

Hector Estevez - Judo Runs Through His Veins

By Fernando Vila (translated from Spanish)

Photos courtesy of Hector Estevez

When you enter the study room of the house of this man where he has placed all of his plaques, trophies and photos, it immediately comes to mind that you are not in the presence of a common man.

There has been lot of success that Estevez has obtained at all levels ever since he started practicing judo in the 60's in his native town of Florida in Camaguey, Cuba.

To begin, it is worth mentioning that he is the only judo referee that will represent USA in the upcoming Olympic Games in China to be held this summer. But is not only that, that's the most recent, as an athlete he also won many competitions.

To go to Beijing fits perfectly with the popular saying "Life always gives you a second chance" and this phrase fits Estevez perfectly with the designation to go to these games.

You see in 1980 he was one of the members of the Puerto Rican Olympic Judo team to the Olympics in Moscow. At that moment, destiny did not allow his Olympic participation due to the boycott by USA and other countries to those games. Estevez's opportunity was lost. Four years later, he lost an elimination match to go to Los Angeles with Robert Berland, who later won the Silver medal in the Los Angeles games; again his Olympic dream was not to be.

His dream of going to the Olympic Games seemed lost, and as an athlete, it was. But, the sport of judo runs through this man's veins and what he sets out to do, he does. So, with this combination of will power and commitment, some 28 years after the first lost opportunity, his dreams of participating in the Olympic Games and representing his country is realized, but instead of as an athlete as a referee.



This did not happen by luck or chance, this was something that Hector Estevez set out to do, his goal was always to represent USA in Beijing, and he will be there this summer. To be a referee it is not an easy task, you have to study a lot, and most of all work hard and not make any mistakes, because if you do, it could prevent you from participating in any other major tournaments, Estevez knows that, and was able to make the transition from athlete to referee smoothly, "the most difficult thing to do is to remain calm", says Hector.

In 2005 he was recognized as "The Referee of the Year" by the USJF in the USA. He has refereed during the 2005 World Championships in Cairo, Egypt, the Pan American Games in Rio de Janeiro, Brasil in 2007, as well as the 2007 World Championships in the same city.

With all of his achievements, Estevez maintains his humility and that is demonstrated in his daily life. "Judo has taught me a lot, and I just want to give back what it has given me", this sport offers you everything, it helps with your discipline, character, you learn to be a winner, you look at things seriously, says the international referee.

“The love for the sport that I have is from my cousin Pedro Carbonell who used to live in the city of Camaguey and always with his judogi in his back”. Commented Estevez. And it was there that I started my career in the sport, my first Sensei Jorge Porro and in 1965 my first championship in a Province Championship where I obtained a bronze medal, and that’s where the career of one of America’s best Cuban American judokas started.

My career was resurrected after I arrived in Miami in 1966. It is one of those interesting life stories. “I was delivering newspapers in Hialeah and one day I saw through the windows that they were practicing judo”, commented Estevez. The judo school he was referring was from Reinaldo Montpellier a judo sport figure in the island of Cuba and Cuban champion in 1959. Montpellier practically adopted me as his son and that was the drive that the boy from Camaguey, Cuba needed to make it to stardom.

The same level of willpower and commitment opened the doors to the Florida International University (FIU) in which he graduated with a Bachelor of Science in Physical Education, and at the same time put on the map the sport of judo in this university.

In 1979 he won a Silver medal in the 1979 Pan American Games in San Juan, Puerto Rico competing for that country in the Open category. The previous year he won a Gold Medal in the Pan American Championships in Argentina which served to be considered as the “Athlete of the Year in Judo in 1978” by the Puerto Rican Olympic Committee. He also won Silver and Bronze medals in the Pan American Championships in Islas Margaritas in 1980.

Another great attribute that Estevez has is that he is a family man and he owes that to the sport who taught him to always look at life putting family first the correct way. He is waiting together with his wife Zaida their first grandson from their daughter Jessica any minute now. His son Alex on the other hand, inherits his athleticism and competitive spirit of his dad and is one of the receivers in the football team at Columbus High School.

His love for the sport took him to the Centennial Olympic Games in Atlanta in 1996 working as volunteer. “I asked permission at work and I went to Atlanta to work as a volunteer in anything they needed me, as table worker, score keeper, anything says Estevez.

On the other hand, his yearning to compete took him to compete in the Masters and from 1984 to 1994 he won 10 Master’s Championships for veterans. Estevez is a Six Degree Black Belt Rokudan, a very high and difficult rank to obtain.

He has never returned to the land of his birth since the day he left. In 1978, Estevez had an opportunity to go and see his family, and Cuba, but it wasn’t meant to be. You see, Puerto Rico was invited to the Jose Ramon Rodriguez International Tournament. At that time, Estevez was representing Puerto Rico and they made a stop in Mexico en route to Cuba. As they were ready to board the Cubana Airline flight they informed him that because he was born in the island of Cuba, he needed a Cuban passport with the proper Cuban papers from the island. He was not allowed to board the plane and make the trip “I had to stay 10 days alone in the hotel waiting for the delegation to return from the island; commented Estevez.

The saddest part of all of these was that his family in Cuba, his grandparents, uncles and cousins travel from Camaguey to Havana to reunite with him after so many years of separation, but the encounter never happened.

Thus, it is with great pride and through this great sport that this man has put the name of Miami, and the USA in very high esteem within the sport of Judo and as an American Estevez feels honored and privileged to represent us all in Beijing during the Olympic Games. So the question remains, and after Beijing what? Without hesitation, he replies, “Continue to give back to judo what judo has given me”.