

## I recall Nick Zaffuto the Founder of South Hills Judo Club in Pittsburgh

by [Gary Goltz](#), 2/15/12



Arnell Newsome, Nick Zaffuto, & Gary Goltz in 1975

Nick Zaffuto, 6th Dan, USJA LM 147, member since 1970 passed away quietly last Wednesday. He started Judo in 1945 while serving as a Marine stationed at Pearl Harbor. He formed the first Judo Club in Pittsburgh at the downtown YMCA and continuously taught judo for over 60 years. Nick was indeed the Father of Pittsburgh Judo.

In 1975 he introduced me to the U.S. Judo Association and supported my promotion to 1st degree black belt. Later he asked me to run for local [AAU Judo Chairman](#) and worked hard to get me elected. This was the beginning of a lifelong involvement in judo politics with the goal of trying to make a positive difference. I will always remember Nick as a good Sensei who was devoted to judo and his students.

In Yoshisada Yonezuka's book which has just been published in English he talks about a tournament in Pittsburgh in 1962 where he took on a challenge line of 15 in under 10 minutes per Nick's request who was the event coordinator and promoter. Later Nick got a tag team of 2 women black belts Jordi Ludwig and Donna Waxter to be a regular feature at Pittsburgh's Civic Arena as an act during the Professional Wrestling events. They would come out and do an action packed judo demo in the days of Bruno Samartino and 'Judo' Gene LeBell. It really helped put judo on the map in my hometown.

I feel lucky to have started judo under Pittsburgh judo legend, [Kyu Ha Kim](#) and after short lived falling out with him I got to study under the original Pittsburgh judo legend, Nick Zaffuto. Both men contributed to who I became in the judo world today. Eventually after Mr. Kim and I made amends, I felt he then saw me as a grown-up man, like a son that had found his own way. This I'm sure is among the reasons he listened to me on important things like when I told him point blank to stop vacillating and sign-up for the heart transplant list which proved successful in saving his life.

It always amazes me how just like in judo things all seem to come together in the end. Rest in peace Sensei Nick, I'll miss you.

# FATHER FIGURE

**65 years after Nick Zaffuto introduced judo to Pittsburgh, his students carry it forward.**

Marine Corps at Pearl Harbor. “He said, ‘Are you interested in this?’ The ad said ‘American Soldiers Welcome’ – of course we were Marines – but we went.”



**Nick Zaffuto in the U.S. Marine Corps, Pearl Harbor, 1945.**

YMCA. “I was still a white belt,” he says, “because judo was still in its infancy here. There were no instructors.” But other American servicemen had also learned judo while in the Pacific, and the sport grew in popularity as they returned. “We traveled all over, anytime we heard of anyone who had something he could teach us, and we taught each other. And of course we started competing.”

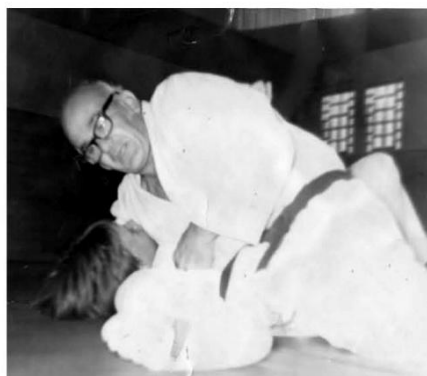
Mr. Zaffuto opened his first judo school in the early 1950s, on the third floor of a bank building on the North Side. Back then there were no high-density foam mat systems. “We hauled a truckload of sawdust from a sawmill in Uniontown back to the North Side, lugged it up to the third floor in burlap sacks and spread it out. We stretched canvas over it, and that was our mat.” He chuckles at the memory. “Boy, when you’d get thrown on that, there’d be a big cloud of dust! We had to sweep up after every practice.”

By the late 1950s Mr. Zaffuto had earned his third-degree black belt and was teaching at clubs throughout southwestern Pennsylvania, and competing across the state and in Baltimore and Washington, D.C. In the early 1960s, Kyu Ha Kim, a national judo champion in Korea, moved to Pittsburgh and joined Mr. Zaffuto’s club.

To hear Nick Zaffuto tell the story, it was about as casual a beginning as you can imagine.

“A buddy of mine hrew a newspaper on my bunk with an ad for judo classes,” Mr. Zaffuto recalls. It was 1945, World War II had just ended, and he was stationed with the US

Mr. Zaffuto quickly displayed an early talent. For the next year he studied under the tutelage of the Japanese-Hawaiian instructor in Pearl Harbor, and upon returning to Pittsburgh in 1946, began teaching judo in his hometown. The first classes he taught were held in the downtown



**Ne-waza in the old North Side site, 1960s.**

judo to scores of children and adults, and his wife, Mickey, dispensing snacks and scoldings from a small concession stand. In 1982 they moved to the current South Hills Judo Club location in Carrick.

Among the many memorable students to pass through the club’s doors was a seven-year-old from Clairton, Rick Brown. “We saw he had talent right away,” Mr. Zaffuto says. “He started following me around to the tournaments I’d go to, and that’s how he learned.” “Lots of times, if Nick was getting home late from a tournament, Ricky would sleep right on our couch,” adds Mrs. Zaffuto.

Rick Brown eventually went on to the Olympic Training Center in Colorado, traveled the world to train and compete in judo, and was an alternate to the 2000 U.S. Olympic Team. He returned in 2005 and went straight to South Hills Judo Club.

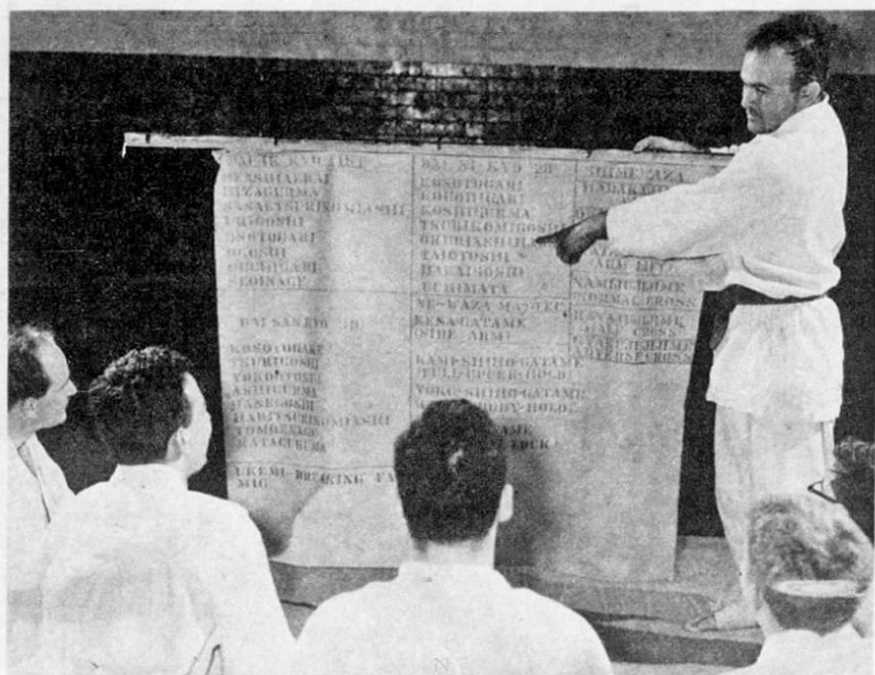
“There was no doubt,” Rick says. “Mr. and Mrs. Z ran this place like a family, and when you come home, you go back to your family. I have my mom and dad in Clairton, and I have my ‘mom and dad’ here at South Hills.”

Now Rick is teaching judo with that same family-based approach to boys on the city’s North Side through South Hills Judo Club’s collaboration with Allegheny Youth Development. “He’s a father figure to my son,” one mom declares. “I don’t know about all that,” Rick says. “But in terms of judo, then yes, I’m passing on what I got from Mr. Z. He’s truly the Father of Pittsburgh Judo.”



**With a current student at South Hills Judo Club.**

“We learned a lot from him, and we helped him with his visa.” Mr. Kim eventually went on to found Kim’s Martial Arts. Mr. Zaffuto’s club flourished throughout the 1960s and 1970s, with him teaching



**LANGUAGE CLASS.** Students of judo must learn Japanese words and phrases for various holds, throws, other judo jargon. Director Zaffuto of Pittsburgh Judo Club conducts class.

However, the rough-tough little Irishman, now a successful surrealist painter, was probably unknowingly echoing the ancient Japanese practitioners of the fine art of judo.

"Size and weight mean little in judo," says Nick Zaffuto, director of the Pittsburgh Judo Club which makes its headquarters at the Downtown Y.M.C.A.

"More important than size is timing, balance, co-ordination and quick reflexes—plus lots of practice. Practice is really the most important," Nick emphasizes.

Nick, the operator of a gas station at

1903 Brighton Rd., North Side, first learned the rudiments of judo when he was in the service in Hawaii. Returning to Pittsburgh after World War II, he reactivated the judo club at the Y.

Today the club has 15 members, ranging in age from 12 to 35. The Pittsburgh unit belongs to Shufu Judo Yudansha-kai, alias the Judo Black Belt Federation of the U.S.A., and is recognized by Kodokan College in Tokyo, mecca of judo devotees throughout the world.

Twice a year the Pittsburgh judo artists compete in Shufu's Mid-Atlantic



**DOWNSY-DAISY.** Nick flips over backwards in warm-up session. Neophytes spend weeks learning to fall before they're taught holds.

# The Bigger They Come . . .

League tournaments. This year they hope to land a member in the national tournament in California and perhaps even the hemisphere competition in Cuba. From there the winners will go to Australia and then on to Tokyo for the world championships.

But judo is more than a competitive sport in the Western sense. It is a highly disciplined art, shot through with elaborate ritualism.

"The real purpose of judo is to teach sportsmanship," says Mr. Zaffuto. "Occasionally we get some fellow with a chip on his shoulder who wants to learn a few quick tricks so he can get revenge on somebody. But that's not the way we work."

Before a neophyte can even start learning the various throws and holds of judo, he must first spend at least three weeks practicing how to fall. This is vital, because after he gets into judo further he's going to spend a lot of time sailing through the air and landing smack on his back.

"The soreheads are usually weeded out fast," says Nick. "But if they stay they become good sportsmen. One of the best things about judo is that it builds confidence without building bullies."

Besides learning how to throw opponents and how to fall himself, the judo artist must also learn something of the Japanese language before qualifying for

the various belts — white, brown and black — which denote stages of proficiency.

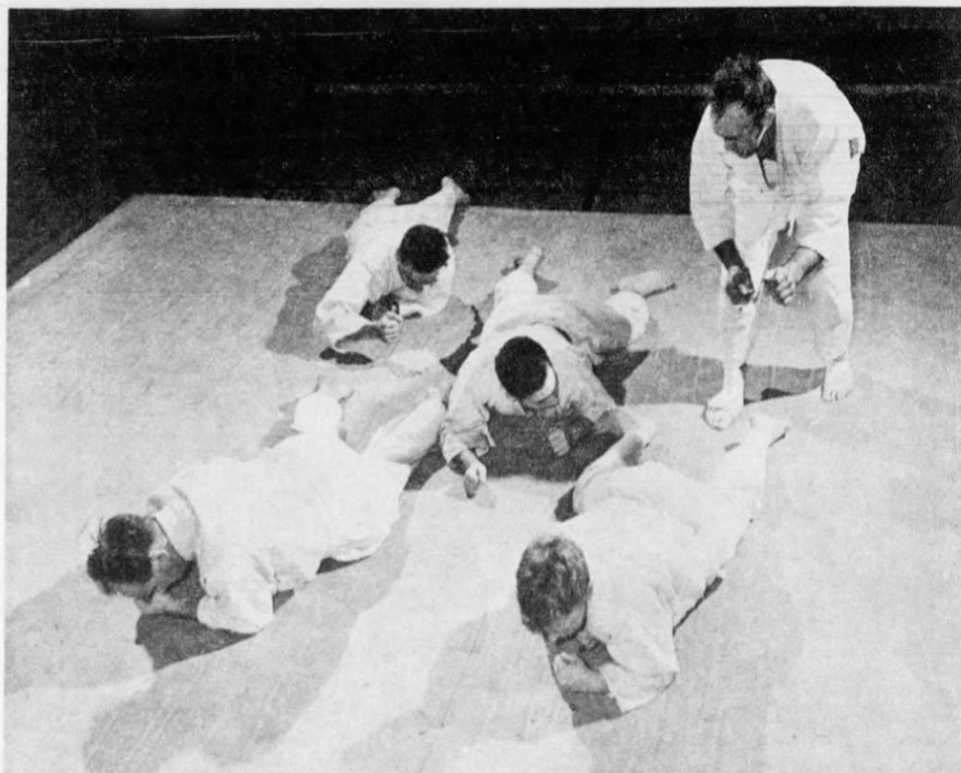
These belts are won only after years of practice. Nick Zaffuto, after 11 years, holds the highest rank here the brown belt second class.

There is a great difference between judo and jujitsu, though the two are

often confused. Judo has been aptly described as jujitsu with the hitting, kicking, bone-breaking, windpipe closing trickery taken out.

"Jujitsu is for the offense, judo for defense," Nick explains.

Incidentally, in Japanese the word judo means "the soft way."



WARM-UP. Director Zaffuto, members in one of judo warm-up drills. They crawl on elbows only.

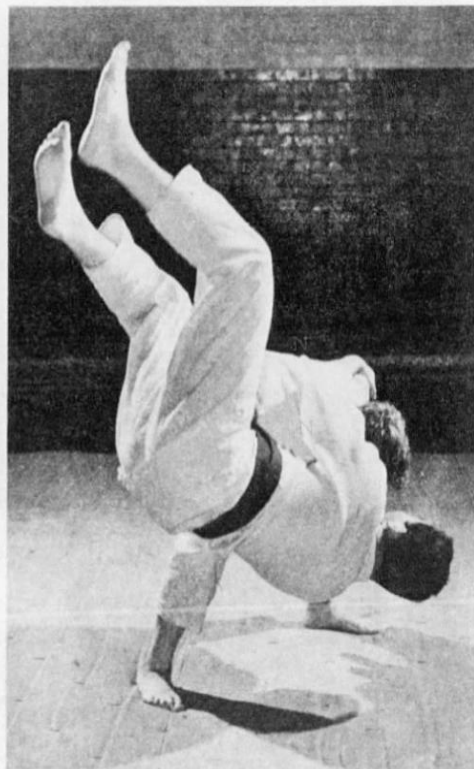
Press Photos By Stewart Love



Twelve-year-old Tony Ball, right, tries . . .



a seoinage on George Rockman, 17, and . . .



tosses his heavier opponent flat on his back.