



Episode 398 – Sensei Jimmy Pedro | whistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com



Jeremy Lesniak:

Hey, what's up? Everybody, welcome! This is whistlekick martial arts radio episode 398. Today, my guest is Sensei Jimmy Pedro. My name is Jeremy Lesniak, I'm your host on this show. I'm the founder of whistlekick and I love traditional martial arts and that's why we bring you this show twice a week. Every Monday and Thursday all for free. You can find the show notes at whistlekickmartialartsradio.com. If you head on over to whistlekick.com, you're going to see everything that we make from uniforms, to apparel, to protective equipment and a bunch more. Some super cool stuff as well as all the projects that we're involved in. Now, if you buy something at whistlekick.com, you can save 15% by using the code PODCAST15. Don't forget we've also got a lot of stuff over at Amazon but we don't give you a discount over there because Amazon takes a lot of it. Now, let's talk about today's guest. Sensei Jimmy Pedro is one of a very small list of names that you really should know in American Judo. As we talk about today, Judo is a pretty small world especially in the United States but it's pretty hard to have a conversation about Judo over the last, let's say, 20 years, 25 years and not include the Pedro Family. We spent time talking about his competitive career, his childhood, what it was like growing up with a martial arts father and a whole bunch more. Lot of really good stuff. motivational, powerful and I'll think you'll enjoy it so here we go, Sensei Pedro, welcome to whistlekick martial arts radio.

Jimmy Pedro:

Yeah, thanks for having me on. I appreciate it.



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Jeremy Lesniak:

Absolutely, thank you for being on. I appreciate you coming on. Listeners, we were just chatting a little bit and, once in a while, I get this vibe, this instinct that we've got a guest who probably could go for hours and hours and hours with their stories. Now, we're not hanging the format here, we're not going to make this a 4-hour marathon episode but I got a feeling that you're going to be able to just hit us with story after story and I'm not going to make you start there. I'm going to make you start pretty basically, the way that we start with just about everybody because it's a martial arts show so we have to get some context for you as a martial artist. How did you first find martial arts?

Jimmy Pedro:

I was born into Judo and the martial arts. My dad was a Judo instructor, a Judo practitioner and an instructor and when he first opened, [00:02:30] Judo School, it was called, was in 1972. I was a year and a half old so it was my dad's first dojo and ventured out on his own so ever since I can remember, I've been walking around the Judo mats, I've been involved in the sports of Judo as has my entire family and basically, I know no different. That's just the life I grew up in.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Now, 1972, that's not exactly...it's certainly not today. It's certainly not that first wave of martial arts here in the U.S. but Judo isn't exactly a sport, a martial art, that's practiced broadly so if you look at your life as being so ingrained with Judo that maybe we can't separate the two, maybe you'll indulge me a little bit, you'll be willing to speak, not just about you and your life but Judo and how you've seen Judo change.

Jimmy Pedro:

Yeah, quite honestly, back in the 1970s and late '60s, Judo was one of the predominant martial arts in this country. Meaning way more people knew of Judo and practiced Judo than karate and certainly, Jiu Jitsu didn't even exist back then in this country, organized in any way, shape, or form but before karate, before taekwondo, before now, Jiu Jitsu, Judo was the predominant martial art in the United States and I think it's really because of after World War II and the Japanese sent many ambassadors and similar to what Brazilians are doing today in Jiu Jitsu, many ambassadors and people came from Japan to the United States as this token of goodwill and started Judo, started Judo academy, started teaching it at universities and things like that and the sport of Judo was fast growing worldwide at that time with an emphasis, it has just been introduced as an Olympic sport in 1964 in Japan and so, they sent ambassadors around the world to grow the sport and America was a key focus and the Japanese-American relations was such that it was trying to head in a positive direction in that Judo was the main martial art. If you look at any TV shows and like the sort of '70s and early '80s, there's always some sort of obscure reference to Judo and what that means it was a Judo chop or something do with a flying tomoe nage or some Judo technique in the show. There's a lot of references to Judo and in America, it's



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always part of the American Amateur Union which is the AAU and the AAU was basically a sports organizing committee similar to sort of what we have today of the US Olympic committee. the AAU was a bunch of sports that got organized together that had a common theme and organization were those emphasis on growing the sport and putting it in schools and getting our teams ready for 1984 Olympics which was held in Los Angeles so it was always part of that movement and after the '84 Olympics is when the AAU broke up and it was also the time with something called the NCAA was coming into existence and Judo chose a path of not going with the NCAA but sticking with the AAU which broke up shortly thereafter but we didn't ride the NCAA wave. We thought we were Judo and we know better and we don't need this organization to help us make rules and set protocol so it chose a different path and obviously, it wasn't the right path so then things came along like the Karate Kid and different martial arts and Hollywood and TV and things like that and all of these other martial arts started to grow in this country and the awareness of them grew and business acumen grew and people were doing it as a true business to make money and the sport of Judo got left behind with sort of a Japanese mentality that you don't charge people money for Judo, you give back to the sport, you're altruistic. You shouldn't make money and benefit financially from Judo and the other martial arts had a different agenda and slowly but surely, we got bypassed by all of the others and today, although Judo isn't flourishing in America, worldwide Judo has become much, much stronger, much, much bigger, more money, more professional programs worldwide. I'd equate it to sort of what tennis was in the early '80s maybe where tennis was starting to become a mainstream sport in this country and there was more and more money being put into it, that's where Judo is today, worldwide. There's a complete world circuit. There's a complete Olympic ranking system and world ranking system. There's a hierarchy of tournaments and now there's prize money in every single one along the way.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Interesting and what I find most fascinating about the story of Judo, from the bits that I know and you certainly filled in a ton of gaps for me, is Judo has placed in the United States and I've done a little bit of research and understand that president Roosevelt was really fascinated with Judo and I'm sure that ties in with what you're saying with post-World War II and just that general curiosity or welcoming or whatever it might be that brought Judo into this country and then just to watch that contrast with today as you're talking about the other traditional arts sort of moving along and exceeding Judo in terms of numbers but when you talk about this organization of events and prize money and things like that. that's something that we don't see a lot of in the other traditional martial arts, karate, taekwondo, et cetera, et cetera, at least to my knowledge, as much organization with that competition and I've long suspected that it's because Judo has been in the Olympics for so long that there's been that path up, that pinnacle, that credibility of being in the Olympics that's lead to some of these things. What do you think?

Jimmy Pedro:



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Quite honestly, right now, it's a direct result of the president of the IJF which is Marius Vizer who's a businessman and understands that for a sport to be successful, it takes lots of money and it takes lots of people participating in the sport. You need to have a great foundation. You need to get companies interested in supporting this great sport and he's been sort of a mastermind in helping get the sport of Judo ingrained in school systems in other countries and most foreign countries, there's a minister of sport. We don't have that position here in the United States. There's a minister of sport in each country and the president of the IJF has made a purpose to speak, not only to the president of each of those countries but also the minister of sport and to introduce Judo as a viable, physical education component in developing great people in their country and through the sport of Judo and through the character development that it teaches and the life skills they acquire through the practice of it, it has become and the IJF has gotten a lot of big sponsors who support this growth and support this initiative and right now, it's sort of everything's feeding each other meaning the minister of sport is buying into the fact that it will affect the health and wellness of the children of their country for the future and therefore, they're introducing it, allowing it to be part of their school system then a lot of big companies from that country are then donating money and sponsoring these schools and kids' type programs and giving money to national teams and the national federations to support the marketing and the teams that they have are strong competitors on the field of play and the IJF is utilizing that money to turn it into a professional business where we are able to pay our athletes for winning, where there's a live telecast now via the internet and the web platforms have allowed us to broadcast our sport to every nation live. Every competition now in Judo is live from every country and you can watch any event at any time, at any mat, there's 6, 8 cameras sometimes at each event. You can watch any mat at any time so it's really expanded the viewership of Judo as well which is expanding the reach of the sport so it's not unforeseen in many, many countries where the national coach is being paid a quarter of a million dollars to be the national coach of that team and they have, now, they have a senior circuit which is all of the senior athletes try to qualify for the Games. We now have a junior circuit with the kids under 20. We even have the cadet world tour for kids that are under 17 so between the ages of 14 and 17. We've got a tour of events and a ranking list of all of our athletes with national, professional coaches and professional athletes that are competing and it's just now this entire organized system with the Olympics being the pinnacle of the Games, as you said.

Jeremy Lesniak:

I have to say, as a non-Judo player, I'm a little bit jealous of that, of that organization, that description and I'm thinking back to myself as a young kid, practicing my karate, that was my principal art back then and that was the dream is that I could've moved on and had a path upwards. Now, you mentioned that ministers of sport in different countries have been an important piece of that and you, of course, mentioned that we don't have that here in the United States. Is that the major reason Judo is not bigger here or is there a more complex issue?

Jimmy Pedro:



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I think one of the main reasons, well, there's many, many reasons. One of the many reasons as it exists today and one of the problems that exist today is that there just isn't enough instructors in this country to service the population. In other words, coming off the last two Olympic Games, we had 4 Olympic medals in the last 2 Games. We have 2 golds, a silver and a bronze so in terms of United States Olympic committee giving some exposure to the sport of Judo, we had the heroes, we had the stars. It's a sort of incentive and make people want to play Judo but even with there was a huge demand, we don't have enough Judo clubs and instructors in this country to be able to service the people even if they wanted to do it. We're up against, as you know, every other sport in this country is now very, very organized. I mean, in your hometown, at least within 5 or 10 minutes of your house, your kid can play organized soccer, organized hockey, organized baseball, couple hundred football, gymnastics, you name it, it's within 5 or 10 minutes from your home but the nearest Judo club might not be for an hour or an hour and a half away from you. If you're lucky, there's one in your hometown but then certainly, the next one that's closest to that might be an hour, two hours away so there's not enough instructors, there's not enough accessibility to the sport to service a huge influx of Judo players even if they wanted to do it. People aren't going to go that far out of their way to introduce their kid to an obscure sport.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Makes sense.

Jimmy Pedro:

And so now, if you look at Jiu Jitsu, there's hundreds and hundreds of Brazilians coming into this country every single month that are finding places in the United States that currently don't have a lot of Jiu Jitsu and they're opening schools in those areas. You go to Mississippi, Alabama, North Carolina, anywhere you go in this country, there's instructors setting up shop and kind of squatting, this is my territory, I'm starting a school here. The other guy's going to start a school 20 minutes, 30 minutes away and then you're finding pockets that are empty and they're opening it up and dropping schools in there and now, Jiu Jitsu's accessible. I mean, almost every street corner, you see the sign. Gracie Jiu Jitsu or this type of Jiu Jitsu and it's accessible and with the marketing power of the UFC and MMA behind it that validates it every single week on national television now, the one common thread to every announcement is Fabio blahblahblah, nationalist and brown belt in Jiu Jitsu under this guy. It always validate Jiu Jitsu in the UFC and it's just a marketing avenue for that sport and it has to be the one component of mixed martial arts you can actually do safely, not get hurt but then also then, tell your buddies, you know what's going on in the television because you do Jiu Jitsu training.

Jeremy Lesniak:

I'm curious. As MMA has grown, as the UFC come up and we've seen Brazilian Jiu Jitsu and the various similar flavors of Jiu Jitsu. I say Brazilian Jiu Jitsu in an effort to separate from Japanese-based Jiu Jitsu,



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have you watched that with any frustration? BJJ coming in and going from zero to a hundred in the same time that Judo maybe has lost participation?

Jimmy Pedro:

I mean, obviously you're envious. You'd love for that to be your martial art but, again, I think that they came in with a different attitude. They see it as a business. These people come in, not only to make money but it's a whole movement that's been created and it's a great form of self-defense. It's proven in the mixed martial arts to be a great form of self-defense. The instructors come in and they open academies and they do it for a for-profit business and they are providing great level of instruction to their students. Their students are becoming healthier, they're becoming better citizens, they're training hard, they're respectful and the coach is able to do it full-time. He's dedicated his life to making this his livelihood whereas in the sport of Judo, there's still this stigma that shame on you for making money from teaching kids the sport of Judo. It was given to you and you should give it to others but what that creates is a bunch of hobbyists. Creates a bunch of people that go to work, get up at 7 and get to work by 8, 08:30 and then work until 5 and then drive to their dojo and they're exhausted when they get there and they have 1 or 2 classes a night and maybe they're open 3 or 4 nights a week. It's a very recreational program and even if some people wanted to do it 5 days a week, the instructor can't do it 5 days a week because he got a wife at home or he's got a family and he's got to do other things with his life so it's done as a hobby and when you do it as a hobby, you can only charge hobbyist money for it and the program's become one size fits all and so, you've got an 8-year old in the class with a third degree blackbelt because the instructor doesn't have enough time in the day to service every level of Judo and it just becomes, it perpetuates and then, everybody at the Olympic level, up until now, has done the sport and made no money and there's no future for them because there is no professional Judo anything. There is no high school or college university job you can get. The national coach of the sport doesn't even get a salary so, after you give up your entire life pursuing Olympic excellence, you now have to go make money and unfortunately, you can't do it in your sport so now, you go find, while you're at the top of your Games and you have the most experience and you're technically as good as you'll ever get, you now have to walk away from the sport for 8, 10, 15 years to go make some money doing something else and when you have enough money and you want to give back to Judo, you're now too old to really be effective and it's just this perpetuation of going nowhere. In this country, unless something drastic happens, it's going to continue to decline in participation and obscurity, invisibility. It's going to continue to become more and more of an obscure sport because, like I've said, the rest of the world is treating it very professionally and in each of their country, the sport's growing, the number and level of athletes is going up, the level of professionalism is going up. There's a lot of money behind it and then this country, there's really no money behind it with the exception of whatever the US Olympic committee can provide our national team with.

Jeremy Lesniak:



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Right, and one of the things I find most interesting about Judo as a traditional martial art, as a martial art that the rest of owe so much to, and we've talked about that on various episodes on the show, just the history of Judo and what Jigorō Kanō gave to the rest of us, belts and everything else. Here we had, in the last 2 Olympics and no disrespect to you, but I think we can claim the most successful American Judo athlete of all-time, Kayla Harrison, and how many people even in the martial arts world in this country know who she is?

Jimmy Pedro:

Right and this is an era where, back in the day when I competed, if you didn't make it on to national television, nobody got to see you compete, nobody ever heard of you, right? Because it was before the internet existed. It was before there was ever anything online where social media didn't exist, YouTube. You couldn't watch everything live and you couldn't even follow on the internet so, today, some of these more obscure sports and I use wrestling as an example. The sport of wrestling today is biggest as it's ever been in this country and a team is successful as it's ever been and the level of wrestling has gone up significantly in our country just over the last ten years and I attribute a lot of that to the internet. It's because they don't need national television anymore to expose the athletes and the heroes of their sport. It can now all be done on internet television. A sport like wrestling which would never really command a viewership on any national level with the exception of maybe the NCAA championships, the sport can now be seen by everybody at all times and you can follow your favorite athletes and follow your favorite teams and watch everything live and it's not accessible to the general practitioner. Wrestling has a huge following.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Yeah, it's amazing to see what the internet has done for, we can call them fringe, we can call them niche, less popular things in the combat sports. You mentioned wrestling but we've also seen, we've had some few folks on the show from the historical European martial arts. The Hema world, this sword and shield stuff that 30 years ago, nobody was talking about it. nobody even knew it was an option but you give a group a really passionate people a place to talk to each other like the internet and some amazing things come of that. Well, that was a great tangent. I told you we'd get out into the weeds and that's quite okay and that's my favorite thing about this show. Now, very early on as we were talking, I think in your first couple of sentences you mentioned that Judo was not a choice for you. It was something that your family did. Can we get some context with that? I think you said your father started a school so where did he learn Judo?

Jimmy Pedro:

My dad was somebody who barely graduated high school and probably, back he would've been labeled with somebody who had ADHD. Couldn't sit still in his seat in school and struggled and gotten a lot of trouble in school and maybe gotten a few more altercations than he would have liked when he was in



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high school because he was a small kid with maybe a wise mouth and one day, was just driving down the street when he was 18 years old and looked over on the side and there was a sign that said Judo Karate and he thought, hmmm, martial arts, learn how to protect yourself, he said, well, I kind of get a lot of scrapes so might as well do it and do it well so he just stumbled by a school one day, walked in and signed up and fell in love with the instructor and fell in love with the combat aspect of Judo and that's how he got his start and ever since that day, never gotten another fight in his life, put all of his energy into training martial arts and getting as good as he could but he started Judo at the age of 18 and, as you know, it's not ingrained, it doesn't become instinctual, you don't learn the right movements when you start a sport that late and Judo's a young man's Games, right? I mean, most people retire before the age of 30 or shortly thereafter so he put in 14 years and made it to a national place winner in the sport, competed in the Olympic trials, represented the United States in some international events like Pan-Am championship and things but never really made it to the top of the Olympic pinnacle but started a school and started producing some great athletes and was super hard on everybody on the sport that trained under him. He had one goal in mind as a coach and that's to produce the best team possible. He didn't care about kids quitting because it was too hard. He didn't care about making money. I think he charged back then, I think he charged \$5 or \$10 a month per child and had a family program for \$15. Every dime he ever made for the sport, he put back in his team and taking them to events and at the time, we had the best junior team, one of the best junior teams in the country in the sport of Judo and that's how he got his start and when he didn't make it to the Olympics himself, his goal and his mission was to help one of his students get there and I just bought into that mindset and that Olympic dream from when I was a kid, watching the 1976 Olympics on television with my dad when it was in Montreal. I remember watching Bruce Jenner win the decathlon and seeing the spark in my dad's eye that the Olympics created and I wanted to be that kid that went there and that's in 1992. After training for, or being on the mat for 18, 19 years myself. I made the Olympic team in the age of 21 and I was my dad's first student to make the Olympic team.

Jeremy Lesniak:

There's a lot that we can unpack there but let's start with what it was like growing up in that environment because of course, when you grow up and something is important for your parents, people tend to have one of two responses: they either jump in with both feet and they get it and they want to please their parents or they go the exact opposite and say, I'm not going to do this. Now, clearly, you weren't the latter, you weren't the former. What was it like growing up and you just described your father as not caring about it being hard, he wanted to produce great athletes. What was that like being in that environment and having that person, having that coach be your father?

Jimmy Pedro:

It was intimidating. I would say it was done a lot out of fear. My dad, at that time, was...he was like the drill sergeant. He was your Donny Drill Sergeant type of coach. It was a lot of screaming, a lot of yelling, a lot of like if you were goofing off, he had no tolerance for that whatsoever. He'd walk around with a



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bamboo stick and hit kids with it, saying, if they weren't putting out 100% he was definitely of the old school mentality of martial arts training. Quite honestly, I was a timid kid, I was a small kid always. I grew really late so I was undersized but, and at one point, I used to tell my dad when I was a young kid, I don't really like this. I don't want to compete. I don't really like this and he didn't give me the option to back down. He didn't give me the option not to participate. He basically said you're not staying home and doing nothing, so you're going to the club, like it or not, you're going to train and when there's a competition, yes, you're going to fight. I don't care if you win but you're going to go fight so he made me do it. I didn't have a choice when I was a kid. A lot of parents will say that guy's insane, that's wrong, he shouldn't do that to a kid. His mentality was, if, as your parent, I can make you go to school because I know what's good for you, or I can make you eat your broccoli and eat your vegetables and make sure you get your fruits in everyday because, that, I know is good for you, then why, as a parent, can't I make you do something like the sport of Judo which I know will be good for you because I want you to get out of the sport, the hard work, the perseverance, the confidence. I don't want you to ever get picked on your life. I'm going to make sure that you're physically fit and you can handle yourself in a self-defense type of situation and as a young, timid kid who wore glasses and wasn't very aggressive said, hey, man, this sport is good for you, I'd like the person that it's going to help you become so he did make me do it and I remember at my very first tournament said I'm not going out, I'm not fighting and he just booted me right in and said, he said get yourself out in the mat, I don't care what you want. That was my start and I knew that, as a kid, I had no choice. I went to every tournament. I had butterflies in my stomach. I was almost sick. I couldn't eat anything on the way to every tournament. I was a nervous wreck before I fought every contest but I didn't have a choice so that's the way it was. My dad was the coach and I listened to what he said and believe it or not, I fought every tournament that my team went to from the age of 6 until 11 and I never lost one match.

Jeremy Lesniak:

And despite that, you were enjoying it?

Jimmy Pedro:

I hated it but I loved...I should say I hated the pressure, I hated the...I didn't mind the training. I liked the training because I liked, what was then, I enjoyed the physicality, the sweating, the working out. I enjoyed being at the dojo every night. My dojo was not like a martial arts training center full of respect and it was discipline, yes, but it was more of like I could be off to the side of the mat with two friends playing whistle ball or playing soccer or tackling each other while Judo was going on. It wasn't like a place of just discipline, Judo training, no distractions. It was like from 3 o'clock until 9 o'clock every day, I was playing in the dojo with some kid doing [00:31:50] you know, 7:30 I had my Judo class. I was in 7:30 and while the adult class was going on, always playing and doing something. So, it was a place of activity and [00:32:05] it was like my boys' club.

Jeremy Lesniak:



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I get it. I get it. Now, when you were talking about training as an older, we'll say, a teenager and as an adult and competing then, you were speaking of it positively but you're talking about as a child, not being so thrilled with this whole process so when did that change?

Jimmy Pedro:

It changed when I started to mature. I think around 15, about 15 years old, I started to say you know what? I'm actually really good at this and I enjoy going on fun trips because my dad started sending me to different training camps and different places in the country. I'd go to Oklahoma, or I'd go to Chicago or California and I said, oh, starting to get outside of Massachusetts and hanging around other teenagers and have some fun and I had to do Judo as part of it but I started liking it and I started hanging out with other kids and having better experiences. I grew up in the city of Lynn, Massachusetts and Lynn is a sin. Never come out the way you went in. That's the mantra there and it's a very poor city, it's a very tough city and as a young kid from Lynn, being able to get out and see the rest of the country and have some cool experiences was starting to make the sport a lot fun, a lot cooler.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Now, of course, you mentioned that you've been to the Olympics and you competed and if I did my research right, you've been there more than once?

Jimmy Pedro:

Yeah, I made 4 Olympic teams as an athlete. I competed in '92, '96, 2000 and 2004. I won two Olympic medals. A bronze medal in '96 and a bronze medal in 2004. I fought for a medal in 2000 but I finished 5th and I won a world title in 1999. At that time, I was only the 2nd male ever to do it and only the 3rd person ever to do it, male or female.

Jeremy Lesniak:

I'm curious what was your father's response to this stuff? To these achievements?

Jimmy Pedro:

Well, the first, I mean, I remember making the Olympic team for the first time and like I said, it was my dad's first student to make an Olympic team so the day I made it was, it was at the Olympic training center at Colorado Springs and a lot of my family and friends were in attendance and watched the trials. They all flown out to watch me compete and making that team was really a dream come true. For me and my dad and I think my dad doesn't cry very much but I think that was maybe the first time I saw the tears well up in his eyes and how excited he was for being all his life, it's his life work, right? From 1972 until 1992. 20 years of going to the dojo every single day, going to every Judo tournament on the weekends and travelling around and finally, we reached the pinnacle and made the Olympics so that was super exciting. Competing in Barcelona in '92 was, it was awesome from an athlete's standpoint of



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getting to be with. That was the first time with the Dream Team was at the Olympic Games and we had Michael Jordan and Larry Bird on the same Olympic team as Jimmy Pedro from Lynn, Massachusetts. It was really cool to be in the athlete's village with all the superstars of the world and Barcelona was a beautiful venue right on the beach. We had a lot of fun. It was a great experience. The competition itself, for me, went okay. I won two matches and then the third round, I lost to a guy from Japan and it's Judo, at the time, Judo was a single elimination sport. Once I lost, I was done. That was a bit heartbreaking. That was hard to take because you train your entire life to compete in the Olympics and ultimately, win a medal and when you win two and lose one and you don't make the podium, and then you see the first, second, third place people that do make the podium and, in my career, I was undefeated against the gold and the bronze medalist. I never lost to either one of them. I was 11 and 0 in my record so when you see the people make the podium in the Olympics and you're not one of them, it was a bit devastating. I remember sitting on the stadium steps of Barcelona with my dad and I was just crying. My hand was...my head was in my hands and I was sitting on the steps and I was just in tears like man, I just gave up my entire life for this and I'm going home with nothing. I just felt like a complete failure. I just felt like man, it was all for nothing and the only way to even try to deal with it is you got to wait four more years. It's been four more years. You got to sacrifice four more years of your life and that not only gets you, you still need to make the team and once you make the team then you got to compete again and I didn't know if that was going to be worth it and obviously, after a brief pity party, I decided okay, let's do this and I had to go back to school, finish my education at Brown University for two years and then, my dad was the one who said to me, if you want to win in Atlanta, I think the best thing for you to do is do Judo fulltime. Take two years off, train fulltime, I'm actually thinking about sending you to Japan for 6 months and I think that would be, maybe it would help get your Judo to another level and that's what I did. I packed up and I moved to Japan and I lived and train twice a day with the best guys in Japan for six months straight and that, that did help me and I still left Japan and competed internationally and occasionally but that was a sacrifice that I made to try to get as good as I can in the sport and then, in '96, when the Olympics was in America, I made the team and we competed in front of our home country and Atlanta was amazing. It was amazing in every aspect. A homegrown Olympic Games. Team USA was awesome at that Games, we won like 101 medals. I got to compete in front of all my family, all my friends, kids that went to college, everybody who touched me in some way, shape or form, in my life, went to the stands and watched me compete and in that Games, I won my first bronze medal and I actually got to step up on the podium and that was an amazing feeling. It was so fulfilling and rewarding that, at that Games, I said yes! All of the sacrifice was worth it. I would do it all over again for this moment and this feeling, unquestionably, and after I won my medal, I walked out of the stadium and just got mobbed by the people in Atlanta. Everybody wanted pictures and autographs, touch the medal and we were treated like superstars in America and it was so cool. That made me want to do it another 4 years and try again in Athens, Greece and along the way to Athens, I had said I had won the world championships in 1999, well from 1996 until the 2000 Olympics, I had my best competitive run ever. I won almost every tournament I competed in. I had 85 or 85 to 90 wins and I only had 4 losses in 4 years and one of the wins along the way was taking a world championship title in 1999



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and it was at that moment I was feeling so good about myself that I actually called my dad up and I said, Dad, I want you to come to the world championships in Birmingham, England and he said, why? I said I'm feeling really good. I feel like I'm going to win it and I want you to be here so I actually paid for my dad to get on a flight to come watch me fight and the night before the tournament, I went to bed really, really like 9:30 and while I was sleeping, I dreamt that I won the world championships that night and I saw every match in my dream. I was sweating profusely. I woke up all of a sudden when I won the worlds and I jumped out of bed and I kind of looked around, looked at the time clock, the alarm clock and it said 2 AM and then I realized, man, I didn't even wake up yet. I was so depressed. I was so disappointed. I thought I had won the world championships but I hadn't even woken up to fight yet. I haven't even weighed in yet so, it was one of those dreams that it felt so real. I had soaked through all the sheets. I had sweated through everything and it was just a dream. I had to force myself back to sleep and get up the next day and, lo and behold, that's the day I ended up going and winning the world championships. The power of the mind is amazing. To think that I had dreamt that I won the worlds, that real, that vivid and it was a day that I asked my dad to come and be in the stands because, up to that point, my father really didn't watch me compete around the world anymore because he had got divorced from my mom. He had remarried and his life was such that he couldn't afford to travel and come around the world with me so I'm on my own with just the other guys on the team. To have him be there and watch me win the world championships was amazing.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Pretty cool feeling, I would imagine and so, you mentioned that that 4 year span between '96 and 2000 was your best, at least, record, if not best skill Judo-wise. So, coming into the 2000 Olympics, there's got to be a fair amount of pressure on your shoulders.

Jimmy Pedro:

Yes, I mean, we've never won an Olympic gold medal in the sport by an American ever and I was the favorite to win it and all of the media outlets had the coverage and I was invited to be in this sports illustrated issue and that ESPN magazine thing and all the different media outlets were asking me to come on TV and talk about what's going to come in Sydney and all of the hype was there and all the pressure was there. I thrive under pressure. I really took it well when all the chips are at stake. In my career, I've always fought well at the world championships and I always fought well at the Olympic Games and that Olympics, I thought the planets were aligned. September 18th, 2000, it was my wife's birthday. I said, Marie, I'm going to bring you home a gold medal for your birthday. I had done everything I possibly could to win. If anything, I trained too hard and I didn't rest enough and I wasn't fresh. I was tired because physically, I didn't want to look back and say, you didn't do enough to win the Olympics. You should've trained more. I put too much into it and then the other dynamic that was really different in Sydney, Australia was number one, the time difference was crazy. I never adjusted to the time zone in Australia but even with that, it was the only tournament that I had ever been in where the Judo competition was not held in the morning. The Judo competition in Sydney, Australia didn't start



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until 3 PM so, sort of, your whole life in every competition, your body wakes up, weighs in, eats a quick breakfast, warms up and fights and what happened in Sydney was, because of the time difference and the television feeds, I woke up, I ate breakfast and then, I had to go back to my dorm room and I had to kill 6 hours sleeping, laying around, doing nothing and then, I get to the bus at 1 PM to go to the venue and then, you take a bus ride over and now your first fight isn't until 3:30 in the afternoon so, by this time, my blood sugar was low and I didn't eat anything because it's not part of my normal routine. My normal routine was wake up, do this, eat breakfast, warm up, do that, fight along the day, eat this food and it was such a different dynamic that I went out and I fought first round against the guy from Korea who was really good. He was 5th in the world the year before and one of the top guys at this Games and it was a really hard first time match and I lost by a small penalty but I lost first round so you went from possibly being Olympic champion to losing first round was the worst feeling in the world and I just didn't feel good physically, like I said, the blood sugar was off, everything was off. I wasn't fresh that day and then I ended up salvaging the day by stringing together five wins in a row and then, for the bronze medal, I lost again so I went home with nothing so it was pretty disappointing. With that said, I retired after that. I had three kids at home and it was time to start making money and figure out what I'm going to do with the rest of my life but every night, I'd go to bed and I'd think about the loss in Sydney and how I felt and every time I saw a sporting event on TV, I'd start thinking about losing and being a failure and it was something I couldn't live with and I said to my wife one day, you know what, Maria, I just can't. I can't not try for the next Games. I have to try to do this one more time. Just come back and compete this time in the Olympics in 2004. It was a great decision and that was great decision because the outcome totally changed my perspective and I retired on the podium one last time. I gave it my all. I did everything right and I finished on the medal stand and I won my second Olympic medal, which at the time, no other American has ever done either, win two medals in the Olympics. To me, it was a dream come true and a fairytale ending. It was a bronze. I tell everybody that that's second bronze is like a gold medal because it represents a lifetime's worth of work and putting it all out on the line and making things happen.

Jeremy Lesniak:

And in a sense, we can say almost two lifetimes because, I hope I'm not misspeaking in that without your father, without his commitment to Judo, you probably wouldn't have found Judo, just statistically.

Jimmy Pedro:

Correct. A hundred percent and had I been given the choice to hey, Johnny, you want to compete or not? If you don't, it's okay. If I hadn't been pushed and I have sort of made up my own mind, if you will, I would not have competed in the sport of Judo. I would not have chosen not to deal with that.

Jeremy Lesniak:



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Now, the other thing I want to touch on through this narrative of the Olympics which, honestly, I'm finding fascinating, I mean, how often do we get to talk to people who've participated in the Olympics and brought home hardware, I think that's super cool but you mentioned earlier that Judo is a younger man's Games. That most people have retired at the age of 30 and while I'm doing the math and I think you said you were 19 or 20 when you went to your first Olympics, so your final Olympics in '04 would have crossed that 30-year old barrier, wouldn't they?

Jimmy Pedro:

Good math. I was 33 years old. I was 33 years old in Athens about to turn 34. Yeah, I wasn't as good technically a Judo player then as I was in Sydney, Australia. I would say the Jimmy Pedro in Sydney was a better Judo player than the Jimmy Pedro that competed in Athens but I was motivated. I had the experience to draw from and I knew the feeling of not winning. I had the bad taste in my mouth and I was out to prove something. Everything worked out for me in Sydney. It wasn't an easy day. I'm sorry, it really worked out for me in Athens. It wasn't easy. I had 2 matches that went into sudden death in overtime that I had to win in OT and it was a struggle. It was a very, very hard fought, I had 7 fights on top of that. Most of the time you have 5 or 6 matches in Judo but I had a first round. I was the very first match of the day and I was the 2nd to last fight of the day so I had more fights than everybody as well so the odds were stacked against me but they worked out in my favor.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Now, you mentioned that it was time to come home and figure out how you were going to make your money as we already talked about the challenge of most Olympic athletes, not just Judo, but most Olympic athletes have is where do they make their money now that they've dedicated 10, 20, 30 years to their passion. What did you choose to do when you came back?

Jimmy Pedro:

The hardest part about that is not only that you've dedicated yourself to something, you've dedicated yourself to something else but many of my peers that I graduated Brown University with, many of them had already had 12 years of experience under their belt. Some of them have worked their way up to be VP of their company or even started their own company and sold it and were now serving as a VP on someone else's board and had already made enough money to retire in those 12 years so, for me, I'm starting out as a newbie. Fresh like a 21 year old kid right out of college with no resume, no experience in any work-related anything other than, I had opened my own dojo in 1996 after I won my medal in Atlanta. I did start my own Pedro Judo Center and I was, I brought in an income from that and that's what helped me fund myself throughout my career was the money I made from my students but my dad and I ran that school together so that was a money-making endeavor for me but I was working for an Olympic sponsor, actually. After the Sydney Olympics, I got hired by one of the Olympic sponsors which was monster.com and their goal was to help athletes find jobs after the Olympic Games were over and I



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said to myself, that would be a perfect job for me because I know the struggles that athletes go through and I was excited to work in the marketing department for them and really had a dream job. It was all about sports in the Olympics and marketing. I was learning from some really smart guys that knew sports marketing and the internet was fairly new then and a lot of internet technologies I learned and it was a great job. I've got to go to the Olympics in 2002, not from an athlete perspective but from a sponsor side of things. We hired other athletes to represent our brand and to be spokespeople and to give speeches and all that and I got to be a part of that whole thing so it was really cool. So, when I came back from the 2004 Olympics, that was my job, is to continue doing, working for monster.com but unfortunately, 2001 was 9/11 and in 2001 to 2005, the economy went the opposite direction as a result of 9/11 so many companies were struggling. They were laying off people. They weren't hiring anybody and it was a really difficult time to execute and have a successful opportunity program so monster decided not to spend all that millions of dollars in the Olympic sponsorship and they closed down the Olympic division but at that time, I still had a job at the company doing marketing-related things but all of my bosses had left and the fun of the company had gone away and I was kind of looking for a new thing to get into and that's when I got an opportunity to work in a martial arts-related company that bought and sold mats. Mats for martial arts gyms and stuff. My wife told me and advised me, listen, this is right up your alley. You get to run your martial arts school, you get to attend martial arts events, you get to work with martial arts people. This other thing over at monster.com, it's not your passion. You put your time and energy into something you're passionate about, I have a feeling you'll be super successful and that's what she advised me to do and that's what I did and ever since, I've just started one business after another related to martial arts and now, I'm president of Fuji Mats, my own mat company where we design and build amazing martial arts academies for people. We do everything from turf and rubber to mats and wall pads and heavy bags and rack systems for martial arts schools and also, on the gi and gear side, I am vice president of Fuji Sports, which outfit some of the biggest and best martial arts chains in the world. We manufacture, gi, shorts, rash guards, hats, t-shirts, hoodies, training gear for Renzo Gracie Academies, Royce Gracie Academies, Rilion Gracie Academies' Brazilian Top Team Straight Blast Gyms. We're doing all the biggest and best associations in martial arts. We do all of their online merchandising for them so I'm helping other martial artists now make money, opening up their dream academy and filling it with students and it's kind of a symbiotic relationship where I run my own academy, I have my own training center but I also own these two other companies that help other people make their dreams come true and then, help them merchandise and make money so they can do it fulltime and that's what my job in life has become.

Jeremy Lesniak:

That's awesome. That's awesome. Let's talk a little bit more about how people can find you and what you've got going online and then we can start to wrap up so website, social media.

Jimmy Pedro:



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We're at fujimats.com. We build out, like I said, anything from the smallest of home gyms to the biggest and best martial arts facilities that you've seen with 30,000 square foot facility. We will design it from floor to ceiling, you give us the floor plan, we'll make your dream become a reality. We'll give you a 2D and 3D rendering, all virtual. You can see the place come to life. Your logos everywhere. Your custom bag rack systems, whatever you need. We design it and we build it. We deliver it to you and, in many cases, we even come out and install it for you. I have a team of installers that will go out and put it all together so that's fujimats.com and for the martial arts uniforms, whether it's Judo gis or karate gis, taekwondo gis, whatever it is, or apparel on fujisports.com, we provide custom solutions for school owners so patches and belts and hoodies, hats, tees et cetera, full team equipment. We will manufacture and design to your specification and help outfit the teams and we do small orders and big orders but right now, we're involved with some of the biggest and best associations through my relationships with outfitting their teams with custom gear and then, my own training center, pedrosJudo.com. I now have about 250 Judo athletes training at my training center in Wakefield, Massachusetts. We're one of the national training sites for USA Judo. We helped produce, in the last 2 Olympics, we had 3 Olympic medals. We won 2 gold and 1 silver from students that trained in my academy and I have a fulltime live-in training academy in Boston in Wakefield, Massachusetts where athletes come to me from California and Ohio and Texas and wherever. They come live and train fulltime and we help them get ready and prepare for the Olympic Games and I've got a team of coaches there that help look after the development of those kids.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Cool. Super cool and of course, folks, if you're new to this show, you may not know that we have show notes, whistlekickmartialartsradio.com and we're going to drop all the social media links and websites to things that you just heard from Sensei but also from others that you sent me. We'll make sure to include all of them so you can check them out there.

Jimmy Pedro:

Cool.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Here's a question. Here's our last big question before we wind down.

Jimmy Pedro:

Sounds good.

Jeremy Lesniak:



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What's your why? You've been doing this a long time. This has been, in your own words, your whole life and I'm not hearing anything that indicates that you're slowing down or you're going to wake up tomorrow and say, forget Judo, I'm done. So why? Why is this still your passion?

Jimmy Pedro:

Great question! My brother ask me the same thing all the time because my brother's a doctor, is a medical doctor. He invented a device in a medical company and he made tons of money and he says, Jimmy, why? Why do you care? You've already done everything in the sport there is to do and I've won Olympic medals. I've been in 4 teams. I have won world championships. I have helped produce great athletes who have done what nobody's ever done before in terms of helping Kayla Harrison become the first gold medalist ever. Travis Stevens winning a silver medal like we have the most successful run as an organization and a country that we've ever had in the United States but I like to win. I like to succeed in everything I do. Doesn't matter, business, sports, if I'm involved in it, I want it to be gold. I want it to be first-class and I put my heart and soul into everything I do. It's just who I am and I work as hard as anybody else. I have no question about that but I feel I owe it all to Judo. I do. I was born into this amazing sport and it's all I've known and it's taught me everything that I know. It's taught me humility. It's taught me perseverance. It's made me the person I am as a character. I was a world Judo kid, meaning, I lived in England. I lived in other people's houses all over the world, Germany, England, Japan. I had host fathers and I had families in the Judo world that always open their doors and let me in whether it was to train for a week or a month and I just became friends and family with all of them whether I spoke the language or not, they always accepted me and I feel like I can get along with anybody and I've just become, I feel like, I'm a student and I'm from the world Judo family and I just want to see the sport succeed and I want to see it given it's due especially in the United States like what's next? I look at it and say, sure, I can help coach the next Olympian. I can help coach the next Olympic medalist, even, but I really feel like my time now in the sport should be dedicated to putting it on the map again in America. I really see that as my calling at this point. I run three businesses and I'm successful in all of those three businesses and I don't really need the money from the sport of Judo to support my family but to see it as I can take this sport and make it popular in America again and I have the army of people that will follow me and help me accomplish this and it's not for me, it's for the sport and I feel that we owe it to the next generations and the generations to follow to create something that's meaningful and if it was already headed in the right direction, then I would just let it go. It wouldn't matter because it is successful and it's going in the right direction but I feel like it's not. I feel like it's dying and it needs a true leader to take it. It needs a visionary to say, guys, this is for all of us. This is for the future of all of our kids and this is the future of the sport but here's how we're going to get there. I need all of you to get on board to help me do it and I really feel like in my heart of hearts, that with my connections, in the world of Judo, I could help make that a reality in America and I think that's the next and the why is because it's what gave me this opportunity and this amazing life that I have that I can give to my kids and I want this for a lot of kids, not just one or two. I want it for a lot of kids and the other part of it is that the Olympics is going to come to the America, I believe, in 2028. A



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couple years ago, I thought it's going to happen in 2024 but I'm almost positive that LA is getting the Olympics in 2028. So, 9 years from now, there will be a team that will step on the mat at the Olympic Games and we will get a full team. We will get 14 athletes and we will get a full team that will qualify for those Games and I do not want America to get shut out and shut off from Olympic medals at that Games and it is going to take a monumental effort to change the development of the next generation to be ready in 9 years and I think that is something that is absolutely necessary for success.

Jeremy Lesniak:

I do. Yeah! What better reason? I mean, that's a pretty powerful reason and I have no doubt that you can do it. I mean, just listening to your passion today, I'm fully on board and I have to confess, I'm already training in, what some would say, too many martial arts but you've got me fired up about Judo.

Jimmy Pedro:

That's good! That's my job! That's what I want.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Yeah! The, I guess, the plus for me, personally, so I don't continue to become even more over committed is that there is no Judo nearby.

Jimmy Pedro:

Right, right. That's the sad part. That is the sad part but you're welcome to come train at Wakefield, Massachusetts so anytime, stop in for a class. I think you'd love our academy in the way we train and the way we treat our people.

Jeremy Lesniak:

I have no doubt.

Jimmy Pedro:

It's truly unique in the sport of Judo.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Well, you're not far away and I definitely get to Massachusetts frequently so I'm sure we will meet each other in person at some point soon and I look forward to that and as we wind down here, as we fade off, walk into the sunset, whatever you want to term it, what parting words, what advice, wisdom, if you will, would you offer up to people listening today?

Jimmy Pedro:



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I'll give the same advice that I give everybody. There really is no secret formula to success. You have to choose something that you're very passionate about and then, once you decided, you make up your mind you're going to do something, then, do it and don't let anybody tell you you can't get there. They'll make any excuses to why you can't do something. Put all of your heart, your energy, your soul into it and pursue with passion and realize that along the way, you're going to get beat. You're going to have losses. You're going to fail. Learn from those losses. Improve. Get better but be persistent. Follow through with what you started and finish it through the end and the one thing that I know, in doing so, is that you will feel fulfilled because you'd have given a 100% of yourself and along the way you'll have learned some amazing, valuable lessons that will help you succeed in anything you do. Whether you make it, I wasn't a gold medalist. My goal was to win the Olympic gold medal. I didn't do that. I don't feel like a failure but I didn't succeed in my goal but the pursuit led to some amazing experiences. 2 bronze medals in the Olympics. I got to represent Team USA for 15 years. I got to travel the world. I've made friends and the memories I have are more meaningful than the medals and the lessons I learned in the sport are what enabled me to succeed now in my job, in my daily life. The relationships, the follow through and running a business is no different than competing in the sport. You have to be organized, you have to be professional, you have to be on time, you got to be committed, you got to be dedicated. You're going to deal with challenges and people that don't believe in your dream. You got to bring them in and show them what the culture's supposed to be and teach them. Quite honestly, in my companies, I hire, almost everybody that I hire, trains. They all wore a black belt or took Judo under me at some time, they're all part of my team because they know what it takes to succeed so I'd say, set your mind to doing something and follow through and finish and do what you said you're going to do and it's not going to be easy. There's no secret formula. A lot of hard work, a lot of perseverance and commitment and I say heart and soul is what gets it done.

Jeremy Lesniak:

We've certainly had a lot of great story tellers on this show but I would have to say Sensei Pedro at, or near the top of those story tellers. As I joked with him afterwards, if I have a box of popcorn in front of me, I would be sitting there eating it with my microphone on mute because I was so enthralled with everything that he was saying. I feel motivated to train and I feel a renewed effort towards my goals with whistlekick in helping grow and spread the martial arts just as he does with Judo, so, sir, thank you so much for coming on. Thank you for sharing and thank you for all that you do and will do. If you want to check out the show notes, you can find them at whistlekickmartialartsradio.com. We've got photos, we've got links to websites and social media that were shared today as well as a whole bunch of other stuff from all of our other episodes. If you head on over to whistlekick.com, remember you can find a bunch of stuff that we've got going on, products that we make and save 15% with the code `PODCAST15`. We appreciate your help and support whether that's sharing an episode of the show, maybe like this one, leaving us a review over on the Apple Podcast store, making a purchase or just calling somebody up, texting them and saying, hey, check out martial arts radio. Your support keeps the show alive, keeps us bringing on new guests and in some way, directly or indirectly, however you want to look at it, it



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helps benefit the martial arts. You can find whistlekick on social media, we're @whistlekick on Facebook, twitter, YouTube and Instagram and you can email me directly, jeremy@whistlekick.com. I thank you for your time, hope all is well in your world. Until next time, train hard, smile and have a great day!