

Arrangements

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It looked like this was going to be a piece of cake. So why, I wondered, were all the advanced students in the back cussing quietly under their breath? I thought I even detected faint sobbing.

My first move was to spill the water all over my paper. Easy mistake. Could happen to anyone. I mopped it up and picked up my first flower. I pushed it into the kenzan. I let go and it fell over. Ahh, I must do it harder. I tried again, using my center. This time it stuck, as did my index finger. Was flower arranging supposed to hurt? But pain was something I could understand and learn from. It lent me focus. For the next thirty minutes I was lost in leaves, branches, and the stabbing pain of impaled fingertips.

I'm no aesthete, but I can tell when something's beautiful. My arrangement fell on the not bad side of pretty. I leaned back, wiped the blood off, and observed my work.

Sensei approached, hasami in hand. "Nice first try," she said quietly. And then she began to prune.

"Not Necessary." She cut off a leaf. I gasped.

"Not necessary." A branch fell to the tabletop. I cringed.

"Not Necessary." A flower met its demise. I wept.

I couldn't believe this dainty woman could commit such wholesale slaughter of my work. She bent, twisted, snipped, and cut. Half my arrangement sat discarded on the table.

"Much better," she said. I opened my eyes and looked. Really looked. And I saw that it was better. It was beautiful. The branches twisted like a breeze was blowing through the open door of the classroom. The flowers lifted their faces in exultation to the fluorescent lights above. But the poetry lay in the empty space.

I sighed: Here was true beauty. I would never touch it.

Sensei smiled at me and said, "OK, now take it down and try again."

Professor William Randle often tells our class that the most important lessons in jujitsu you learn on the first day: How to get up properly, how to roll and fall for safety, and that the learning is more

important than the knowing. Professor also reminds us to strive for maximum results with minimum effort. Less is more. How true this is in ikebana. The beauty of the branches or flowers is magnified by the empty space surrounding them. It focuses the eye and allows the mind to contemplate the simplicity amongst the complexity and vice versa.

So I rearranged my arrangement. And it
"Ikebana is not meant to be moved."

Sensei Shohara

was better. I was proud and excited to go home and show off my work.

"Ikebana is not meant to be moved," said Sensei. She was right.

I tried to carry my arrangement out to the car. I got halfway down the first staircase when my primary flower toppled to the ground. My secondary flower took the leap on the second staircase and the filler material had given up the ghost by the time I made it to the car. Only one single tulip, brave and alone, was clinging to the kenzan when I arrived home.

I gathered up the flowers and made another arrangement. I don't know if it was better but it was different and I found that I enjoyed the doing more than the done. So I did it again.

But while I was sitting there and staring at my twisted branches I started contemplating the old line about perfection of character. Do you ever ask yourself the question, "Why do I do jujitsu and just how does it perfect my character?"

Do I do it just in case I am attacked by a horde of zombies and I must defend all of mankind? Or, more mundanely, if some idiot threatens me or anyone around me and I have to defend us? Sometimes I feel that way - usually after a tense day of Los Angeles driving. But I think it comes down to the fact that I like the practice. I like the discipline, I like the focus, I like the sense of accomplishment and sometimes I like the pain.

Ikebana is not about the finished arrangement. It's about the meditation on form, structure, nature, simplicity and beauty. Beauty is the end result but learning and enjoyment through the process is more important. Just like a near perfect hane goshi. It's beautiful to watch, but moments later it's just an uke lying on a mat.

Reflections: An old judo player on competition

Editor's note: The following commentary is from Glenn Shifflet, a guy who has been around judo for a long time. Glenn won his division at the 2003 World Masters Championships in Japan. He sent the comments to a listserv for judoka. We think it is worth sharing, and are reprinting it with his permission.

By Glenn Shifflet

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Sent: Wednesday, May 12, 2004 9:40 PM

While in San Diego for the U.S. Nationals last spring, I had a chance to think about this great sport and what was going down out there. While holed up in the hotel awaiting my Saturday contests, I realized that I didn't feel real good. Something was amiss. I'd been watching the Senior competition on Friday, followed by Kata competition. While I enjoyed watching the Kata and many of the women's matches, something was bothering me about watching the men's competition.

It hit me after a while. It was the attitude of the men competitors. A kind of "win at any cost", train hard, plan out your strategy, work on the other guy's weaknesses, tough it out, attitude which, to me at least, was a real put-off.

Let me make a confession at this point. I have never been a very disciplined judoka. I've always been in judo for the fun of it - always looking for the game, the sport - not the winning. Sure, it's more fun to win than to lose, but hey, winning is a long way from being everything.

My opponent on Saturday seemed to have that same strong need to win. And it worked against him in a major way.

When I left San Diego on Sunday I caught a ride with a guy some 30-40 years old from Toronto. He had competed

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