

Olympism

by Morley Myers*

Judo king

Anton Geesink, a missionary of mercy



Judo lesson with the Master Anton Geesink.

Anton Geesink Dutch IOC member since 1987 was somewhat of a sporting legend during the 1950s and 1960s when he reigned supreme in the world of judo.

The towering 1.98 metres (6ft 6ins) tall 121 kilograms (266lbs) athlete revolutionized the sport and became the first man to beat the Japanese at the game they invented.

He defeated three Japanese in consecutive rounds to win the open category at the 1961 world championships in Paris and then scored two

victories over the great three-time All-Japan champion Akio Kaminaga to capture the gold medal when judo made its Olympic debut at the Games of the XVIII Olympiad in Tokyo in 1964. It was no wonder that Geesink, now 65, is still lionised in Japan.

In an illustrious career between 1952 and 1967 he won 21 European titles, three world titles, one Olympic title, a string of national titles and numerous international tournaments.

His home in Utrecht should be awash with silverware, but apart from some photographs and other memorabilia,

the only awards on display are his gold medals from the 1961 world championships and the Games in 1964. There are many stories of sporting heroes selling their trophies when falling on hard times, but Geesink sold off his medals to help others.

In fact, the energetic Dutchman still devotes much of his time to charity work, more than three decades after sacrificing his hard-won trophies to help build a school in Brazil.

He first became involved in good causes at the 1965 world championships in Rio de Janeiro where he met a Dutch missionary who asked whether he could visit Belo Horizonte and hold a demonstration tournament to raise money to build a school. "I promised I would," said Geesink recalling the meeting which changed his perspective. "After the championships where I got my third title, I went with the other Dutch team members to Belo Horizonte. But unfortunately, we had to cancel the demonstration because it was so hot. It was the hottest time in memory, according to the locals. But the people were very friendly and I was determined to do something. I promised the missionary that as soon as I got back to the Netherlands I would look for ways to find enough money to build a school." However, Geesink could sense the missionary's doubt.

"It was a very sad situation, because he thought we would have raised some money, but there was nothing when we left. He thought it was a mission impossible for me to get some money in the Netherlands." When he returned home, Geesink considered various options and then cashed in on the power of television advertising. "I was asked to take part in a television programme. I promised the director I would accept if they would allow me three to four minutes to explain my idea of selling trophies to raise money for the school. I would sell everything except my Paris and

Tokyo gold medals which had special sentimental attachment." Even Geesink was surprised at the impact. "There was a tremendous response and we sold everything for 65,000 guilders, that's about \$30,000 which was a lot of money in those times - enough to build the school." Geesink has never seen the concrete results of his efforts. "I've never been back to Belo Horizonte to see the school, but I have seen photographs and I keep in contact with the missionary, who comes to the Netherlands on holiday every two or three years."

Closer to home, Geesink has found other outlets for charitable work. "I like to be engaged in social work. Sometimes I sell the street newspaper for the homeless where the funds help to provide them with shelter and other assistance," he said.

Geesink, who is married to Johanna and has three children and four grandchildren, likes to remain active. "I am very much involved with kids. I give three or four judo weekends every year, hold training clinics and find sponsors for attraction parks. "I also have what I call a 'Mobile Olympic Academy', a car which I use to visit schools with educational packages. It is a very good tool to go to schools and speak about every facet of life, not only Olympism. I have been doing it for eight years, but now I have other people carrying on the work because I am getting too old to inspire the youth. But I am still a stimulator or catalyst," said Geesink.

Certainly, Geesink remains an inspiration and is still revered in Japan. In fact, the genial giant has been invited

to Japan on 27 January to receive an honorary doctor's degree from the Kokushikan University for his judo innovations. "This is a very big honour for me, especially from the Japanese because they are very traditional."

Geesink's place in Japanese sporting history is secure and they share a mutual admiration. It was the Japanese who invented judo in 1892 and it was a demonstration by the Japanese in 1948 which determined Geesink's sporting future. "As soon as I saw it I quit football and I quit swimming and I have never regretted it," he said. It was a decision which also turned out well for those schoolchildren in Brazil, the homeless in the Netherlands and generations of aspiring judokans.

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Selling the street newspaper for the homeless.