

Article by Jimmy Pedro, World Champion.

Your company faces a much bigger rival. Is there a way to turn your competitor's size into an advantage for you? Your fiercest opponent is gaining momentum in the marketplace. How can you turn that momentum against him? Your arch rival keeps beating you to the punch, cutting into your business with superior speed. What can you do to flip the situation around and win back your customers?

Jimmy Pedro knows a lot about flipping things around and a lot about winning. Pedro, the 1999 world judo champion, is the first American in 12 years -- and only the third American in history -- to win that title. A three-time Olympian and the 1996 bronze-medal winner, 30-year-old Pedro has been the top-ranked American judoka for the past decade, winning five national titles.

Judo (Japanese for "the gentle way") emphasizes winning in combat by using your opponent's weight and strength as weapons against him, while preserving your own mental and physical energy. It embodies the principle that good technique can win out over sheer strength. In a judo match, a slight person can overcome a heavier, stronger opponent. There are no kicks or punches. Instead, after a bow to begin the match, players score points by "throwing" their opponent or by using a hold-down, a choke, or an armlock.

Judo was created in the late 19th century by Jigoro Kano, a Japanese educator. A pacifist, Kano modified the ancient samurai art of jujitsu ("the gentle practice"), a system of weaponless defense, by changing some dangerous holds and dropping others altogether. Seeing judo as a mental discipline as well as a physical one, Kano founded his own judo school and instituted a strict code of ethics and humanitarian philosophy.

Pedro officially retired from the sport after the Sydney Games and is now working as a marketing VP for Monster.com in Maynard, Massachusetts, where he manages the company's 2004 Olympic-sponsorship program. It's Pedro's first 9-to-5 job after years spent running his judo studio in Andover, Massachusetts, training, and competing. While he still runs the studio, Pedro's latest mission is to help former U.S. Olympians make the transition to the world of business using a Web-based community and mentoring system that connects current athletes to former athletes, lists job openings, and provides a place to post resumes.

Pedro recently coached Fast Company in the business application of judo: how to let your opponents beat themselves.

Minimum effort with maximum efficiency

It's a main tenet of judo: "Minimum effort with maximum efficiency." Instead of resisting force, use it to your advantage by going with it and adding your own strength. Don't fight back when you're attacked. Yield. It sounds counterintuitive, but you want to be attacked. When someone shoves you, that person is a little off balance and can easily be thrown. If I'm on the mat with someone and he's not attacking me, I somehow need to get him to act. I might push him a little bit just to see what he does, and if he pushes back, I'll use that movement against him.

Judo is a full-contact hyperspeed chess match. Matches run for five minutes or until someone scores a point -- whichever comes first. Because judo is incredibly fast moving (you can lose an entire match with one split-second lapse), you have to maximize every opportunity. And you have to think several steps ahead all the time. You must anticipate what your opponent is

going to do so that you can either counter his move or execute an attack before he does. The moves are logical and sequential: action, reaction, action, reaction. If I'm pinning somebody, there are certain escapes that my opponent is capable of performing. As he's trying to get out of my grip, I switch my hold, and now there are different possible escapes. If I'm ahead of him when he starts to make his next move, I can counter it and stay in control of the situation.

Study the competition

How do you make great split-second decisions when you're under a huge amount of pressure and every move counts absolutely? By knowing the competition before you step out onto the mat. I have videotapes of every single person who has competed in an event anywhere in the world in the past year. Even if I don't attend an event, someone's there taping for me. Of course, when you're studying the competition, you want to see how that person performs against competitors who are similar to you. I'm a medium-sized lefty, so I study people fighting medium-sized lefties. I note their strengths and weaknesses. I look for concrete qualities like stamina -- whether they get tired if they're pushed. I look to see how aggressive the person is. I pick out the main techniques that each person uses and which throws he succumbs to.

I take notes on all of these details so that I can create a game plan before a competition. You have to know what your opponent is capable of beforehand in order to make good decisions quickly. Know your own strengths, know your opponent's strengths, and use both of them to your advantage.

Drill your strong points -- and remain unpredictable

It's better to do a few things exceptionally well than to do a whole gamut of things in a mediocre fashion. There are about 65 different judo throws, and you can become an Olympic champion having perfected only 2 or 3 of them -- if you can throw every single person in the world using those throws. Eliminate those 2 or 3 techniques from your repertoire, and you won't be able to throw anyone. So now you've got everyone studying those 3 techniques. That means that you have to evolve continuously and develop new techniques. If you've perfected 3 throws, there are still 62 others for you to learn.

How do you choose which techniques to perfect? By knowing yourself and by understanding your advantages, your disadvantages, and your style. There are all sorts of different styles. The Russians like to pull opponents in close, lock them up so they can't move anywhere, and then throw them over. They have awkward gripping techniques and stances that other people aren't accustomed to. They're successful because they're nontraditional. The Japanese are very technical. They like a lot of space so that they can execute their moves. Generally, you want to be strong in areas where other people are weak, and you want to keep your opponent off guard by being good at a variety of attacks from the same grip. Don't ever change your style to cater to an opponent. When I'm watching a videotape of a competitor, I make note of which throw beat him -- but that's not the first throw that I'm going to try. Execute your own techniques first and work your repertoire into the match. Only if the match isn't going well or if your techniques aren't working should you use your backup. You always want to have tactics that you may try in certain circumstances.

Take risks -- no matter what the circumstances

You can't win in the long run if you don't take risks. When you're winning a match, there's a great temptation to focus on trying to hold on to the lead,

as opposed to going for the win by taking chances. Even if you end up losing the match, it's much better to take chances than it is to fight afraid and run away psychologically.

I learned that lesson the hard way, when I was 16, at the U.S. Open in Colorado Springs. In one match, I scored early and then got defensive. My opponent didn't beat me by throwing me; he beat me on penalties, because I was scared. I wasn't wrong for losing. I was wrong for not making the other person beat me. I beat myself by not having the will to win.

That match was a turning point in my career. From that day on, I was more afraid of playing scared than I was of losing. Now I take the match to my opponent. I'm always aggressive. Regardless of what the score is, I'm always taking chances.

Attack, attack, attack -- especially if the odds are against you
I tell my students to attack as often as possible -- especially if the odds are against them. If you attack only once in the entire practice, then you haven't learned as much as if you had attacked 100 times. And you'll learn more by losing to someone who's better than you than you will by winning against someone who isn't. Learning is trial and error. If a throw doesn't work one way, try it another way, until you develop a technique that works for you.

I also tell students not to worry about what's going to happen. Just do it -- and worry about it later. Go home and think about it. Visualize it, and try to conceptualize why it might have gone wrong. Most people are afraid to try things because they're afraid of failing. But with failure comes success. If you fail enough times -- if you're persistent -- then you're going to get better.

It's important when you're competing to "do the right thing" -- use proper techniques, fight aggressively -- even at the cost of a match. You can always learn from a loss. But if you're winning using bad techniques, you're not improving your skills, and you're going to hurt your chances in the long run when you're competing against better, more-experienced opponents.

My father was my coach, and if I won a national title but didn't fight the way that he had taught me, he would be sure to tell me what I did wrong. He had bigger, better plans for me than just a national title. He wanted me to be the best athlete I could be.

Believe it's possible -- and relax
Everybody has a dream. But most of the time, people think that their dream is far-fetched. What is your dream? What is the ultimate achievement in your mind? For me, it was being the best judoka in the world. If you met me for the first time and I told you that, you'd probably think I was crazy. You might think, He's never going to be the best in the world. Well, if I don't believe it's possible to get there, if I think my goal is just a pipe dream, then I'm never going to achieve it. When I began to prepare for the 1999 World Championship, I sat down and pictured what it would feel like to be a gold medalist. I imagined what my body would experience -- the goose bumps, the elation. I pictured myself on the stand receiving my medal, with the national anthem playing all around me. In my mind, I made up an opponent whom I'd beaten in the finals and put him right there on the second-place podium.

When your dream becomes real to you, if you can create that image in your

mind, then it's almost as if your body allows it to happen. Until you really think you're capable of doing something, it won't happen. Ten minutes before

every fight, I lie down on the floor, close my eyes, and think. Sometimes I think about nothing. Other times I think about whom I'm fighting, and I picture myself beating that opponent. I win the match in my mind before I actually compete. I'd guess that at least 60% of successful athletes visualize their success before they actually compete. It's a huge part of succeeding.

You don't know what you're capable of until you step up to the challenge. When I was a kid, I had no idea that I was capable of being a world champion and a three-time Olympian. People don't realize that achieving their dream is possible. They see it as something that's out there. Do you want to be that person? Or are you ready to face your fears, put in the work, accept the consequences -- and reap the rewards? The people who can honestly answer yes to that question are the ones who will win the gold.

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