

History of Sports Ju Jitsu in New Zealand

Early competitions

The first sporting format of ju-jitsu in New Zealand was instigated by Laurie Olliver in 1969 as an inter-club tournament between the NZ Jiu Jitsu Association clubs in Auckland. The rules were very judo-oriented but also allowed for light-contact striking. In the early days the matches tended to be very scrappy and badly refereed, and soon fell from favour.

In 1973 Gary Trail, Ivan Gale and Steve Heremaia organised a demonstration competition between the NZJJA clubs but when that failed as a promotion they returned to the tournament format. The standard of refereeing was improved in 1975 when NZJJA head Hans van Ess introduced a referees' course and the sporting format continued until 1986 when the NZJJA adopted a 5-point scoring system to better balance striking with throws, groundwork and submissions. Meanwhile, in the mid-1970's the new South Pacific Jiu Jitsu Society, under Laurie Olliver, began crossing the Tasman to Len Noyes' Sydney club for competitions against the Australians, who later reciprocated with New Zealand visits.

World Ju-Jitsu Games

Correspondence between Steve Heremaia and overseas dignitaries secured an invitation for a team from his Black Dragon Jiu Jitsu Academy to attend the first World Ju-Jitsu Games in Canada in 1984. New Zealand became a member of the World Council of Ju-Jitsu Organisations (WCJJO) and Steve became New Zealand's first director.

Appearances at the next five Games secured the 1995 World Games for New Zealand. However, following the Games, American Ernie Boggs formulated a new version of sporting ju-jitsu, coining the phrase 'sport ju-jitsu' and forming the International Sport Jujitsu Association (ISJA). Their format allowed for full-contact ju-jitsu alongside the more common light-contact, and introduced grappling-only events. The first ISJA World Games was held in 1996 in the United States and a team led by Waitakere Martial Arts' Terry Evans attended with Terry returning as New Zealand's ISJA director.

Sport Ju-Jitsu New Zealand foundation

As New Zealand competitors gained confidence in their sport, tournaments began to spring up around New Zealand under various bodies using different rules. Many held "national championships" but each rarely involved competitors from outside their own organisation, if at all.

In 1999 Doug Bailey (NZ Jiu Jitsu School of Self Defence) contacted Gary Polwart (Waitakere Martial Arts) to discuss merging the various tournaments onto a single circuit. Doug had competed at WCJJO World Games and hosted Jiu Jitsu Unlimited tournaments, and Gary had competed at the ISJA World Games and hosted tournaments under ISJA rules. Together the two sorted out a workable format and founded the International Sport Jiu Jitsu Association of New Zealand [ISJJA(NZ)] with Terry Evans as Chairman. Gary Polwart became the Tournament Director and by April that year ISJJA(NZ) had hosted its first tournament. In 2001 ISJJA(NZ) changed its name to SJJ(NZ) and Doug Bailey took over as Chairman.

SJJ(NZ) National Circuit

The original idea of the founders was to band together all the clubs and organisations



running their own tournaments and "national championships" and to put those tournaments onto one circuit that was open to all martial artists, regardless of style. The hope was to create more unity in the ju-jitsu and wider martial arts community, develop New Zealand standards by allowing competitors to amass greater experience, and to determine, by an open process, just who the top competitors in this country were. Originally, the National Circuit was made up of tournaments hosted by separate clubs, each run under the particular rules of the host club, with SJJ(NZ) overseeing the administration of entries, draws, referees and ranking results. The diversity of rules was seen as a positive factor in developing the mental flexibility needed by NZ international competitors, but as time progressed SJJ(NZ) took a greater role in running the tournaments, and at competitors' request, the rules were standardised into a single format for all tournaments.

Rules

The rules of the tournaments for the first two years were those of the host organisations and were categorized into Freestyle, Grappling and Self Defence. Some Freestyle rules allowed for striking to the face and thigh kicks, while others made those illegal but allowed win by submission as well as win by most points. Weight divisions were standardized with six men's divisions from Under 70kg to 110kg+ and three women's divisions from Under 60kg to 70kg+. Part way through 2000, Colts (Under 18) divisions were added and competition from 2002 onwards included children's (Under 15) divisions.

In 2001 rules at all SJJ(NZ) tournaments were standardized. Freestyle allowed one point to be scored for any type of strike to legal targets above the knees but actual contact to the face was disallowed although non-contact strikes were scored. Throws and takedowns were scored according to classification, and groundfighting was scored by pins, with submissions being awarded points and a restart from the mount. Grappling was standardized into a single format that reflected good grappling strategy and which awarded points that were fair to judo players at one extreme and Brazilian jiu jitsu competitors at the other.

That same year, a Striking category that resembled light-contact karate / tae kwon do was introduced to try to attract more competitors from striking arts. However, few additional clubs were coaxed into attending and the focus on striking-only in the Striking category saw a number of heated clashes. By the end of 2002 a disqualification and disciplinary procedure was implemented to curb the excess contact, and Striking was dropped for the 2003 season, never to appear again. At the same time, a re-look at Freestyle in 2002 saw ground-fighting time-limits extended from 30 seconds to 45 seconds, and striking allowed on the ground.

New Zealand Black Tops

By 2000 over 30 clubs had competed on the SJJ(NZ) National Circuit and later that year a team of athletes were chosen to represent New Zealand at the ISJA World Sport Ju-Jitsu Games in England. The significance of this team was that it was the first to have been chosen objectively from the country's pool of sport ju-jitsu competitors, each team member holding a number one ranking, and having the most specialised competition preparation to date. The team of eight returned from Leeds with two gold medals, four silver, and a bronze, easily the most impressive results of the 10 NZ teams to have attended World Games since 1984.



At the 2002 ISJA World Games in South Africa, just two Black Tops represented New Zealand, returning with two gold medals and one silver. New Zealand had no showing at the 2004 Games, but in 2006 four Black Tops attended the ISJA World Games in Argentina, returning with one gold medal and two silvers.

Sport Ju-Jitsu Black Belts

The SJJ(NZ) Black Belt was designed to reward those competitors who complete 50 wins on the SJJ(NZ) National Circuit. The first recipient of this outstanding achievement was Louise Park, in 2000. To date, just eight awards have been made. In 2006 Neil Swailes made history by achieving the momentous milestone of 100 match wins.

National Championships

In 2001 SJJ(NZ) took the next step of adding a National Championship to the National Circuit in order to find the best competitors in New Zealand, in addition to those holding top rankings on the circuit. By the end of the Nationals over 35 clubs had competed at SJJ(NZ) tournaments.

Referees' Programme

The first systematic training of referees had been instigated by Hans van Ess in 1975, and in 1992 Steve Heremaia had some of his members gain qualifications under WCJJO. Doug Bailey was one such WCJJO referee and, together with Gary Polwart, he developed the SJJ(NZ) Referees' Programme to recruit and train referees for the SJJ(NZ) National Circuit.

The new Referees' Programme standardised the different qualities of expertise in New Zealand at the time and assessed current referees to one of three levels. All referees were retrained to a new standard and new entrants were prepared in the theory of refereeing and then given the opportunity to gain qualifications by gaining experience on the mat. Under the current programme, Class III referees may time-keep, score-keep and score matches as Judges. Class II referees may centre referee, and Class I referees may referee at international level and train others in the programme.

Restructure

August 2003 saw the foundation of the New Zealand Ju-Jitsu Federation. Much of the success of the Federation was due to the accomplishments of SJJ(NZ), and in forming the Federation, SJJ(NZ) allowed itself to be absorbed as a sub-branch of NZJJF. With the restructure of NZJJF in 2005, the SJJ(NZ) committee was disbanded in favour of a CEO representing SJJ(NZ) on the NZJJF committee. Rowena Haper became the first SJJ(NZ) CEO.