that the energy and fearlessness her Midwestern pupils brought to their training will be a perfect complement to the discipline and fortitude Judo can teach them. She believes that she can be an ambassador for Japanese martial arts and for Japan itself by teaching Judo to students from other countries.

“Children in America are so positive and proactive when learning, so I think the philosophy of Judo is the perfect partner for that kind of energy. Judo not only makes us happy but it teaches us to respect and support others, so through the passion of American students I hope the joy of this sport can grow even more.



What’s more, I believe that so much of Judo’s emphasis on respecting others and working together to support everyone’s growth is a really important part of Japanese culture. So, in a way, students are learning a new sport and a new culture at the same time. They also learn to respect others, no matter where they come from, so I think Judo can give everyone the right attitude to make a more peaceful world.”

This year, Megumi founded the NPO "Global Kids Judo Network," which aims to help more children outside Japan study Judo, and has already started teaching students at Chicago's Tohkon Academy through Zoom. In April, Megumi will return to America to study English more while teaching Judo to students here in the Midwest. She hopes this will be the first step on her journey to bringing a love for Judo to people all over the world. She shares her words of encouragement to all our readers and to anyone who is interested in learning Judo or Japanese martial arts:

“My dream is to bring happiness to children all over the world through Judo. Right now, we are all living in challenging times, but challenges only make us stronger. Someday, I will return to Chicago and I hope to meet many of you in person and teach you all about Judo. Judo and Japanese martial arts are really fun and can teach you many useful things. If I can help more American people to become interested in Judo, then I’ll be really happy. We’ll be waiting for you at the dojo (training hall for Judo)!”