

Judo on TV

Such is the power of TV that we all hope that when a major championship comes around that judo will get shown on it so that we can enjoy watching it and hopefully so that others may want to give it a try. With modern camera techniques such as close-ups and slow motion replay all can see the intricacies of our sport. But TV does not always work to the advantage of judo. What follows is my experiences of commentating on judo since 1972.

The first time I commentated for TV was in 1972 at the Munich Olympics. At the time I had retired from competition but was coaching and still training quite hard. About a month before the Olympics I had a call from London Weekend TV (LWTV), who asked me to come and talk to them about the Olympics and judo. At LWTV I met their head of sport and the first question he asked me was how would British judo do in Munich. I talked it up a bit and said confidently that we will get three medals. A week later I had a letter saying they would like me to cover the judo at Munich. This was just the second time that judo was in the Olympics. Tokyo 1964 was the first time but the Mexico Olympics of 1968 did not include judo for some reason. I heard at the time that wrestling was opposed to judo's inclusion.

From that time I had written a bit about judo but I had never had to talk about it live on TV. I accepted the 'challenge' and LWTV arranged my accreditation and accommodation, which was in short supply, and that was it apart from arranging my transport to Munich. It all sounds a bit casual but that has been my experience of TV ever since. As the Olympics approached I gradually became aware of the judo world out there waiting to see and hear judo's biggest event live and I had never commentated before!

Between then and the actual Olympics I gathered what information I could on previous and recent competition results and any interesting stories about individual fighters. As I looked at my information I thought that it did not amount to very much. I gulped and thought what was I going to say?

The first day of the Munich Olympic judo arrived. I went to the venue and was shown my commentating position and given a brief explanation of how the gadgetry worked. I would be on my own it seems. 'If you are getting close to a medal,' said the technician 'Press that button, and that will connect you through to LWTV office in Munich. Press that button and you will be able to talk to the London office and press this microphone button when you go on live. Best of luck!' Off he went and I sat there all alone among a large number of commentating positions with commentators from all over the world a few of whom I knew. Five minutes later I glanced at the box of tricks but couldn't remember which button was which!

Days one and two of the event went by without any British medals which made me feel a bit of an impostor but on the third day I pressed the connecting button to the Munich office and let them know in good time that we were heading for the medals. Suddenly things got very frenetic. Munich office asked me if I was OK and in the next breath told me that they were sending a back-up team (in case I froze).

Shortly after that a red light winked on my electronic box of tricks and LWTV Munich told me we were about to go live for Brian Jacks' who was steadily progressing through the rounds. Then a voice in my headphones told me we were going live in ten seconds. I adjusted my headphones and pressed the microphone button. For a brief moment I thought to myself if I do not now start talking silence will reign. It was a slightly unnerving thought. Halfway through the fight I heard a scuffle and commentator Adrian Metcalfe (a former Olympic athletics medallist) and commentator Dickie Davies (I think) squeezed in behind me. It was my backup team. Are you OK they mouthed and I nodded and carried on chatting. They put their thumbs up. Brian went on to win the bronze. When I talked to LWTV before going to Munich I predicted that British judomen would get three medals and that was exactly how it worked out. Dave Starbrook got a silver and Brian Jacks and Angelo Parisi got bronzes. LWTV began to call me the medal-man.

Then disaster struck. Terrorists attacked the Israeli team in the Olympic village and the whole focus of the Games shifted. Total confusion reigned. At one point when I was in the huge media centre a Japanese journalist asked me in poor English what was going on and was surprised when I replied in Japanese. Almost immediately I was surrounded by a big group of Japanese journalists as I translated what the big screen there was telling us about the attack but my job there was done. The news commentators took over. I headed back to London.

I breathed a sigh of relief for my personal TV Olympics - my commentating had worked out all right. As in later Olympics the media almost outnumbered the competitors and were just as competitive. As I recall the matches were all ten minutes but there were four early rounds to get through and that represented a lot of mat-time. In those days there was quite a lot of experimenting with the format of the event and it was absolutely essential to keep tabs on how the competitors were progressing especially those in the repechage which could take different forms. The last thing you wanted was to see a competitor on the mat and wonder why he was there. In this Olympics a number of competitors fought each other twice. Dave Starbrook for example beat Soviet fighter Chochoshvili early on and then had to fight him again in the final when he lost.

What every commentator hopes for is the clean Ippon throw ending but there were a lot of messy fights which weren't fought for any kind of clean ending. Grip fighting featured prominently in these. Well it is possible to talk about grip fighting for a minute or two but not for almost ten minutes. It is difficult to get passionate about such bouts compared with say Chochoshvili throwing Sasahara of Japan with a massive left Seoi-nage. This was in the days when very few foreigners were a threat to the Japanese.

One commentating rule was to talk about what the viewer could see as shown on your monitor. This meant watching it with one eye virtually and using the other to check what was happening off screen. There was very little point in talking about something off-screen unless it is something like a corner judge disagreeing with a referee's call. In addition to this any notes you had on the competitors had to be easily readable and there were constant up dates and instructions from the Munich office via your headphones. Breaks were frequent and even if there was nothing actually happening on the mat you had to keep talking. Fairly frequently the organization of

an event seized up so that there might be a long gap between matches or the final and the medal presentation ceremony for example. An empty unlit mat or rostrum would be shown on one's monitor with shadowy figures moving around it but silence was not an option. So you have to be a bit of a chatterbox.

One commentating difficulty about live Judo bouts which are fairly short compared with a lot of other sports is that you have to be careful about launching into any kind of journalistic story about a player because inevitably the action overtakes you with a score of some kind which usually requires comment and explanation. This is quite different to putting a voice on an instructional video. Here you have all the time in the world and can work from a written script or if you mess it up you can always go back to the beginning and start again.

For most of the years I have commentated, judo's Japanese terminology and the scoring system have always presented particular difficulties. Since you can never be sure who the viewers are I have always assumed that half the viewers were knowledgeable about judo and half weren't. This is purely my guess since I have never seen any research on this. So with technique names I play it safe by giving the Japanese names and an English version in the same breath. Unfortunately many of the common English versions are not very descriptive (for example Minor Inner Reaping for Ko-uchi-gari) so I often use my own more descriptive translations. With practice this can be done quite smoothly and automatically.

What always takes some explaining is the koka-yuko-waza-ari and ippon scoring. The scoreboards that often sit on the screens nowadays might show the numbers 1-2-3 which might make a viewer think that 123 points has been scored and not one waza-ari, two yukos and three kokas. Of course you can always talk round this by saying that the player with the highest number is ahead but it is confusing. Under the present system we have an instant terminating score (ippon), an accumulating & terminating score (waza-ari) and small scores that accumulate but do not terminate (yuko and koka). This needs to be simplified for the uninitiated viewer. Accumulate or terminate is the choice perhaps, not a mix. The whole business of scoring and penalty levels desperately needs to be sorted out and simplified. But here is not the place to go into it in any detail.

After Munich LWTW covered quite a lot of judo and other martial arts events but gradually they lost interest. They were quite frank about it. The tapes they received from judo events were not dynamic enough they said and in fact I had to agree with them. I suggested that the dynamic action was much more likely in the early rounds when the weaker ones were being eliminated and that we should show the path to the finals of the finalists. But they were not interested. It was always the case that the number of medal fights meant that they could easily fill up the time available and this was before women's competitive judo took off. We have to show all the medal fights they said.

As LWTW's interest in judo dwindled during the 1970s the IJF began to experiment with the rules in order to make the judo more exciting. Some changes helped such as the passivity rules and many things had to be done to modernise the sport but I cannot say that they made an awful lot of difference. It was the big clean throws that TV and the public wanted to see and nothing specifically channelled judo in that direction. In

fact the rule changes made it easier to win with unspectacular low score (koka) throws and through passivity wins.

LWTV commentating eventually stopped and my commentating didn't start again till a call from out of the blue from Channel 4 in the mid 1980s asked me if I could co-commentate on a sumo programme which they were trying out for the first time. As it happened I was a great sumo fan during my years in Japan and could talk about it. This though was a one-off programme.

Work in TV mostly followed this pattern. If you had experience of commentating (and had not cocked it up) work at some point would pop up from unlikely sources. You were always as good as your last programme and if you were no good the next call did not come – somebody else would be asked.

However, the Channel 4 sumo job led on to a lot of work with Eurosport TV starting with the three day visit to Paris of the Japan Sumo Association's top forty wrestlers. It was a huge sell-out in Paris. After this visit I suggested to Eurosport that they should broadcast the regular two monthly sumo tournaments held in Japan. This they went for and ran it for twelve years to 2007 which meant that I covered an awful lot of sumo bouts. I not only covered sumo for Eurosport but they soon asked me to do judo, taekwondo, Olympic wrestling, jujitsu and even some pro-wrestling. Eventually these went the same way as judo did in the 1980s with LWTV. They were not spectacular enough. It was the same old story.

As its name suggests Eurosport is for Europe. The major languages (French, German English etc) were covered by native speakers like myself but not many Brits realised that my Eurosport commentaries were not specifically for the UK. Why don't you praise the Brits more some moaned but what they did not realise was that I was specifically told by Eurosport to be impartial. The English commentary was of course for the UK but also for about 35 other European countries. If a Brit was fighting a Swede for example I had to be impartial which was not always easy.

Occasionally I got asked about the commentating and usually I suggested that the next time they saw it on TV to turn off the sound and talk through a bout. Some did just that and later confessed to me that they found it very difficult or impossible.

Before *every* tournament I read the rules carefully and checked for any changes. Explaining the judo scoring system was always a pain but necessary. Bad refereeing was another problem because with the advent of slow motion replays it became much more necessary to discuss whether the score was legitimate or not. Many a time you have to contradict a score but there is a limit to the extent you can criticise referees because the commentary in general can sound very negative and they of course cannot hear you.

European judo did very well out of Eurosport TV. For a long time it regularly covered the Olympic, World and European championships plus the French and German Super-A Tournaments and the European Team championships. This was not just a few snippets such as he BBC did but covering all the medal fights in one or two hour programmes. One reason for this French interest in the martial arts was because former French President Chirac was very interested in sumo and because the French

were doing very well in judo. Eurosport of course is a French company based in France.

Technological changes quickly began to affect TV. In the early days commentating meant either being present at the venue for the live broadcasts as per the Olympics above or at the studio where we put a commentary of a feed or on a tape which could be one hour old or one year old. This then went out as we talked so it was always partially if not fully live. If we made a mistake all could hear it. For some time Eurosport broadcasts meant going to Paris often once a week. At the studios the German, French, English and Dutch commentators had their own separate commentating booths to which we were called when required. Often commentators were in the booths finishing off a programme on a different sport and then it was a big rush for them to gather their papers and notes and get out and for us to slide in with seconds to go or even late.

The biggest problem with this type of studio broadcasting was creating a seamless transition to the live event. For example the voices in our earphones told us we would be going live in ten seconds and that we would be joining the Smith v. Jones fight which had Smith in the lead by one koka (all this said by a French technician often in a very thick accent). Then after ten seconds when the action flashed up on our monitors it was not Smith v. Jones at all and it was sometimes the case that you could not identify who they were. This meant feeling your way into the fight. When in doubt I always did the commentary on the actual judo action without mentioning names until a scoreboard or a caption identified the players. Another problem was that the semi and repechage finals often happened on two mats at the same time. The commentators had to be prepared for this which usually meant a desperate struggle to get the latest state of play on ones pool sheets before heading for the booths. Information from the venue was not always available. Many a time I have gone into a booth without the latest info but mostly I was able to work out the state of play and who was who fairly quickly.

Once when I was covering the Sydney Olympics on site judo journalist Nick Soames of Ippon Books asked if he could sit beside me in a vacant chair. On the other side of me was the BBC commentating position which had Neil Adams, a house commentator and a statistician for the paper work. Feeling somewhat envious of this help I asked Nick if he could help me with the paperwork but he declined saying he couldn't handle the pressure and didn't know how I managed it either. That was very much the Eurosport style – one man to do three jobs and always flying by the seat of our pants. It required quite strong nerves and judo contest experience certainly helped this. Many a time I came out of my booth or position to meet the other Eurosport commentators tearing their hair out with rage. It was slightly reassuring to know that I was in good company.

Quite quickly the live on-site programmes died away – it was just too expensive to send French, German, Dutch and English commentators etc to the event. What this meant was that the commentators were not able to talk to competitors and coaches and pick up the latest stories. Our knowledge of the sport became not much different from that of the viewers. We were both watching the same images.

One big problem was that we could never tell whether a throw was a winner or not usually because the referee and corner judges were not fully on-screen. So instead of shouting, "What a magnificent Ippon!" we had to come up with a tame, "That could be a winning score.....yes I think it is..... Yes it is!!" I once asked the late Simon Hicks of Fighting Films who did a bit of filming for the EJU etc if he could give us wider shots so as to take in all the refereeing team but he said it was not easy to anticipate the action. One way to get round this problem would be to introduce compulsory instant electronic scoring by all of the refereeing team as in Taekwondo and then the word Ippon could instantly be flashed on to the screen.

The next technological change was when we stopped going to Paris and did the commentary from studios in our own countries. The images were relayed to us by satellite. This cut out a lot of travelling time but was far less glamorous than going regularly to Paris.

Finally we now have a situation now where we see almost no judo on Eurosport because the ratings are not so good and the advertisers are few. The reason for this has to be placed on judo's un-spectacular nature and confusing scoring I think. We have a sort of alternative which I confess I have not seen and this is a PPV (pay per view) service through the European Judo Union. This may be the way ahead but judo is nowhere near as available as it used to be. (If you have any comments on ppv email them to me at info@sydhoare.com. As I said above I always used to commentate on the assumption that half the viewers were knowledgeable about judo and the other half were casual viewers who needed explanations about what they were seeing. This I am sure helped spread judo in Europe especially when the judo was dynamic and exciting. The EJU may hope to make money from the PPV but a greater consideration is advertising our sport and pulling more beginners into the game. If it is to be televised do it properly.

So what makes a good commentator?

1. Good knowledge of the sport and its rules
2. Steely nerves for those frequent moments when it goes wrong
3. A pleasant or appropriate voice
4. Able to prepare quickly
5. Able to talk about next to nothing when facing an empty mat on screen for fifteen minutes. Believe me it happens.
6. Able to talk for hours on end when the programme is very long.

I am often asked how one gets into TV sport commentating. Unfortunately a lot depends on who you know and what work you have done before. Many try sending tapes of themselves to the broadcasters but few get anywhere. Every week the tapes pile up on a desk in the commentators offices mostly untouched and unwatched. (It's a bit like the movie business which I have some experience of. Guy Ritchie used to come regularly to one of my judo classes. Then one day I had a call from his office asking me to come down for a casting for two possible roles. And that was how I ended up in Snatch and other movies). It's who you know mostly.

When the judo is un-dynamic it leads to low viewing figures and then to little or no advertising and then the TV companies stop showing it unless somebody such as the continental judo federation (or IJF) are prepared to pay to have it shown. In the early

days I always assumed that Eurosport would pay for broadcasting rights of a good event but I soon learned that in the minor sports it was they who have to pay Eurosport. The IJF and EJU have to grasp this nettle.

So what might make judo more spectacular ? I think that the way to do it is to make *height* a necessary criteria for a throw. This already happens in Olympic wrestling and earns the wrestlers higher scores. (Height in wrestling means around or above the persons centre of gravity). This might lead to fewer attacks with the low throws like Ko-uchi-gari and a greater concentration on the higher ones (Seoinage, Uchimata, Harai goshi etc). The criteria for the Ippon throw could then be (1) largely on the back (2) with force and (3) with height. This would parallel the new three levels of scoring namely Ippon~waza-ari~koka.

Hypothetically speaking one could possibly create spectacular judo by limiting the throws that could be used. For example if competitors were only allowed to do big throws such as Seoinage, Harai-goshi, Osotogari, Uchi-mata, Tai-otoshi etc we might see some exciting action. Maybe this is the way ahead – leave judo’s wide range of techniques for randori in the clubs but impose restrictions for competition.

I once had an unnerving revelation. I went to a neighbour’s house to collect my kids and as I walked into their sitting room judo was on the screen with the sound down. It was totally unexpected and slightly shocking. I saw two people bent over almost double with their jackets hanging out fighting for grips which went on for some minutes with the occasional flop and drop seoi that achieved nothing and the odd leg grab. Why on earth would anyone want to watch this I thought. That cold clear moment of revelation passed but it has stayed in my memory for a long time.

To repeat what I said the TV camera records all the action and often repeats it in slow motion. This highlights confusion in the rules and poor calls by the refereeing team and if we want big spectacular throws we must experiment with the rules to produce such action.

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