



Ulster Budokai special needs students visit GentleWay Masters Judo Club in Queens, NY.

Special Needs Judo in **ULSTER BUDOKAI**

BY MARK ROOSA

Since its inception in 1976, Ulster Budokai Inc. judo has occasionally had students with various types of handicapping conditions. It was around 1992, however, when a young girl with cerebral palsy entered our dojo and became an inspiration to us all. Her determination and courage throughout her judo experience kept everyone from complaining about our petty maladies. Around the same time, one of my students, Bill Scribner became the father of a special needs student. Bill's quest to share experiences with his son Ian, and to provide a greater variety of social and physical activities for him led to our special needs judo program.

When Ian first enrolled in our junior judo classes, he had difficulty focusing on the class. This problem was partly due to his autism and partly due to our lack of teaching skills for special needs students. About a year later, a school official in the special needs school that Ian attended asked Bill if Ian spoke Japanese. Bill explained Ian's involvement in judo, and the school asked for a judo demonstration for Ian's class. The demonstration was such a huge success that the school asked for a second show for the entire school. Bill and another Ulster Budokai student, Ezra Waltermaurer, put together a demonstration on a few old mats. To their surprise, forty-five students showed up with their aides, ready to participate! When the director of the physical therapy department for the school, Laurie Hopkins, saw how much fun the kids were having, she approached Bill about holding a special needs judo class. She had two brothers who studied judo and knew of the physical and cognitive benefits of judo. Bill and I discussed the idea at length and decided, "Why not?". In February of 2002, a special needs class began with twelve students, two judo assistants, and several aides. The students were trained in traditional judo etiquette, ukemi, ne waza, and tachi waza to the best of their abilities.

A few years went by and some of the students started to age out of the program, and several parents asked about more mat time for their children. The benefits of judo training had become noticed and were the talk of the school. As a result, we started a Saturday morning special needs judo class at Ulster Budokai. At this time, Bill also started reaching out to find other similar programs, and was surprised to find that there was nothing substantial in this country established for special needs judo. The search widened and Bill eventually found that Europe has a well developed judo program for special needs students of all ages and disabilities. Eventually we came in contact with Roy Court from Wales, who provided us with a wealth of information via email. It was then that we discovered that there was even special needs judo competition. In 2005, with the help of Hudson Yudanshakai president Yoshisada Yonezuka, we held our first special needs judo shiai. The shiai was sanctioned by the USJF, and I gave a short ne waza clinic pairing each special needs student with a judoka from Ulster Budokai. After lunch we held the shiai the same way, with each special needs student 'competing' against an Ulster Budokai opponent. School, parents and students made us feel like local heroes.



Bill Scribner instructing special needs student.



Special needs students with Ulster Budokai competitors after the shiai.

Continued on page 15



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(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3)

In 2007 our special needs students were invited to participate in a special needs tournament in Ravenna, Italy. Fundraising began immediately and with outstanding support from the local autism society and the community, Bill took his son Ian and Miranda Carey, another special needs student, to compete in Ravenna. There he met Roy Court from Wales, and Roberta Azzilona, and Tiziana Berti from Italy. He was educated about special needs classifications for competition, and participated in the pre-shiai clinic. Students from the Netherlands, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, and many other nations competed in the annual two day event. The tournament was a class act from start to finish, and our students returned with stories and renewed enthusiasm for judo.

Since then Bill and our students have competed in Ravenna several times. In 2009, we hosted the aforementioned Roy Court, who brought a team of special needs students to visit our dojo for a week. Roy gave an outstanding clinic at the dojo on special needs classification and judo development. It was there that I realized how far behind the U.S. is in this aspect of judo as compared to Europe.

The following year Bill took his son Ian to Wales for their shiai. Bill joined Rene Devliger and Rudi Verhagen from the Netherlands, who conducted a special needs practice and clinic. Again Bill was impressed with the determination and exuberance of the competitors, as well as the respect and hospitality of everyone involved.

Over the past fourteen years we have learned a great deal about athletes, judo spirit, and the willingness of instructors to donate their time to those less fortunate in life. Our hope is that more special needs programs will evolve from U.S. judo dojos to join the growing number of countries that participate in international special needs judo.

Anyone needing more information on special needs judo can contact Bill Scribner at: wascribner@gmail.com



Miranda Carey (far left), one of our long time special needs students, with European students in Ravenna, Italy.



Ian Scribner competing in Ravenna, Italy.



(L-R) Ian Scribner, Gary Naccarato, Miranda Carey, with instructors Sean Rivera and Bill Scribner in Ravenna.



Ulster Budokai students with visiting Wales special needs team.