

## Matside Coaching

By Steve Scott

Winning on the mat takes a team effort. An athlete needs a reliable and skilled coach or team-mate at the side of the mat during a match. That second set of eyes from the coach at matside may see a weakness in an opponent that the athlete can't see because he's involved fighting him. In this case, the coach at matside may make the difference between winning and losing.



Every athlete on the team is different. The coach should make it a point to know everything possible about each athlete he coaches. This is true for elite-level athletes competing internationally as well as beginners competing at the club and local levels. The better a coach knows an athlete's judo, the better he will coach that athlete.

**Communication from Matside:** At matside, a coach should give clear, precise instructions to the athlete. The coach should not go into a long discussion or give complicated instructions. The athlete on the mat needs information that will help him win. Ultimately, it's up to the athlete if he chooses to use the instructions or information from the coach or not. He's the one fighting on the mat. If the coach calls out to perform a specific move and the athlete knows that, for whatever reason, it won't work, it's ultimately up to the athlete to make the decision. This is only true with experienced, skilled athletes who have been working with their coach and have the experience and technical skill to decide what to do under the pressure of competition. Another important thing to remember is when coaching at matside, don't "overcoach." Make sure what is said to the athlete is worth listening to. Coaches or team-mates standing by the side of the mat who yell non-stop, shouting one thing immediately after the other at their athletes during the course of a judo match do absolutely no good for the athlete on the mat.

During the training cycle leading up to the tournament, the coach and athletes will develop specific phrases or words for techniques, movements or actions (both technical and tactical) that only the coach and athletes know. Hand signals are also useful for communication. These phrases must be short and to the point using only one or two words. Upon hearing the phrase from me at matside, the athlete would make a small gesture with his or her hand (that I would look for) to let me know that he received the instruction and if he thought it would work or not.

**Tips on Matside Coaching:** The following is a list of items on how to coach matside more effectively. Some of these items have been mentioned previously, and you may also have items to add to the list.



1-Preapre in the dojo. Work on strategy and tactics as part of your training. If you have special signals or phrases, this is the time to work on them so the athletes will be able to know them and use them in the tournament. A good way to prepare in the dojo is to have regularly-scheduled club scrimmages like this club team tournament.

2-Know the rules. Coach by the rulebook. I've seen coaches who were ignorant of the rules (or a specific rule in question) and argue with the referees, and as a result, lose every argument every time. Also, it's a good bet that if a coach doesn't know the rules, his athletes won't know the rules either.

3-Come prepared for the day. Bring water, food, a first-aid kit, extra judo uniforms or anything that might be needed during the tournament.

4-Bring a stopwatch just in case there isn't a visible timer or clock.



5-Pre-Match Instructions are important. The coach (or senior team-mate) should talk to the athletes before the tournament and to each athlete before each match. If a "rah-rah" talk is needed, then do it. It works for some athletes in many situations, but if you do, mean what you say. Generally, this is a good time to offer any last-minute information that the athletes can use. Often, a good quick discussion of the upcoming match in a positive way helps.

6-Don't Overcoach. At the same time, a coach shouldn't ignore his athletes either. It's difficult to say which is worse; the coach who shouts, talks and yells too much or the coach who sits there like a spectator and never offers any advice or information.



7-There should be only one coach at matside. Too many people shouting at an athlete only confuses the situation and some people simply offer dumb advice that the athlete might hear.

8-Advice should be clear and to the point. When you offer matside advice, make it clear, understandable and concise. Don't confuse your athlete with useless banter or garbled language.

9-Don't be a cheerleader. Offer encouragement, when necessary, but keep to the job at hand. When the match is over, don't get too excited. You can congratulate him and be happy, but don't overdo it. Be professional and a gracious winner. Likewise, if your opponent loses, don't blame the officials or make disparaging remarks about the opponent (even if your athlete got a bad call). You may not like the outcome of the match, but don't be a sore loser.

10-When the referee calls a break in the match, the athlete should look over to the coach for advice.

11-Do not berate, scold or verbally abuse during the course of the match. If you need to discipline the athlete, do it after the match and don't do it in public. Never use profanities when speaking to your athletes, referees or anyone at the tournament. Never physically abuse an athlete, fellow coach, referee or spectator. Anyone who does this should be barred from coaching.



12-Don't irritate the officials. They control the match; you don't. You can't coach if you've been thrown out of the gym.

13-Be polite to the officials. You're at the tournament to help your team win. A referee will be more likely to give your athlete the benefit of the doubt if you treat him with respect. Referees are human too.

14-Sometimes your athlete is wrong. If your athlete deserves a penalty, then don't argue when he or she gets one. If the referee made a technically incorrect call and you have a basis for a review, then by all means ask for a review. But when you do ask for a review, make sure that you have a good argument to justify it.

15-Sometimes your athlete loses. In every match, there is a fifty percent chance one athlete will win and the other will lose. If your athlete gets thrown for ippon, don't argue the call (unless you believe you are correct on technical grounds).

16-Video the matches. Have another coach, team-mate or parent video the matches for later study and analysis.

17-Be professional in your behavior and in how you dress. Look and act professional. Stay in the assigned area for coaches. Don't ever walk onto the mat unless specifically asked by the referee.



18-You are there for your athlete. Represent him or her to the best of your ability.

The items listed have a proven record of success, but there may certainly be other items that can be added. Make sure, as a coach, that you don't do or say anything that will harm the sport of judo. You are a representative of judo as much as you are a representative of your team. We are all in this together and none of us are getting rich or famous for what we do, so we might as well enjoy it and make it as positive experience as possible.