

TURNOUTS: UNORTHODOX UKEMI

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For the last twenty years, I haven't taught my students how to do ukemi, at least not the traditional ukemi one thinks of when the word is uttered. Modernists call that form of ukemi mat bashing. If you ask many Judo people in Southern California what they think of me, the very first thing out of their mouths is "he doesn't teach his kids how to fall" as they roll their eyes and imply that I am crazy. Of course, none has ever been to my dojo to see first hand what really goes on. In spite of all the rumors surrounding our program, Judo America San Diego thrives with over 100 members practicing three times a week without the benefit of traditional ukemi training. And for this privilege I might add, Judo America students pay \$50 per month. Obviously, we must be doing something right for it would be impossible to maintain a membership such as ours if students were getting hurt because we don't teach them traditional ukemi.

DEFINITION OF UKEMI

Literally, ukemi means "receiving the body" so as to protect it. There is no mention whatsoever of falling onto the back in order to protect the body. Just how ukemi has come to be strictly understood as falling onto one's back is anyone's guess. Perhaps it is because teaching the masses how to fall on the back was easier than developing the skills to land safely on one's feet or fours. Perhaps landing on one's feet was deemed the domain of the smaller, more agile man rather than that of the slumbering, big man, or of the few exceptional players instead of the average players? Regardless of why traditional ukemi is what it is today, many modern participants in Judo, especially competitors, resort to all sorts of maneuvers to prevent falling on their back. For the most part, these skills are developed without the benefit of structured class training.

HISTORY DOESN'T LIE

From a historical perspective, there is anecdotal evidence to suggest that landing on one's feet is not as unorthodox as some would like us to believe. Long before Geof Gleeson, the eminent British Judo coach, openly questioned ukemi- and kata and uchi komi and everything else associated with traditional post World War II Japanese Judo- some Japanese Judo exerts had been doing "unorthodox" things for decades. Unfortunately for us, many of those "unorthodox" skills or methods seem to have been lost or misplaced. Specifically, the story of Shiro Saigo comes to mind. Saigo, one of the legendary four heavenly lords of the early Kodokan years, used to hang like a possum from the beams in the dojo. There he would practice falling onto his feet, not onto his back. Fukuda sensei states in her book *Born for the Mat*, "As a training partner for the late Professor Kano, he [Saigo] was thrown thousands of times until he trained himself to land on his feet no matter how he was thrown." In the 20th century, Kyuzo Mifune, 10th dan, also earned a reputation for being nearly impossible to be thrown onto his back. One could elevate him into the air, but throwing him onto his back without his permission was another story. Some of the aerial contortions he went through don't seem to fit the mold of traditional ukemi or behavior patterns.

The most compelling justification for unorthodox ukemi for me was a Japanese documentary on Judo that I remember watching on French television in the mid-60's. By holding a cat upside down about three feet off the ground and letting go of the cat, a small, white haired man in his 60's or 70's demonstrated the concept of landing on one's feet rather than on one's back. The slow motion very succinctly demonstrated the cat's response to being upended and falling, and the French subtitles indicated that landing on one's feet was a goal in Judo. Since I had only been in Judo for a few months when I saw this documentary, I had no clue who this old timer was. Today, I look back and realize that I had seen none other than Mifune himself.

PURPOSE OF TURNOUTS

Although the primary purpose of turnouts is to minimize or eliminate scores in competitive Judo, turnouts have the added benefit for all students of Judo, competitive and non-competitive alike, of accomplishing the following;

- Turnouts provide another means of falling safely onto a surface.
- Turnouts allow a player to be in a position to counterattack after being airborne.

- Turnout training increases kinesthetic awareness.
- Turnouts help develop an entire category of athletic abilities that traditional methods don't.

Falling Safely

While falling or rolling onto one's back certainly has its moments, so do skills that allow you to land on your feet or fours. So whether the environment is a Judo mat or the street in a self-defense situation, being able to land safely is easier if one knows two methods of falling- the traditional as well as the unorthodox. At Judo America San Diego, we stress turnouts because the skills required to not land on your back take much longer to develop. Nonetheless, while we don't focus on traditional ukemi or spend time "bashing the mat," all our students learn how to fall on their back as early as their first lesson when they are introduced to throws via the crash pad. The big difference in our modern approach is that falling on the back occurs during practice only as part of drill training. However, unlike turnouts, falling on the back is never consciously practiced as a separate training component.

Better Transitional Skills

Turnouts, especially the skills that allow you to land on your feet or fours, put you in a position to counterattack immediately during the transitional phase from one throw to the next, or from a throw to a ne waza situation. For the most part, falling onto one's back limits the transitional skills available to the player who was thrown. An example of this would be the turnout from Tomoe nage or Yoko tomoe nage. The turnout from these throws is a simple, safe round off which sets up a transitional skill into Kami shiho gatame. On the other hand, once you take a traditional fall onto your back with Tomoe nage, transitional skills are minimized. (Note: This sequence of being thrown with Tomoe nage and turning out and pinning the opponent with Kami shiho gatame was pulled off in the final of the 48kg division by Valerie Lafon against Ezaki at the Pacific Rim Championships in 1991. Ezaki was a two time World silver medallist at the time and a ne waza expert.)

Kinesthetic Awareness

In addition to having good balance while firmly planted on the ground, Judoplayers also need to develop kinesthetic awareness, which is the ability to relate to one's surroundings while airborne and upended. For the gymnast, this means being able to gyrate through the air and find the ground with a firm foot plant. For the springboard diver, this means doing summersaults, twists and tucks, finding the surface of the water and entering hands first without a splash. And for the Judoplayer, this means being able to control his body in flight without exposing his back, and landing safely on his fours or feet. The practice of turnouts will help improve kinesthetic awareness.

Athletic Development

Practicing and developing the skills to do turnouts will make you a better athlete. In the 19th century and the early part of the 20th century, gymnastics was the foundation for all physical education programs in the western world. Like gymnastics, Judo is a whole body activity that involves balance, strength and performing many complex skills. So while learning basic gymnastics skills in order to perform turnouts, balance improves, reaction options increase, body management skills develop and explosiveness reaches a new height.

TYPES OF TURNOUTS

The core of turnout skills is based on the ability to control the body in flight by performing gymnastic-like skills. These skills are simple enough that just about anyone can learn them. This includes the 99lb athlete as well as the 240lb athlete. The fundamental skills required to perform many of the turnout skills from throws are the:

- Round off
- Hand stand
- Elbow roll
- Head roll



Hand stand or round off



Back leg turnout

Regardless of what behavior is used to perform the turnout, turnout skills can be classified as:

- Under-rotation skills
- Over-rotation skills
- Turn away skills
- Turn in skills
- Scoot-around skills

Under- and Over-Rotation Skills

For the most part, these skills occur without the benefit of a point of contact with the ground and usually result in landing on the side of the body and infrequently face down. Typically these skills are done after forward throws and minimize scores rather than eliminate them. These skills use mostly body control to speed up (over-rotate) or slow down (under-rotate) the rotation of the body. A good example of an under-rotation skill is called the back leg turnout. This skill seeks to keep most of the back off the mat to minimize the score.

Turn Away and Turn In Skills

These skills are done after throws that take uke towards his back, i.e. O soto gari, Ko uchi gari or Tani otoshi. As the name implies, uke turns away or into tori to prevent from being thrown squarely onto his back. These skills usually minimize scores.

Scoot-Around Skills

These skills are the most spectacular in Judo. They almost always have a point of contact with the ground and result in landing on one's feet or fours. Scoot-around skills typically involve a round off, head roll, elbow roll or hand stand and usually result in eliminating a potential score. They are mostly done after forward throws or sutemi waza.

BUILDING AN UNORTHODOX UKEMI PROGRAM

The foundation of any turnout program is based on the acquisition of pertinent gymnastics skills and on an improvement in overall kinesthetic awareness. Training should be geared toward learning how to do a basic round off as well as the elbow roll and the head roll, which are nothing more than a round off on the elbows or head. The level of difficulty can be increased by adding height, movement and obstacles to these basic drills. Elbow and head rolls can be learned first from the knees, then from a standing position before finally being performed over a low obstacle to mimic a body.

Other fun, pertinent drills are the hand or head stand to improve kinesthetic awareness especially when movement is thrown into the equation. Walking on one's hands or spinning around in a head stand all contribute to developing some meaningful abilities for any Judoplayer. Another valuable skill to learn is

turning onto one's stomach when falling backwards. This mimics rear throw situations in Judo and also the traditional mae ukemi but adds some relevance to it.

Examples of Simple Drills

Drill 1: Player stands on head with two hands on ground for support in a tripod position. On command, player spins to the left or right without falling down. If player loses balance, he lands on fours, side or feet but not on his back.



Simple Drill 1

Drill 2: Player walks on her hands as far as possible, loses balance towards back on purpose and turns onto her stomach, fours or feet before her back hits the ground.

Drill 3: Player A holds player B's lapels. B pulls A for a few feet by leaning backwards and moving. A releases his grip on B's lapels. B turns onto stomach instead of falling onto his back.



Simple Drill 3

Drill 4: Player A stands behind player B. A pushes B's shoulder blades to make B move forward. B resists the push by leaning backwards with both feet out in front of his body. A releases his hold on B. B starts falling backwards and turns onto his stomach before his back touches the ground.



Simple Drill 4

Once players have mastered the rudiments of gymnastic skills, they are ready to move onto more complex skill development using partners in specific Judo situations. At first, grips will be minimized or altered to allow for the success of the drill. Eventually, little by little, turnout skills will be done from full throws with any type of grip.

Examples of Complex Drills

Drill 1: Player A throws B with an O goshi or Uki goshi without holding the sleeve. B does a round off and lands on his feet ready to transition to a throw. The advanced form of this drill requires A to hold B's sleeve. B must do the round off with just one hand on the ground. At this point the drill culminates with B attacking A after doing the round off.



Complex Drill 1

Drill 2: Player A throws B with a dropping Seoi nage. B does an elbow or head roll and lands on his fours ready to transition to a turnover or some other ne waza skill.

Drill 3: Player A throws B with Tomoe nage. B does a round off, lands on his feet or fours and covers up with Kami shiho gatame. The advanced form of this drill has A throw B with Yoko tomoe nage or perhaps a double sleeve Tomoe nage.



Complex Drill 3

Drill 4: Player A throws B with Morote gari or Kata ashi dori. B turns onto his stomach and A follows up with a ne waza skill.

Drill 5: Player A throws B with O uchi gari, O soto gari, Ko soto gari or Ko uchi gari. B turns into or away from A while attempting to land face down. A follows up with ne waza.

Drill 6: Player A throws B with De ashi barai or Okuri ashi barai. B turns onto fours, A follows into ne waza.

Drill 7: Player A throws B with a forward throw such as Tai otoshi, Harai goshi or Ippon seoi. B takes the fall but under-rotates by using a back leg turnout to prevent landing squarely on his back. A follows into ne waza or B proceeds into ne waza by rolling A over or by climbing onto A's back.

CONCLUSION

As a competitive coach, I must provide my players with safe training methods on the one hand and with effective training methods on the other hand. I have successfully used an unorthodox approach to ukemi for recreational as well as competitive students for over 20 years, resulting in fewer injuries than when I taught traditional ukemi for a period of six years. Dennis Mercer, the former USJI insurance agent, once stated to me that the most costly exercise in Judo when it comes to insurance claims is the forward roll or zempo kaiten over several players. Certainly, the most costly exercise in Judo in terms of wins or losses is the yoko ukemi with arm bash, which results in a full point. I admit that traditional Judo dogma is hard to overlook. For many coaches and sensei, I can see where, for physical reasons, the thought of teaching gymnastics skills can make the heart skip a beat or two. And for the die-hard traditionalists, well, the subject just doesn't get discussed. Nonetheless, history, pedagogy and the rules of the sport of Judo all dictate that turnouts are a valuable skill. So let's make them an integral part of our curriculum. Without compromising safety, we can give our students more choices on how to fall. We can make our students better athletes and we can help them be more successful as competitors.