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**Girl Gang Leader Breaks
Olympics Judo Ceiling**
by
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Since 1980, the International Women's Sports Hall of Fame of the Women's Sports Foundation has been recognizing female athletes and coaches for their remarkable achievements and lasting impact on the world of women's sports. In 1994, Rena "Rusty" Kanokogi joined that elite group in tribute to her coaching skills in judo, a sport for which she spearheaded the process of gender equity and Olympic recognition. Her life's story exemplifies the transformative power of sports.

"I had a very dysfunctional childhood growing up in Coney Island, Brooklyn in the 1950s," says the daughter of Russian Jewish parents. She describes herself as "an aggressive girl with no outlets". Her leadership skills, however, came out early in her life when she organized a girl gang. Going further down that path was interrupted by a close relative.

"My role model was my aunt, Lee Krasner (wife of the painter Jackson Pollack). What she demonstrated to me was a woman who wouldn't give up, a woman who wanted to do it her way," recalls the seventh-degree black belt in judo, the highest ranked American woman and one of only three or four women to achieve this ranking in the world.

When asked what drew her to judo, Kanokogi was very clear, "It was an outlet. I needed to get out my energy." In 1961, she entered the New York State YMCA championship (as a boy), won a medal and then lost it. "I had broad shoulders, short hair, and bound my breasts with an ace bandage. However, after I won in the team competition, someone notified the officials that I was a female. If I did not give my medal up, our team would have to have forfeited their first place win."

The determined practitioner of judo – a Japanese word 'the gentle way' – didn't let this experience lessen her drive to learn more. The next year, Kanokogi went to Tokyo to study judo.

"I came back and started teaching boys and men," says Kanokogi. "Women's judo was just developing and although there were some countries like France, Great Britain, Switzerland, and West Germany that held competitions for women, the US wasn't considered part of the judo world. I thought it should be!"

Besides learning judo and beginning her career coaching the sport, Kanokogi found a friend in Japan. "We met when I was training and he later came to New York to teach," said the

now grandmother of four. Marriage and the birth of a daughter and a son didn't deter Kanokogi from continuing with judo as a practitioner and a coach.

By 1974, Kanokogi was teaching men *and* women who were competing nationally and in 1976 was coaching women for their first international event that year. A judo team in the US was approved to go to the British Open in 1977 but they had no funds to get there. Somehow, Kanokogi and others involved scraped together the money – a good investment since women from each weight division won gold medals. “People were suddenly saying, ‘All right; there must be something in women doing judo.’”

Kanokogi's work crystallized around this time. She realized her mission wasn't just for young women in the US. “My mission was for the world. I had made many friends through traveling to competitions around the globe and reached out to these people to help change the world of judo.”

In 1980, the first Women's World Championships of the International Judo Federation was held at Madison Square Garden in New York. Kanokogi personally took on the responsibility for the event, going so far as to put up her home up for collateral to assure that the funds were there to stage such a groundbreaking event. Competitors from 27 countries and three continents showed up that year; the next year 27 countries from four continents were represented, recalls Kanokogi. But there was one more challenge to be met.

Although men's judo had been an Olympic sport since 1964, women were not allowed to compete in judo. In 1984 the Olympics were held in Los Angeles, California, and Kanokogi led the team presenting the case for women's judo to be included. However, the response of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) wasn't encouraging. The IOC declared, “It's not good for women to participate in contact sports.”

Kanokogi and her colleagues brought a lawsuit against the IOC but the case never got to court, she says because, “We could prove that we were being discriminated against.” When the Olympic Games were held in Seoul, Korea, in 1988, women competing in judo were part of the program.

Looking back on her life and career in judo, Kanokogi realizes that what she got from judo was more precious than any medal. “Judo saved my life. It put me on the right road. It gave me structure when I needed it. Also a husband. Great kids. And grandchildren,” she says.

“I wasn't satisfied and wanted to make certain that what happened to me didn't happen again,” admits the coach who now works within the New York City School Department. “That is, if you work so damn hard and you're not given the reward of competing, it's like going up the first two steps of a ladder and told you can't go any further to receive your recognition. We went to the top in judo. And I'm proud to be a part of making that happen.”