

First Contact and Grip Domination

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The Question of First Contact

Recently the question of which hand top level players employ first in gripping was raised. Most experienced players and coaches would be able to offer an opinion on the subject. But the problem is that opinions are nothing more than unsubstantiated conjecture until supported by some sort of evidence.

The only accurate means of verification of conjecture or hypothesis is by way of statistical analysis. To that end a survey was conducted in hopes of ascertaining the approach to gripping skills by elite players.

A study of the gripping habits and patterns of players was taken from video tapes of three major competitions. The tapes were matches of the quarter finalists of the 1987 All Japan Championship, medallist and championship matches of the 1985 World Championships as well as elimination and medallist competition from the 1985 European Championship.

Numbers

A total of 549 incidents of initial gripping contact were observed. The criterion for discerning an occasion of initial contact was that neither player had any contact with the other. As the players came to grips the observation was made as to the first hand to make assertive controlling efforts. That is to say that the player was trying to make a positive gripping effort and not merely pushing the opponent away or avoiding contact. Next the determination of the player's primary attacking direction was established. In other words, was the player set for left or right-sided attacks?

Of the 549 observed incidents 278 were right-sided preparations while the remaining 271 were lefties. (Evidencing, once again, that the players of top level Judo are unaware that only 10% of them should be playing left handed.) In 164 of the episodes of gripping the players placed their Power Hand first. While 385 of the incidents saw the players reaching in with the Locking (other than the Power) Hand. This gives us a statistic of 70.13% of the time elite players will grip first with the Locking Hand.

The survey prompted more than a cold, hard list of statistics however. During the observation of the competition several factors became evident. Outlined below are the surveyor's conclusions on high level gripping skills.

High Incidence of Kenka Yotsu

Kenka Yotsu is a Japanese term denoting the players taking opposite stances. That is to say that one player takes a right grip while the opponent adopts a left posture.

When players do not oppose the opponent's initial grip the tendency is for both players to reach in with the Power Hand and take a strong grip. When this occurs each player simply takes what is most available. What is available is the lapel of the side that the opponent has reached with. So if Player A reaches out with his right hand his right side is extended toward the opponent's left side. Player B simply reaches out and takes what is proffered. We now have the players holding one another with opposing Power Hands. (right versus left). Each player is now faced with two problems:

- 1) In order to progress into an attacking situation the player must try to find a way to get the other hand in for a grip.
- 2) The player also has to find a method of circumventing the opponent's defensive position of the "stiff arm" that has been allowed a purchase. As a rule the players are doing nothing more than trying to hold each other at bay with the Power Hand arm stuck into the opponent's ribs.

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The problem with the practice of this approach is that taking the Power Hand first tends to be very neutral. The players have equal grips and equal control over the opponent. Neither player has, nor can secure, an advantage. This leads to the situation of neither wanting to release his grip for fear of attack. So the players waltz about attempting an occasional, and easily defended, one armed attack.

Allowing the opponent to place his Power Hand unopposed generally results in a neutral Kenka Yotsu position. Inevitably this situation comes down to two things.

1) Very defensive play.

Power Hand first players tend to use the Power Hand to hold the opponent's torso away. Once the Power/blocking hand is placed they use the locking/free Hand to prevent further grips or attacking maneuvers. Neither player is willing to take a chance on shifting his grips. The unwillingness to venture into other gripping strategies is probably due to a strong defensive position. With an arm glued into the armpit of the opponent the player is able to hold the attacker out on anything he might try.

2) Physically stronger player winning.

In a contest where the only criterion of superiority is who can hold the opponent at bay longest the stronger player is a shoe in! There is only one small problem with this strategy.

The Opponent Is Always Stronger!

In coaching I try to impress on players one very simple rule. Your Opponent will always be stronger than you! This may not be an empirically supportable theory but it certainly seems to be the case.

Every time a player is forced into or places himself in a position of having to rely on raw strength he is at a detriment. Players need to be trained to avoid situations where the opponent is allowed to physically dominate. This may be avoided very easily with proper gripping procedure.

Potential Injury and Defeat

A further consideration of extending an unguarded arm is that of injury or attacks from Arm Locks. We have an excellent example of this from a World Championship final match. Hitoshi Saito, World and Olympic Champion, reached out to take his opponent's lapel in the 1985 World Championship +209 final and received a dislocated elbow for his efforts. Saito's serious arm injury and subsequent loss in the 1985 World Championships was directly attributable to a Power Hand first grip! Had he taken the measures to control the opponent's gripping efforts he would have at least had the opportunity to contest the Gold.

Gripping Ability = Dominance

My observation has been that the best grip fighters tend to prepare an opening for the Power Hand placement. What I mean is that the player will reach in with the non-Power hand pull the lapel out for easier access, brush aside the opponent's hands or simply set a blind for the intended Power Hand placement and then take the Power Hand Grip.

The very top players take this one step further though! The big boys don't just reach in and take a grip. What the champions do is to keep the Power Hand tucked in close to the side and move the whole Power Side of the Body in under the grip.

Locking Hand Placement

The Locking Hand placement of the best players appears to be a continuation of one smooth movement in the gripping maneuver. The attacker "sets" his Power Hand and then moves his whole body toward the Locking Hand position. Upon securing the Locking Hand a strong attack must be the inevitable final step of the sequence.

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Match Outcome Was Very Predictable

After viewing many matches a pattern of domination and outcome became clear. Players that took a mutual Power Hand without opposition went to full time of the match. These matches were frequently without score, always boring and usually awarded to the stronger player.

If the opponent attempted Power Hand first, without any type of preparation, the player that prepared with Locking Hand followed by Power Hand was inevitably dominant. Further, the Power Hand first player was frequently confused and did not understand how to deal with being controlled from the initial grip. At the highest levels of gripping and grip domination the players that attempted to secure a Power Hand without preparation were frequently reduced to taking any grip the dominant player would allow.

Nowak vs. Fratica

A glaring example of this theory was evident during the 1985 European Championships. One of the -78 (172 lbs.) bronze medals came down to being contested by the 1984 Olympic bronze medal winners of this division.

Michael Nowak of France and Mircea Fratica, Rumania, are not strangers to high level competition. In point of fact Fratica has twice won World Championship bronze medals as well as having been European Champion. Yet in his contest with the equally experienced Frenchman he could do nothing.

Nowak refused to allow the opponent any kind of gripping opportunity. As soon as Fratica closed to gripping range he was thwarted and dominated. The Rumanian was reduced to placing his hands and elbows into the opponent's ribs in an attempt to prevent attacks. It didn't work. The dominant gripping player made short work of his highly skilled opponent.

Dominant Grippers Do It More

The higher the level of play the higher the incidence of complete separation and re-gripping. Apart from blocking any of the opponent's gripping advancements, grip dominant players are highly skilled at removing the opponent's hands. This leads to frequent complete separations of the players. Once the players are separated they are able to work back into a favorable gripping position.

Once the grips are secured the player attacks! UNDER NO CIRCUMSTANCES DOES A DOMINANT GRIPPING PLAYER PAUSE AFTER SECURING HIS DESIRED GRIP! The time for a breather is between gripping bouts or after the match, not while holding on to an angry opponent. If the grip is there the top player throws. If the throw is not successful he breaks off and starts over. Holding a grip for any period of time only allows the opponent opportunity to counter the position and apply his own attack.

Lapel and Over the Shoulder Back Grip

The majority of dominant players controlled situations through strong sleeve grips. Players would Double Grip or Cross Grip sleeves and apply strong downward pressure in order to expose the desired Power Hand position. Popular with physically strong players was a similar tactic of gripping the lapel directly opposite of the intended Power Hand position, pulling down and then reaching over the opposite shoulder (the side away from the lapel grip) and taking a Back Grip.

This maneuver, as in any physically dominating maneuver in gripping, does not happen because the player pulls with his arms alone. Players must be trained to use the whole body to secure the grip. It is not enough for the player to try to push the opponent's Power Hand away from the lapel. He must shift his torso in such a way that the Driving Leg is set to move the opponent. The player will not be able to simply reach over the opponent's shoulder. He must be in position to align his power in order to first force the shoulders down and in. This means elbows in, Driving Leg set and good hip rotation.

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Drilling for Grip Dominance

Many players rely on tricks and clever techniques that carry them through early competition. This is a very easy trap to fall into. The coach is satisfied that his methods are successful while the player will see no reason to change a winning technique. The problem lies in the fact that every other player in the higher levels of competition also has tricks, trips and traps.

If players are to graduate to a higher level of play the foundations of skill must be laid. The training emphasis of the novice is on basic throwing and grappling principles. Coaches must give consideration to the future requirements of advanced play as the young competitor develops. Gripping and foot work skills as well as match tactics should be introduced at the beginning levels and up-graded as the player progresses.

As in any training objective, if we expect our players to be able to execute a skill that skill must be practiced. Simple drills may be devised to introduce your players to gripping skills. Some excellent gripping drills may be found in "Championship Judo Drill Training" by Ben Campbell.

Once the techniques of grip domination have been introduced it is the coach's job to see to it that the techniques become skills. The most obvious place to apply grip dominant tactics is during randori. This should be encouraged.

Coaches should also ensure that players practice dominant gripping skills whenever possible. During throwing drills the players should begin each attack with a gripping sequence. Be especially watchful that the players begin each time with a fresh grip. Gradually the act of preventing the opponent's grip while securing your own will become a habit. Then and only then will your protege be able to become a grip dominating player.