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Women in Aikido - Part One

Since the inception of the British Aikido Association in 1966 and the introduction of Sport Aikido into the UK, women have made a significant contribution to its development. Their overall contribution is only overshadowed by their individual successes, achievements and impact. There have been many and I have had a difficult choice in selecting, in my opinion, the top eight, presented in no particular order or ranking. They have all made a unique contribution and the article only highlights part of a continuing story. Part One will focus on Lesley Hepden 7th Dan, Vanda Fairchild 5th Dan, Danielle Jones 3rd Dan and Chandra Kaur 3rd Dan followed by four more in part two.

Lesley Hepden 8th Dan

Lesley Hepden, by far, has made the most significant impact on the technical development of Tomiki Aikido within the UK. She has an excellent understanding of technique especially of the Koryu-no-Kata (higher grade practice sequences); she is one of the outstanding world authorities in this area of development and coaching. It is no understatement to say that within the UK she is the bible from which this learning takes place.

Having previously studied Judo, Lesley came to Aikido in the late 1960s and was soon involved in early competition. She was the first woman competitor to win medals at the British National Championships including Embu gold in 1971 and 1972 demonstrating her early technical capabilities.

Her initial training, with founders of the BAA Bill Lawrence and Len Mockford brought her into direct contact with many Japanese instructors including Riki Kogure (of the BBC "Way of the Warrior" fame) and Senta Yamada amongst many others.



(Fig 10 Dr Ah Loi Lee throwing Lesley during a demonstration of Koryu-Da-San the collaboration continued with the publication of the first book on Tomiki Aikido Tomiki Aikido: Randori & Koryu no Kata by Ah Loi Lee in the 1970s.

Lesley also a student of Jo-do and Iaido has developed a unique understanding of Tomiki Aikido which she continues to coach. As a coach she has continued to support and develop Aikidoka for over 40 years and is still in demand providing high quality tuition wherever she goes. As a coach of Tomiki Aikido there is no one better in the UK today male or female.

Lesley has undertaken a number of administrative roles both for in the South of England and for the Association. She has been an active competition judge and referee. As part of her role on the Technical Committee she has overseen numerous gradings and taught thousands of hours of seminars and courses. Administratively Lesley predominantly was General Secretary from 1998 to 2012. She is currently a member of the Association's technical committee. Lesley was made a "Fellow" of the British Aikido Association in 2005 for her continued dedication to Aikido.



(Fig 2) Lesley Hepden (centre) with a keen eye for detail, coaching at the Winchester Spring School 2015

Most cherished achievements

Two things really; being able to train with and learn from Ohba Sensei was a great privilege; he was a great inspiration and mentor. And to have an active Aikido career lasting over 40 years to be able to help so many people.

Top skills, qualities and attitudes to become a successful martial artist.

The most important is to have a sense of "Budo", to understand the mental and philosophical approaches and not just the physical ability. To strive and train for perfection and not to settle for anything less and to be respectful of your training or competition partners.

Budo

Perfection

Respect

Vanda Fairchild 5th Dan

The second Vanda stepped onto a tatami (mat) at the age of 14 in 1979, it was clear that she would become one of Tomiki Aikido's great practitioners. Even in the early days she demonstrated a dynamic ability to perform and a thirst for knowledge.

Achieving her first Dan in 1984 she was the first non-Japanese woman to win a medal at the World Championships.



(Fig 3) Vanda Fairchild 5th Dan preparing to coach at one of the many seminars she attends both nationally and internationally

Her most celebrated successes include being British Randori Champion three times winning her first title in 1988 then followed a host of other successes in Randori and Embu (kata). At an International level, she has represented her country at eight international tournaments as player, captain, coach and manager.

With David Fielding, Vanda Managed the National team between 1997 and 2005 the team won a total of 25 International medals under their supervision with great advances being made in the women's contribution, being led of course by Vanda. Her personal tally came to six International medals the total including a Women's Team Gold in 1995 and an Individual bronze in 1997.

In 1992 Vanda was selected for the first series of what was to become the popular TV programme "Gladiators". She was skilled enough to be crowned champion.



(Fig 4) 1992 Gladiators – the professionals

Vanda was also featured in “The Best of British Women” 1993 alongside other such sporting notables as Sharron Davies, Tessa Sanderson and Sally Gunnell.

Since then Vanda was continued to be involved in competition as a judge and referee, with her own club Tanseikan who have won the British team title on seven occasions. She was head referee at the 2011 World Championships in London.

As a coach Vanda provides a wealth of knowledge and understanding, she is dynamic with high expectations of any class she teaches and leads by example.



(Fig 5) Vanda Fairchild 5th Dan demonstrating Oshi Toashi (Ikkyo) at a recent seminar

Vanda is currently Sports Development Officer for the British Aikido Association responsible for competitive developments within the UK and a representative on the world governing body the World Sports Aikido Federation (WSAF)



(Fig 6) Vanda illustrating good posture during a coaching session in Ireland

Most cherished achievements

Becoming the first ever women's Gladiators Champion in 1992, being the first woman National Squad manager and being able to give something back through my club in London.

Top skills, qualities and attitudes to become a successful martial artist.

In all aspects of martial arts the practitioner has to maintain an air of calmness leading to total self-control. This state allows you to perform under pressure without body tension. In competition one must have tenacity, to keep pressure on an opponent and so to use a football analogy, play the whole 90 minutes. Finally and most importantly preparation, whether technical or physical competitions are won or lost during the build up to the event, thorough preparation is essential for success.

Calmness and Control

Tenacity

Preparation

Dr Danielle Jones 3rd Dan

Having started at the age of five years Danielle has had a long and fruitful Aikido career. As a junior her first competition success came at the Junior Nationals in the under 8s category in 1991, from that point she continued to dominate at all age levels. In 2001 at the tender age of sixteen she became the youngest ever British National Senior Randori Champion. Since then Danielle has been individual champion on six occasions. As a performer she is the ultimate all rounder, with the ability to medal in all competitive Aikido disciplines, Randori and Embu (Kata). At International and World Championship level Danielle has achieved sixteen medal places in all events. Her outstanding sporting career was reflected when Danielle was selected to carry the Commonwealth Games torch, running a section in Tyne and Wear and handing over to Steve Cram.



(Fig 7) Danielle with her two brothers Simon right and Alex left after their 1991 success

Due to her dedication and skills Danielle along with Mick Pratt were appointed as British National Team Managers in 2005, during their period as managers the British team won the overall world title on two occasions taking a total of 39 medals during their tenure – a fantastic achievement. In addition to this Danielle has been a cornerstone of the Leeds Aikido team contributing to its sixteen British titles.



(Fig 8) Danielle at a Civic Reception with the then Lord Mayor of Leeds

Danielle retired from the post in 2014 to become the British Aikido Associations International Officer and Chair of the Associations' Technical Development Committee. Danielle continues to make an enormous contribution to the development of Sport Aikido in the UK and I am extremely proud that she is my daughter.

One of the great advantages of practising martial sports is that you get travel the world, from Japan, USA, Russia to Switzerland and the Czech Republic it offers great opportunities to see the world and experience life.



(Fig9) Japan

So from sightseeing in Japan (Fig 9) to Skiing (Fig 10) in Switzerland, martial sports making anything possible.....



(Fig 10) Switzerland

Danielle's competitive Aikido career has successfully transferred junior into senior the Association now looks forward to the transition into national and international coaching.



(Fig 11) Danielle with her team mates Natuley (far left and Laura (far right) at the 2009 Kyoto World Championships with Japan A.



(Fig 12) Danielle with her brother Simon winning silver at the 2011 World Championships.

Most cherished achievements, first individual randori gold medal at the British Nationals in 2001 having had to overcome her two greatest rivals and friends Vanda Fairchild and Chandra Kaur, being Champion of Champions at the USA International in 2007 and becoming Leeds Female Sports Personality of the Year in 2004.

Top skills, qualities and attitudes to become a successful martial artist.

For me the top three must include high technical ability and understanding combined with dedication to task and absolute focus both during training and the competitions themselves.

Technical Excellence

Focus

Dedication

Chandra Kaur 3rd Dan

Chandra had started studying Judo at Grange School, Bradford and was a very keen and enthusiastic practitioner. Her progress was halted when the then Judo coach left the school for another post. The classes soon returned with a new and enthusiastic new teacher to the school. Who taught both Judo and Aikido, the classes recommenced in 1982 and Chandra was the first to join.

In 1997 Chandra was not only the first British Women to win the World Randori title she was also the first non-Japanese. In the same year Vanda Fairchild achieved the bronze medal position. This was an extremely proud moment and demonstrated that the Japanese could be beaten on their own ground.

Chandra also had a keen interest in getting Aikido into schools and promote the sport to young people. She started coaching self-defence classes for women to promote personal safety and protection.

As a coach she soon built a reputation for being a hard task master understanding that you only achieve through hard work, grit and determination.

It was clear that Chandra had the ability, temperament and enthusiasm to be one of the best at Aikido. She progressed through the grades and attending all the competitions she could. As a young coach she started the Bradford Aikido club and became one of the top women coaches in the North of England. She continued to train hard and soon became a key member of the British National team.



(Fig 13) Chandra Kaur 3rd Dan GB First Individual World Champion 1997

Chandra eventually retired from competition in 2002 due to work commitments and a move to London to further her career. Chandra has now moved back up North to her

roots and it is hoped that she will return to coaching and pass her passion and experience to the next generation of women Aikidoka.



(Fig 14) Chandra front row far right and Vanda Fairchild front row far left as part of the British Team 1997

Most cherished achievements

To be the first non-Japanese winner of the Women's Individual Randori on Japanese soil was my proudest moment. Laying the foundation of the Bradford Aikido Club, which went on to win the Junior Nationals on seven occasions, was a legacy that I pleased to leave. Finally being part of and making a contribution to the success of the British National team at the Vandalia (USA), Imabari (Japan) and Brisbane (Australia) World Championships was one of my proudest achievements.



(Fig 15) Team members relaxing in Australia 1999 with Chandra at the centre of things

Top skills, qualities and attitudes to become a successful martial artist.

As a woman martial artist you have to develop a great deal of positivity and be confident in your own abilities. Positivity is a state of mind that provides the underlying will to succeed. Using Aikido is a good way to develop power, and not just physical strength. To effectively deliver a throw we must remember that power is generated through the use of the hips and centre. The more power we can generate the more effective the throw. And finally you must enjoy what you do. Enjoyment provides the stimulus for training.

Power

Positivity

Enjoyment

I hope that the article provides a short glimpse into the extraordinary Aikido lives of some talented and well-respected Aikidoka. In the next issue I will introduce four more women who have made a difference to British Aikido and help challenge the stereotype that martial sports are often portrayed as a male preserve.

Photographs Mark Cheevers

To join a club please go to www.britishaikidoassociation.co.uk