JUDO

From local gym to Judo champion



PHOTO COURTESY OF CONOR UYEKAWA

Conor Uyekawa celebrates after taking down an opponent at a Judo tournament earlier this year. Uyekawa majors in photography and has been on the judo team for three years.

By Brandon Nicolas
STAFF WRITER

Judo is an unarmed Japanese martial art that takes discipline, patience and strength, but, for Conor Uyekawa, it's a way of life.

Uyekawa, a photography junior, was born and raised in Orange County and was introduced to judo at a young age by his father.

"It was something I was never planning on doing in my life," Uyekawa said.

He said he remembers his father leaving the house on Tuesday and Friday evenings and asking him where he was going.

It wasn't until Uyekawa was six years old that his father took him to the Norwalk Judo Dojo – the family's local dojo in Orange County.

"I was pretty naive and thought that he was going to take me to, like, Disneyland or something," Uyekawa said.

He said the world of judo overwhelmed him at first and it was not until a year into the sport that he would find fulfillment in competing.

"It definitely gave me a lot of maturity growing up compared to other sports," Uyekawa said. "I think each and every sport has its own purpose as to why you learn about respect and build camaraderie during these team events."

Uyekawa attended Los Alamitos High School, balancing judo and wrestling for four years.

Some of his judo achievements from this time include winning the Judoka of the Year award in 2016 and the Junior Olympics for -55kg (120lbs) in the summer of both 2018 and 2019, representing Norwalk Judo Dojo.

He is a two-time Collegiate Nationals Champion and will participate in the World University Games in China later this year, representing not only San Jose State, but the U.S.

"[Conor] is a fighter," SJSU head judo coach Kosuke Tanaka said. "He is a very kind and soft person, but when he starts fighting in practice and in tournaments, he's on fire and he doesn't want to lose."

Tanaka said he first saw Uyekawa at a high school championship in Los Angeles, but it would be years before they met in person.

"When I first met him, I was pretty intimidated because Japan is one of the more superior countries in the sport of judo," Uyekawa said. "Getting the opportunity to meet him and for him to take his own time to teach me was a really big honor."

He said his introduction to competing at the collegiate level was a slow crawl because of his familiarity with local and regional tournaments, which helped him prepare for national competitions.

"It was definitely tough at times because I was always used to competing consistently – that's how I understood what I needed to work on for the bigger tournaments," Uyekawa said. "Since coming here, it was like, 'I have three months until the next competition' and, 'It's not guaranteed that I will compete due to postponing the tournament because of COVID-19 or if I were to get injured.' "

When applying for colleges, Uyekawa said he took judo programs into great consideration.

"I saw [SJSU] had a really good judo program . . . it was set in stone for me," he said. "That's what I wanted to pursue in the next four to five years."

His freshman year was a challenge because COVID-19 pandemic caused classes to be held online, and he said the transition toward online practice was a difficult experience.

"But at the same time, you have to work with what you got," Uyekawa said. "I thought to myself, 'It's better to have something rather than to have nothing – sitting around doing my own thing.' "

Tanaka said he used this time over Zoom to teach the history of judo techniques and the sport as a whole.

At home in Orange County, Uyekawa said he ran on the treadmill and lifted weights to maintain his physique and weight after practice on Zoom.

"We were still able to actually be on the mat and that itself was a big sense of relief," Uyekawa said.

He said the careful sparring at Norwalk Judo Dojo prepared him for tournaments at the collegiate level.

"It was nice to finally be here and to practice, but at the same time, there were still restrictions," Uyekawa said. "We still had to wear masks and keep our distance outside of practice because we didn't want to risk somebody getting sick."

As coronavirus restrictions continued and Uyekawa transitioned into campus life in fall 2021, he said he managed to stay disciplined and patient for the opportunities to come.

The Dallas Invitational and the President's Cup are held in Texas and were among the first national tournaments the Spartan Judo team encountered following the peak of the coronavirus pandemic which included all age groups separated into three divisions.

"Those kinds of tournaments are a lot more competitive since we're competing against the best of the best in the U.S.," Uyekawa said. "We're going against people around the world with different judo backgrounds, different training styles and different techniques."

After competing in the Texas tournaments, he said he analyzed his diet and training regiment and started making changes to prepare for the Collegiate Nationals.

While the Spartans trained rigorously for these two tournaments, he said he kept his eyes on the Collegiate Nationals being that it pertains only to college students.

"That tournament, I would say, is a lot more important to us because you get the opportunity to claim a spot in an international competition every other year," Uyekawa said. "There's also the opportunity to claim a team title granted to the top three teams with the most wins per individual athlete."

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> **Conor Uyekawa**
> Junior Judo athlete

Not only would Uyekawa and the Spartans walk home victorious from the Collegiate Nationals in 2022, but he also received the "Athlete of The Year" plaque the following year in addition to the Spartans taking 1st place on home soil.

Mechanical engineering freshman Weston Uyekawa is Conor's brother and fellow Spartan judo team mate.

"I always felt like I was always competing with my brother," Weston said. "But competing together has been a great experience – watching my brother win and my teammates fight."

Conor Uyekawa said winning the Collegiate Nationals a second time helped prove to himself that he deserves the title.

"I can honestly say that was the first time I ever broke down crying after winning a match," he said. "Not because I won in the final or because I was able to maintain my title, but because of the raw emotions that came into that tournament and also being on home turf – it drove me to want to come out on top."

The Spartan judo team is scheduled to attend the Golden State Open in Los Angeles at the end of the month and the Senior Nationals in Washington at the end of the semester.

"This would not have been possible without my teammates at San Jose State and my teammates back at Norwalk Judo because without them I would not be in this position to tell my story," Uyekawa said. "Also my family too who raised me to be this humble, respectful man and I want to show them that I can work hard and make them proud."



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SJSU junior judo athlete Conor Uyekawa, stands in front of Yoshihiro Uchida Hall on Thursday afternoon.