

Skill Range of the Elite Judo Competitor

Introduction

What is the skill range of the elite Judo player? In other words, how many different skills do the best players use during competition?

To find the answer to this question I observed thirty nine World and/or Olympic Champions. I wanted to observe the best and most frequently used skills of the best players. I observed each champion in a minimum of three matches at the level of World or Olympic quarter final competition. By observing three matches I felt comfortable that I was able to recognize a champion's full range of skill. At the level of World or Olympic quarter final competition I believe that each player is challenged to use only their best skills.

The material of this research was video taped coverage of World Championships from 1983, 1985, 1987, 1989, 1991, 1993, 1995 and the Olympic Judo competition of 1992. Subjects of the research were Champions from all weight divisions. Unfortunately, I did not have sufficient records of any one Women's -72kg champion to be included in the final analysis.

Numbers

I was looking to see how many skills each Champion used. Throws are very easy to count. A player might use Seoinage, Tomoenage, Osotogari etc. Newaza, on the other hand presents a different situation. i.e. Should I count a switch from Kesagatame to Kuzure Kamishihogatame as two osaewaza or is the Champion using a generic skill of holding an opponent so that he/she can't get away? I chose to record newaza skills under the generic headings of Osaekomi, Shimewaza, Kansetsu and Sankaku.

The range of throwing skills varied from just three throwing techniques, by super heavyweight World Champion Masaki, to nine different throws from middleweight Olympic Champion Yoshida. Use of newaza skills ranged from three types of newaza, used by Fairbrother, Kosorotv, Solodukin and Saito, to no newaza skills used by lightweight Olympic Champion Goussainov. (I spent extra time on Goussainov to verify that he did not pursue newaza. In fact there was one incident that he threw an opponent for yuko, fell right into a hold down and walked away. The man does not pursue newaza!)

On average, a World or Olympic Champion uses six different throwing skills and two newaza skills.

Newaza Choices

Clearly, the Champions in this research choose to specialize their newaza skills just as they do their throwing skills. We as Coaches need to recognize that a players choice of newaza skills is subject to the same type of idiosyncrasies as their choice of throwing skills. We also need to learn how to help our players choose the newaza skills best for their personal integrated attack systems.

Championship Levels

Not all of the Champions, studied during this research project, had attained the same levels of success. Some players have won one World Championship, others have been twice World Champion, some have attained World and Olympic Championships etc., etc. I wanted to know if technical range plays a measurable part in the difference between various levels of Championship?

As a measure of comparison I broke the subjects into the following categories;

A = One time World Champion, no Olympic Championship

B = Multiple World Championships, no Olympic Championship

C = One time Olympic Champion, no World Championship

D = World and Olympic Champion

E = Multiple World not-less-than one Olympic Championship

F = Not-less-than three World Championships

G = Not-less-than three World and at least one Olympic Championship

H = Twice Olympic Champion

I = Average of all Champions

Once each category had been sorted I averaged the number of skills employed by each Champion. The average skill range for each category has been listed in the table below.

Average Skill Range By Championship Level

Level	Throws	Newaza
A	5.71	1.78

B	6.16	1.75
C	7.66	1.66
D	5.5	2.11
E	5.66	2.33
F	6.16	2
G	6	2.3
H	7	2.5
I	5.92	1.82

All categories, with the exception of "C" and "H" show a technical range of approximately six throwing skills and a newaza range of approximately two skills. Categories "C" and "H" show a higher throwing range. Category "C" indicates a lower newaza range of 1.66 while category "H" shows a newaza range of 2.5 skills. However, categories "C" and "H" represent only three and two Champions respectively.

The question then is, does this data show a significant difference in the range of skills used by the Champions that have achieved different levels of success? The answer has to be no. There appears to be no significant difference in the technical range at the World or Olympic Championship level.

Frequently Used Skills

As I watched the competition I catalogued the skills being used. A catalog of championship skills provides an opportunity to analyze frequently used skills at the World/Olympic Championship level. The following table lists each skill, the number of champions using each skill and the percentage of the sample population (Distribution) using the skill.

Skill Frequency of Use

Skill	Users	Distribution Percentage
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Osaekomi	33	85
Kouchigari	28	72
Pick-ups	23	59

Seoinage	22	56
Twist Down	22	56
Uchimata	20	51
Ouchigari	19	49
Shime	19	49
Osotogari	18	46
Ashi Barai	18	46
Kansetsu	18	46
Sutemi	12	31
Tsurikomigoshi	11	28
Taiotoshi	11	28
Kosotogake	10	26
Haraigoshi	6	15
Sasae	5	13
Makikomi	3	8
Sankaku	2	5
Uranage	1	3
Kataguruma	1	3

Interestingly, the most frequently used throwing skill was Kouchigari. Kouchigari was used by 72% of the Champions and was observed being used in all weight divisions. Another important skills being used by 56% of the Champions are Twist Downs. Twist downs are competitive versions of Uki Otoshi and Sumi Otoshi. Twist downs are very simple counter throwing maneuvers where the defender gets out of the way of an attack and pushes the attacker into the mat using nothing but his/her (the defender's) upper body and the attacker's momentum. Kouchigari and Twist Downs were observed in all Championships reviewed from 1983 to 1995 as well as the 1992 Olympic Judo competition.

Pick-ups, competitive versions of Teguruma, Kuchiki Taoshi, Morote Gari etc., etc., showed wide spread use. However, Pick-ups appear to be a recent development in competitive Judo. The recent appearance of Pick-ups could indicate a fad or a developing trend. Further analysis is required to draw any conclusion.

Not surprisingly, Uchimata and Seoinage are the most frequently used major skills. While Ouchigari, Osotogari, Taiotoshi, are all used by 49%, 46% and 28% of World or Olympic Champions, respectively.

Distribution of newaza skills was surprising on two points. First, I was surprised to realize that the elite players would forego the opportunity to use one newaza skill in favor of something else. i.e. Pass-up a hold down to work for an arm lock. This should not be surprising! Players seek their favorite throws in spite of the opportunity for another throwing skill on a regular basis. Why shouldn't a player prefer one type of newaza over another? Obviously, each individual must stick with the skills that he feels most comfortable with.

It was also interesting to discover that Kansetsuwaza and Shimewaza share nearly equal popularity among the elite. Fortynine percent of the Champions used kansetsuwaza and 46% were using shimewaza.

CONCLUSION

So, what is the technical range of an elite player? A world or Olympic Champion is possessed of a technical range of six throws and two newaza skills. One of the throwing skills is likely to be kouchigari and one of the newaza skills is probably osaekomi. All of the skills in a Champion's technical range, his/her personal integrated attack system, have been chosen to fit the personal talents and propensities of the Champion.

What has this research taught us? I believe that there is a very simple lesson to learned from this research. Judo is a game of specialization. You have to use the skills that work best for you. You have to stick to what works and practice your skills until they become automatic responses. For the Coach, the lesson of this research is that we have to help focus our players on their best skills.

Perhaps, more importantly, none of the champions were using exotic maneuvers that caught everybody off guard. The skills being used by the World and Olympic Champions are the same skills that you and I practice and teach our players every day. Since they're using the same skills it seems to me that every body has an equal chance to get to the elite level. It could be that the only difference between them and everybody else is a little talent and a lot of hard work. What do you think?

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