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Japan Fact Sheet

MARTIAL ARTS

From ancient tradition to modern sport

Introduction

Most of Japan's martial arts, or *budo*, have histories extending back to the protohistoric era. *Yabusame*, or archery on horseback, can be traced to the seventh century. With the rise of the warrior class in the late twelfth century, the *bushi* or *samurai* (members of the warrior class) trained in such disciplines as *kenjutsu* (sword art), *iaijutsu* (sword-drawing art), *jujutsu* (unarmed combat), *kyujutsu* (Japanese archery), *sojutsu* (spear art), *bajutsu* (horsemanship), and *suijutsu* (swimming). These gradually became standardized into styles or schools, which continued even after the country's feudal domains were pacified during the Edo period (1600–1868).

With the abolishment of the social class system of the Edo period soon after the Meiji Restoration in 1868, the warrior class, which had dominated the farmer, artisan, and merchant classes (the *shi-no-ko-sho* system), disappeared; and with the adoption of modern military weaponry, participation in some of these arts declined. In 1895, following the Sino-Japanese War, a national organization called the *Dai Nippon Budo Kai* (The Great Japan Martial Arts Association) centralized martial arts and oversaw their introduction into the educational system. This led to the revival of many of the arts.

Following World War II, Occupation authorities imposed a ban on martial arts for five years, because those that had been revived before the war were thought to foster the regimentation and nationalistic spirit that led to the growth of militarism. The ban was lifted in 1950, and efforts were made to stress their positive aspects, treating them as sports rather than martial arts.

Judo
Judo champion Tamura Yoko (right) is shown here winning her sixth consecutive world championship in 2003.

Judo

Judo, which means "the gentle way," developed from an older art known as *jujutsu*, which generally avoided using weapons. The Tenshin Shinyo and Kito

schools became the foundation for modern Kodokan Judo, as organized by Kano Jigoro (1860–1938), who renamed the sport after his first training gymnasium (*dojo*). Kano formulated a training system based on modern athletic principles and modified the rules to permit both throwing and grappling on the mat.

The *judo-gi* worn by practitioners resembles the apparel worn in *karate*, save for the upper part which is made of a more heavyweight material. Although some *karate* techniques also involve grappling and holding, it should not be confused with *judo*, which does not permit striking or kicking one's opponent.

Perhaps more than any other Japanese sport, *judo* has gained a wide degree of international popularity. The World Judo Federation was established in 1952, and Tokyo hosted the first World Judo Championship Tournament in May 1956. Following its introduction as a men's event in the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, it has since been added for women as well. At present, *judo* is practiced by 5 million people in the world.

Among *judo* players (*judo-ka*), Yamashita Yasuhiro (1957–), gold medalist in the open category at the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics, and Tamura Ryoko, women's champion in Japan, are currently the most popular.

Aikido

Aikido has its origins in *Aiki jujutsu* of the Daito school of *jujutsu*, founded by Minamoto Yoshimitsu (1045–1127). Ueshiba Morihei (1883–1970) is credited with developing *aikido* into its present form.

Although *aikido* may appear similar to *judo* in some respects, the contestants do not grasp each other's collars and sleeves, but rather remain apart from each other. *Aikido* techniques mainly seek to take advantage of an opponent's weakness in wrist and arm joints.

Aikido practitioners do not hold competitive tournaments. Its techniques place emphasis on self defense, which is a principal reason why it is popular among women and those in law enforcement.

Karate
A *karate* practitioner breaking boards with an elbow strike.

Karate

Karatedo, which means "the way of the empty hand," developed over 1,000 years ago in China. It was introduced to the island of Okinawa (formerly an independent kingdom) many centuries ago as a form of weaponless self defense. The art was a late-comer into Japan proper, having been introduced by Funakoshi Gichin in the 1920s.

In *karate*, every part of the body can be turned into a fighting weapon. But equally important are defensive techniques used to sidestep or block an opponent's thrusts and kicks.

One aspect of training includes repeatedly striking a *makiwara*, a post covered with straw, to toughen the skin covering the knuckles, wrists, balls of the feet, and other areas. More advanced practitioners often demonstrate their power by smashing boards or breaking roof tiles, but this is not recommended for beginners.

In sanctioned competition, *karate* practitioners generally wear protective gear and are cautious to prevent accidental injury. They avoid blows to the head and pull their kicks and punches. In a sparring match, called *kumitejiai*, points are scored by landing thrusts and kicks. *Kata*, which involve a series of ritualized movements, are used to judge form and concentration.

While teaching the fine points of their art, *karate* instructors also pay close attention to a student's attitude and code of conduct.

In recent years, more women have begun taking up *karate*. Together with Chinese and Korean martial arts, with which it

bears many similarities, *karate* has become popularized throughout the world. The total *karate* population in the world is said to be 23 million, and over 10% of those who hold ranks are non-Japanese.

Kendo

Among the *samurai*, the sword was one of the most important of martial arts. Perhaps because of this tradition, *kendo* (Japanese stick fencing) places strong emphasis on ritualized behavior in the *dojo*, and practice sessions tend to be highly regimented.

With the establishment of the All Japan Kendo Federation, in 1952, *kendo* was revived as a sport and was introduced into the curricula of junior high and high schools.

The "sword" used in *kendo*, called a *shinai*, is made of 4 long strips of bamboo. It is quite light and designed to avoid serious injuries during practice sessions.

Kendo practitioners wear protective equipment that covers them from head to hips. Points are scored by striking the opponent's head, trunk, or wrist, or by jabbing the throat. The first to score two out of three points wins the match.

Kyudo

Kyudo (Japanese archery) developed during Japan's feudal period as a fighting art. With the founding of the Japan Kyudo Federation, in 1949, the discipline made a new start as a sport.

In a contest, each competitor usually shoots arrows at a target 28 or 60 meters away. The bow, which is about 2.21 meters long, is made of wood and bamboo glued together. As in other forms of archery, the competitor who hits the target with the greatest number of arrows wins the match. The difference between Western archery and *kyudo* is that the latter emphasizes the importance of form. In some contests, the competitor's form is taken into account.

Archery on horseback, *yabusame*, originated during the Kamakura period (1185–1333). It is still performed at the Tsurugaoka Hachimangu Shrine in Kamakura (one hour from Tokyo by train), among other places.

Kendo
A *kendo* training session.

Present-Day Popularity

Various forms of *budo* are offered as part of the physical education program or as an extracurricular activity at many schools in Japan, but statistics show that they are engaged in less than many other organized sports. Moreover those who continue to pursue these activities after reaching adulthood are relatively few in number.

The percentage of junior high schools offering *kendo* and *judo* training for boys in 1995 was 54.5% and 36.2% respectively, while for girls, *kendo*, *judo*, and *kyudo* were offered at 46.4%, 18.4%, and 2.2%, respectively.

In 1995, there were 46,403 registered participants of *judo* competing at the high school level in Japan, making it the eighth most widely practiced organized sport among boys. Among girls, *kyudo* was also

Yabusame
A demonstration of *yabusame* (mounted archery) at Meiji Shrine in Tokyo.

in eighth place, with 36,034 registered participants nationwide.

Data from the 1997 *White Paper on Leisure*, issued by the Leisure Development Center, indicates that adults who regularly engage in *judo*, *kendo*, *karate*, etc., as a leisure pastime have fallen slightly, from 3.4 million in 1988, to 3.1 million in 1996. To a large degree, however, these figures reflect the nation's demographics (the percentage of young people relative to the overall population is declining), and do not necessarily indicate a dropoff in interest. Due to such factors as movies, novels, and women's increased interest in self-defense, *budo* has not yet lost its popularity.