

Obukan Judo Dojo

By Lauren Yoshiko

Obukan Judo, the oldest *dojo* in Oregon, has had a presence in Portland for over a hundred years. A *dojo*, which translates as "place of the Way" in Japanese, is a place for practicing martial arts. It was an important part of the Nihonmachi neighborhood (also known as Japantown) during the early twentieth century, providing a place for young Japanese and Japanese Americans to connect with one another and to participate in a sport tied to their heritage. Obukan Judo, which is now in northeast Portland, has a special connection to Jigoro Kan, the founder of judo, who visited the *dojo* in the 1930s and gave the club its name.

The origins of Obukan Judo can be traced to the 1905 Lewis and Clark Exposition, where Bunazaemon Nii (also Bunuyemon), a Japanese chiropractor in Portland with martial arts experience, and Shiroye Sato, an Oregon native, gave demonstrations of Kit-ry Jujutsu. A few years later, members of Portland's Japanese American community approached Nii about forming a local judo club. In 1926, he became head instructor—the *sensei* (teacher in Japanese)—of the Portland Judo Club, which held weekly classes on the lower floor of the Foster Hotel on Northwest Davis Street and Third Avenue. The club was a place for Japanese Americans to hone their skills and become their best selves on and off of the mat, as is the way of judo, which translates to "the gentle way."

In Japan, Jigoro Kan had founded the practice of judo in 1882 from his study of Tenjin Shin'ry and the Kit-ry forms of jujutsu (also known as jiu-jitsu or ju-jitsu). His goal was to develop a martial art into what he called a "martial way," focused on using deft movements to "throw" opponents on their back rather than using punches or weapons. With a fluid fighting style of "maximum efficiency with minimum effort," judo went hand-in-hand with a philosophy centered on self-improvement and bringing the highest-performing version of yourself to the mat for "mutual benefit." Kan Shihan believed the practice would lead to the betterment of society.

Kan Shihan was Japan's official representative at the Olympic Games from the 1912 Stockholm Games through the 1936 Summer Olympics in Berlin. During his trip to the 1932 Los Angeles Olympics, he stopped in Oregon to meet members of the Portland Judo Club. When he returned to the city in 1938, the *dojo* asked him to give the club a Japanese name. Kan Shihan chose the characters "O" to represent Oregon; "bu" for *bushido*, or "way of the warrior"; and "kan" for training hall. He wrote "Obukan" in calligraphy before sailing home to Japan. He died during the passage, and the calligraphy he left for the Portland club was one of his last writings. It continues to be on display at Obukan Judo.

By 1941, there were seven judo clubs in Oregon and fourteen in Washington State. Members traveled to each other's clubs for competitions, providing opportunities to connect with Japanese American communities in the Northwest. In December 1941, the United States declared war on Japan following the bombing of Pearl Harbor, and the government ordered all Japanese martial arts training to stop. On February 19, 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066, which led to the forced removal and incarceration of more than 120,000 people of Japanese ancestry on the West Coast, including many of Obukan's instructors and students.

Obukan Judo was revived after the war, when Japanese Americans returned to Portland, largely because of Onchi Sensei. He served in the U.S. Army and taught self-defense and combat techniques to officers at Fort Warren, Wyoming, and then Camp Shelby in Mississippi. Earning the rank of master sergeant, he was a member of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team (formed in 1943) for seven months in occupied Germany, for which he was awarded the Congressional Gold Medal in 2011. He re-established Obukan Judo in Portland in 1953, uniting those who had been practicing judo at the YMCA and Reed College. Onchi Sensei became head *sensei* and, in time, earned a 9th Degree Black Belt. In 1958, with the support of Mayor Terry Schrunk, he launched the Portland Police Officer's Judo & Self-Defense program at Obukan.

Professor Masao Ichinoe, a *sensei* from Japan, made his first visit to Obukan Judo in 1957. He returned for a visit each year, retaining close ties between Obukan and the Kodokan Judo Institute, the acknowledged headquarters of the worldwide judo community. In 1969, Ichinoe's son, Ichinoe

Sensei, moved to Portland as head instructor. That same year, he took first place in the open division of the U.S. National Judo Championships, bringing attention to Obukan. When family business called Ichinoe Sensei back to Japan in 1973, Onchi Sensei led the *dojo* from that time until he retired from the mat in 2011. In recognition of his efforts to increase the understanding and practice of Judo across cultures, Onchi Sensei was given the 5th Class Order of the Rising Sun medal in 2002, an honor bestowed by the Emperor of Japan.

Since 2011, Ichinoe Sensei has been head instructor at Obukan. As of 2024, about 125 students of all backgrounds and genders make up the Obukan *dojo*. Obukan also hosts free clinics for wrestling teams from Portland-area high schools and provides grant scholarships to cover dues for students unable to afford classes. The lead *sensei* are volunteers who donate their time.

Sources

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