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How a local karate expert developed a new martial arts system to teach to the handicapped. By Tim Sukits p. 7



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How a Sarasota karate instructor teamed up with an Arkansas man born with cerebral palsy to create a specialized karate for the handicapped

June 16th, 2009 by [Tim Sukits](#) in [News](#), [Sarasota-Manatee](#), [Sports](#)

Donna Judge's karate credentials are flawless. In her 11 years in competition, the Sarasota Shihan — aka chief instructor — won 323 first-place trophies, came in second four times and never lost. She won 11 world titles, was named "Sportswoman of the Year" and "Female Fighter of the Year," was inducted into The World Martial Arts Hall of Fame, was captain of the women's USKA team when it took gold at the 1987 Japan Goodwill Karate Championships, and now coaches that team. A recipient of the Living Legends Sport Karate Award, Judge is one of five female eighth-degree black belts in the nation.



Most impressive, though? Chuck Norris bows to *her* when the two meet.

Jason Sasser, on the other hand, wasn't blessed with Judge's physical abilities. The 37-year-old was born with cerebral palsy and has been confined to a wheelchair his entire life. He was the first fully disabled person to graduate from his high school and the only to take mainstream classes instead of special education classes. With only the use of his right arm, he managed to earn a degree in radio, television and film from the University of Arkansas Little Rock, and he now works as a greeter at the Wal-Mart in his hometown of Crossett, Ark., and does radio sports commentary for a local Razorback football preview show.

"I'm not your average person with a disability," he says. "I just was not going to be denied. I've had that attitude all my life." That attitude is part of what led Sasser to Judge, and what led the two of them to create [Handi-Capable Karate](#).

At age 13, Sasser saw a Miss America Pageant and was captivated by a karate demonstration by Miss Michigan: "I'd never seen someone physically use their body like that." His passion for martial arts only grew stronger as he got older. Then, three years ago, he decided he needed to learn for himself. He called every instructor he could find in the phonebook and inquired about lessons, but every request fell on deaf ears. "I was actually told by one instructor that I would be a disgrace to the martial arts because I was in a wheelchair," Sasser says.

But Sasser refused to give up, and one day came across Judge's website. He called her up and explained his story. After Judge did a background check, she told him to send her a cassette tape explaining why he wanted to learn karate. So moved by the tape Sasser put in the mail, Judge up to Crossett that weekend — with Linda Cleary, a black belt with 28 years of training under Judge, along for the ride.

"When she pulled up in the driveway I can't tell you the emotional release I had," says Sasser.

"He was sitting out in the front yard in his wheelchair and just started crying like a baby as we got out of

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He was sitting out in the front yard in his wheelchair and just started crying like a baby as we got out of the car," recalls Judge. "He was just overwhelmed that he was actually going to get to learn karate. It was his dream."

Sasser got a key to his high school gym, where Judge gave him his inaugural karate lesson. For the first time, Judge began considering how much she could teach someone with disabilities. She told Sasser she would start sending him videotapes with customized lessons on them. "The most rewarding thing for me was that she took me seriously," says Sasser. "You don't get those kinds of phone calls every day. I just thank God that they have opened their hearts and minds."

About a week went by before Judge started getting more phone calls. "He called me overjoyed and said, 'I'm covered in pickle juice,'" Judge remembers. "I said, 'What do you mean?' And he said, 'I just opened a pickle jar for the first time.' A month later he called and said, 'Shihan, you're not going to believe it. I just opened a Coke bottle.' I think that probably hit me more than anything else. Just the physical therapy this guy is getting with his arm because of all the movements he's doing." The two talk on an almost daily basis and Sasser is prepping to earn his yellow belt.

With successes come new challenges, though. Judge first called the current Grand Master, Robert Bowles, and got the OK to modify the karate world's training system. At first, she was afraid that people would be insulted that she was doing things in a wheelchair without being disabled. "Then I just decided that I have to do it that way because that's the only way for me to understand the limitations they're dealing with in order to be able to teach them."

Judge made separate videos for those who can use both arms and for those limited to either their right or left arm. Inspired by Judge's work, Hovercraft donated a chair she could practice in, and [Sarasota's Watrous Video Productions](#) agreed to let her pay them back as she sold copies. Then, after Judge explained the project at a yearly seminar, a man who wished to remain anonymous slipped a \$5,000 check into her briefcase, allowing her to pay off her debt to Watrous.

Black belt student and web designer Thomas Harty pitched in as well, and [Handi-Capable Karate](#) went into full operation last month. Now it's just a matter of PR. "We've sent packages to *Oprah*, *Ellen*, *Dr. Phil*, *20/20*, *Good Morning Show*, everybody I can think of," Judge says. "If we can just get on TV and show this, I feel like it's going to take off like crazy. I think about all of our servicemen that have come home in wheelchairs; I think about kids that have been in accidents or have diseases; I think about senior citizens that can sit in a chair and do this stuff."

Judge plans to give Sasser a percentage of every video she sells, but so far he is her only Handi-capable student. "I plan on him making something off this. He's the reason I started this project," she says. "I couldn't ask for anybody better to start this with."

Sasser appreciates everything Judge has done for him. "It's been the most wonderful thing I've ever done and I thank God every day for her," he says. "Shihan Judge has a humble spirit. For me it really is about freedom for my body. I don't even know I'm in a wheelchair when I'm doing it. I feel like I'm on Mount Sinai. I really do hope that other persons with disabilities can get the freedom that I've got. Then everything I've gone through in my life would be worth it."

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June 16th, 2009 at 3:00 pm

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The Creative Loafing Half-Hour Variety Hour: Episode #16 | the 941 Says:

June 17th, 2009 at 3:25 pm

[...] to the WSRQ 1220 AM studios. Judge chats with me and Events Editor/Staff Writer Tim Sukits about her work to develop a new karate system for the handicapped. (Please note my wildly varying pronunciation of the word "karate" [1