

# THE WITNESSES : ANTON GEESINK

On that day in 1961, which he was later to call the happiest memory of his life, Anton Geesink had, as usual, made up his mind to push himself to the limits. He was twenty seven, two metres tall and weighed one hundred kilograms. He was particularly looking forward to this world championship in Paris as France was renowned for its judokas at that time. He had been there to train on several occasions and had made many friends there.

*By Marie-Hélène Roukhadzé*



**H**e got dressed calmly, serenely. Very early on he had learned the pleasure of excelling himself and it was this element of sport that he enjoyed. Whether in his daily training or during competitions, he gave himself completely, suffering more or less, but participating with all his energy, and whether victorious or vanquished always ended with a feeling of fullness ; he had given all he possibly could.

Taking part in a championship was no more than a break in this training. From the age of twenty he had accumulated titles, initially on a national level, then in Europe,

and finally, at the age of twenty-seven, the title of world champion — his most memorable victory he would later call it “because I did not feel especially proud of the others. To tell you the truth, after a win, like after a defeat, I didn’t dwell on the details, I was just happy to have done my best; I just brushed everything aside and got down to work again. This was doubtless due to the attitude of my parents and later my wife and children. They attached no importance to the results I got. I just became champion through a kind of natural progression. You like judo, get on with it. That’s all.”

*The unforgettable moment of becoming Olympic Champion, in Tokyo in 64.*

Anton Geesink recalls his memories with a certain detachment. He remembers that his 1964 Olympic title in the open category at the Games of the XVIII Olympiad in Tokyo impressed those around him more than Geesink himself. He was certainly the first non-Asian Olympic champion, but he had also been the first non-Asian world champion. It is true that the event was made more spectacular through the Games' being held in Japan, but Japan was no longer the world's only great judo nation, with France and the Soviet Union having already demonstrated their excellence.



*A new approach to learning judo.*

In 1965 Anton Geesink won his second world championship in Rio de Janeiro, and after a final — his twenty first — European title won in Rome in 1967, he retired from competition. He then devoted himself entirely to education, making use of his

eighteen years on the international sports scene, and these years of training and reflection led him to teach judo differently. He, the recalcitrant who refused to be bound to the past and at fifteen was already claiming he wanted to live in the present and for the future, went on to explain his method in two books: "Judo in evolution" (1971) and "Judo: security through perfection" (1977). He had been teaching at the Physical Education Academy in Amsterdam since 1968 and had observed the results of his method on his pupils. The first principle was "enjoy working with your whole body. If you take pleasure in training, you will always have the success you expected. If you train with the single-minded desire to be the best, you will make life difficult for yourself with no certainty that you will attain your goal."

But to enjoy training it was necessary to consider judo purely as an Olympic sport and to remove it from its tradition. This was because, in the desire to instill the technique and philosophy of judo into western children, they were being forced to accept, rather than understand, a tradition which was totally alien to them. They lost time and became discouraged. Anton Geesink had noticed this during his visits to judo schools across the world, and in remembering the contradictions and flaws he had experienced or suffered during his own training. "Why learn something you will never need to use? The philosophy behind judo is not easily assimilated by the western mind. We have a different culture. You first have to learn the sport and its technique, and then later on you can derive pleasure and profit from studying the philosophy. The system of grades is outdated; it discourages young judokas and slows down their development. Why do you have to be eighteen to reach the second, even if you reached the first at fifteen? And then wait three more years for the third? It's a real check to the development of anyone who is keen on judo. Even if one athlete trains every day and another trains once a week, they will both have to wait the same length of time between two exams. The same is true for someone

who is highly talented compared with someone who is not. And then to pass exams you have to know all kinds of holds, some of which are incompatible with your individual morphology and which will thus be unusable. For example, to get your yellow belt you have to know twelve techniques, ten percent of which you will actually use ; the rest is merely a waste of time. Thus, having waited for years, a judoka may then find himself left empty-handed through failing an exam because he did not achieve a hold with a designated partner, where the hold was impossible simply because of a difference in height."

It is difficult to break away from tradition. To do so requires the ability to stand back and to anticipate, a good supply of originality, an immense capacity for personal commitment, a well-balanced self-confidence and a good knowledge of, as well as a passionate love for one's sport. Anton Geesink had just these qualities, together with the conviction that if judo could be considered as a sport with its technical value and social aspect, separate from its quasi-religious aspect, it would develop five times as fast. He expressed these views. He was accused of being a revolutionary and his ideas were violently contested by many teachers who probably ensured themselves a steady income by cloaking their teaching in a shroud of mystery and difficulties. Inspired by his deep conviction, Anton Geesink persevered. In 1968 he travelled to Japan to meet some of the great masters like Ito-sensei in Budokan, and Matsumoto-sensei at the University of Tenri. He showed them how he taught the techniques of the sweep (barai), and to the great astonishment of Dutch 7th dan, the Japanese 9th dan, unlike certain western teachers, did not get angry but thought for a while and acknowledged the validity of what Geesink was demonstrating. During one of their conversations Matsumoto conceded : "In 1961 we lost the world title through a very simple hold, and in 1964 Geesink's winning hold was even simpler. Our friend's demonstration on the competition tatamis and again here shows us clearly that we have been asleep for

years". Mifuni even wrote : "We should listen to Geesink because the first country to rethink how judo is taught will be the first to produce champions. We owe it to ourselves".



To be understood by some enlightened thinkers is comforting, certainly, but is far from the end of the matter. Consequently, Anton Geesink published his two books and carried on teaching in the Netherlands and across the world. With undiminished enthusiasm he explains, demonstrates and answers questions wherever he goes. If he intends to spend a week in a town, he tells the local judo federation that he will be there, makes himself available to them, voluntarily, for one or two days. Then he arrives, huge and imposing in his three-coloured tracksuit, sports bag in hand. He is greeted with deference and reserve, but this intimidation is short-lived as his simplicity and kind nature quickly put his interlocutors at ease. The lesson starts, with Geesink watching attentively. He explains and shows what to do, demonstrates in slow motion, appeals to internal logic, corrects, makes the pupils repeat their moves. "Basically it's very simple : the more logical the system, the faster

there will be an improvement; the better the technique is, the more pleasure and enthusiasm for judo there will be”, he comments. “The aim is to lift the partner, a good judoka is stable, he does not fall to the mat. You have to start by giving the beginner the feeling of security by teaching him the holds on the floor. He will then learn to push, to pull, to co-ordinate his movements, to hold his partner. After that we start on throwing techniques (tachi waza).” Anton Geesink never grows tired of answering questions. He enjoys developing motivation and seeking to pass on his love of the sport, his experience, his knowledge. He has developed a whole series of exercises designed to stimulate the judoka and make him enjoy fighting. These develop anticipation and reaction skills. When a person feels judo to be a part of himself, he is ready to make use of his knowledge by practising with a partner who will not co-operate, i.e. to enter competition.

At the same time, Anton Geesink is a living legend. At the Tokyo Sports Museum there is a huge photograph of his fight against Akio Kaminaga in 1964 in tribute to the great champion. In his native town of Utrecht, a street bears his name. In 1987 he was honoured as a 9th dan in judo and co-opted as an IOC member. He is also a member of the IOC Sport for All Commission. He is special adviser on Japan to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and to the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries. He could make his chest shine if he chose to wear all his titles and decorations. Instead, he has dedicated his life to the development of judo and sport for all ; he still feels most at home when wearing a kimono and his most enjoyable encounters are those he organizes in dojos. His school produces numerous champions, but he does not talk about them. He has achieved one part of his goal : to make judo efficient and enjoyable to practice — something he never grows tired of demonstrating. *M.-H. R.*



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