

Get serious about judo

Text: Wilhelm de Swardt Image: Reg Caldecott

If you are serious about judo, then the TuksJudo Academy is where you should be.

“The moment one of the Tuks students steps onto a mat during a tournament, the players from the other teams are worried because they realize that they will be up against a tough opponent.

“What is really exciting about the Academy is its holistic approach. The changes they bring about in their young players extend way beyond mastering the art of judo.

“Most of the youngsters started with nothing. They were actually nobodies, but after a year’s coaching and training they are winners on and off the mat.” This is the honest opinion of Zack Piontek, one of older players at the TuksJudo Academy.

Once he begins to talk about judo at Tuks, there is actually no way of stopping him.

“At the recent South African championship we won an incredible number of medals. It was really exciting because we all won medals. We won mostly gold and silver, with only one bronze,” Piontek said boastfully.

Hardly allowing himself time to catch a breath, he began to sing the praises of the 16-year-old Michaela Whitebooi.

“Remember what I am telling you now. She has what it takes to become one of the world’s best. I think once she is 20 she will be almost unbeatable.

“At a tournament in Potchefstroom, her rival started crying the moment she realized that she had to fight Michaela.”

Whitebooi is one of a squad of youngsters who get their schooling at the

TuksSport High School. The school enables them to train at least three times a day.

What is the key to the success of the TuksJudo Academy?

“It is Nikola Filopov, our head coach. He is getting older and at times he tends to moan a lot, but there is no better coach than he, especially while you are fighting.

“He sees instantly what you are doing wrong and gives you the right advice to rectify the mistake.

“Therefore, he is a real asset to have next to the mat when you are fighting. He also knows how to boost you mentally before a fight.”

The 21-year-old Piontek is one of the rising stars of South African judo.

Up to now Patrick Treziser, a former Olympian, was the only judoka who had been able to beat him in local tournaments.

But, as Piontek rightly points out, Treziser, is eight years his senior and he is, therefore, much more experienced.



“I do not feel ashamed when I lose to Patrick.”

A definite highlight for Piontek was the 2010 Commonwealth Games in Singapore where he won a gold medal in the junior category, as well as two bronze medals in the senior categories.

What made his performance even more special, was that he broke the scaphoid bone in his wrist on the first day, but even that could not prevent him from fighting on for two more days.

“I will be honest, I was in a lot of pain and I had to change my fighting style completely because I was only able to get a good grip with one hand.

“But there was no way that I was going to quit. The cost of getting to the tournament was just so high that I had to make the most of the opportunity to compete against the world’s best.”

That brings Piontek to a sensitive issue.

“I would have quitted judo a long time ago if it had not been for the support we are getting from the High Performance Centre.

“Judo South Africa (JSA) is doing basically nothing to help us. It does not seem to bother them that they are sending teams to compete at big tournaments with no hope of winning medals

“I, for one, definitely don’t just want to compete for the sake of competing. I want to become one of the world’s best and, with proper support, I know I can.

“Life is too short and too precious to be wasted on judo if you are never given a fair chance to succeed.

“Thanks to the High Performance Centre I am able to train three times a day and get one decent meal a day. I also have access to good

physiotherapists, sports scientists and even a sports psychologist, should the need arise.

“They even sponsor our accommodation in one of Tuks’ Sports Houses.”

Piontek’s main frustration is the lack of international exposure.

“There is only so much that we can learn at the TuksJudo Academy. If we want to proceed to the next level, we need to be able to compete and train internationally on a regular basis.

“If you train with the same guys every day, you eventually become just as good as they are, but no better.

“Different countries have different fighting styles to which we need to be exposed so that we will know what to expect if we should be lucky enough to go to the Games.”