

H O W A R D O A T E S



COLIN OATES

ACCIDENTAL OLYMPIAN

A JUDO JOURNEY

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CONTENTS

Introduction. 7

The Beginning 1979–1994 9

The Development Years 1994–2000 45

The Overseas Years 2000–2004 86

The Bid For Beijing 2005–2008 120

The Quest For London 2008–2012 163

The Road To Rio 2012–2016 197

Beyond Rio 2016–2020. 237

Record Of Major Competitions 252

THE BEGINNING 1979–1994

IT IS doubtful whether any parent who takes their son or daughter to an after-school activity or sports club can envisage how it can not only change your offspring's life but can completely change a parent's too. What follows is the complete story of how a sport totally changed the direction in life of a whole family that had yet to take shape, how it affected children not yet even born.

Back in the late 70s the decision to have children was based on whether you could afford to bring up a child. Of course child benefit seems to have been about since the Stone Age but there were no working tax credits or so-called free childcare schemes. If you had a child it usually, as in our case, meant you lost a huge chunk of income (usually your wife or partner's wages) and were essentially on your own. When my wife, Denise, and I decided to start a family, that really nice man Jim Callaghan was Prime Minister.

We were in no way prepared for the Thatcher government which would rip us apart financially over the coming years with 17 per cent interest rates on mortgages and public sector wage freezes.

I was still playing table tennis in the London leagues back then having given up playing football. In the real sense it was like football gave me up. It would be nice to say an injury ended my interest, nice to say but untrue. I was simply rubbish at the sport. In modern-day football, being on the bench has a different meaning – maybe you are being rested or it is tactical. In my day it was much simpler, you had been dropped. Sometimes I did not even make the bench in the days of one substitute.

Playing table tennis (and not ping pong) kept me fit and was the last sport I was likely to be involved in, so I thought. Our team was quite good too being in the third of six divisions so it was serious stuff. I took the somewhat short-sighted view that once we started a family my social and sporting life including my table tennis would be well and truly over. I had given Denise the usual male macho speech that once the baby was born I would have little to do with it until it was about four or five years old. I would like to think that all males, not just myself, were donuts back then. In fairness we had been fed an assortment of macho movie stereotypes, and in the 70s even had to make a special effort to see our movie heroes like Clint Eastwood and Steve McQueen at the cinema as the video age was still a couple of years away. With only limited television – yes, we were blessed with not having a Channel 4 or 5 and no reality TV either – the birth of your first child meant the end of any type of social life or entertainment; you were confining yourself to a life in front of a television set with less than a handful of channels.

As a fairly active adult I had always been keen on sport but oddly I came to judo relatively late in life in 1979 at the age of

26, just after my first daughter Charlotte was born; Colin was not even a thought back then. In 1979 that special moment of only knowing if you are going to be the parents of a little boy or girl was saved until the day of the birth; somehow I still think that is the way it should be. The moment Charlotte was born I chose to ignore that suggestion that I would have nothing to do with her until she was four or five or that my sporting life was over. Do not get me wrong, like all self-respecting men I would still avoid those nappies from hell especially as they were not the disposable ones of today. I had got the avoidance tradition down to such a fine art that even 30 or so years later and with disposable ones I can still count on one hand how many nappies from hell I have dealt with. No mean feat considering the amount of grandchildren I wound up with.

I had no aspirations in judo, other than to get my orange belt, or ever being involved in an Olympics. My special memory of the Olympics was getting up early in the morning as a schoolboy and watching the great Chris Finnegan box his way to a gold medal in 1968. I cannot even say I was that interested when British judo players were fighting at the Olympics in 1980 and 1984 and doing so well. In some ways the tragedy of the terrorist attack in Munich in 1972 was something of a downer that made me realise there is more to life than sport. Anyhow, I duly enrolled at the Polytechnic of Central London in Regent Street where they were running beginners' courses. I had discovered the existence of the club through a magazine called *Floodlight*. This magazine advertised educational courses, academic and sporting, in London. The coach at the Poly was a huge man

called William Jones who was a 4th Dan. Even at my age of 26 he was somewhat scary in that he was so powerful looking and as I later learnt very skilful. In an age without the internet it was not possible to track his judo history but the rumour was that he had represented Great Britain and had been one of the nation's top players in his younger days. There was little doubt in my mind after seeing him on the mat that he was an accomplished player and, as I would learn over the next three years, an excellent coach.

I always took pride in myself and had kept myself relatively fit playing table tennis for my office team, the Supreme Court, working at a place called the Court of Protection in Store Street. I was ideally situated for judo training at the Poly just up the road in Regent Street. Sadly I was not prepared for what was to come at a William Jones training session. The warm-up was hard and of the 25 or so students that enrolled the numbers soon dropped off as the weeks passed by. Indeed I too was on the point of quitting until Mr Jones walked past me one evening as I was doing my umpteenth press-up and uttered, 'I'll soon clear off those not serious.' That one sentence saved my judo career (and eventually cost me a fortune) and maybe that of my not-yet-born son Colin from an early extinction and would change the rest of my life. Being a particularly stubborn man there was no way I was going to be driven off this mat regardless of the pain and there was plenty of that. So the scene was set for a 33-year journey that would take me all over the world.

Working in London in the 70s and 80s there were always risks and the security forces were no less vigilant than they are

today; there was just more of them. On one trip to the Poly a whole area of Tottenham Court Road was taped off because of a suspect car. Most Londoners had become oblivious to the threats of modern life and saw having to make detours to get from A to B simply as an inconvenience. Not much has changed nowadays. It meant a long detour and a story to tell in the office the following day. I never found out what it was all about.

However, back to the Poly in Regent Street, I was still only keen on winning an orange belt. Not sure why, just simply liked the idea of the colour.

As it happened I did not need to wait too long. A Club Grading was to be held in November 1979 just two months after I walked on to the mat. I had obtained a licence from the British Judo Association (BJA), at that point in my life ignorant to the fact there were other judo associations. It was simply luck that I chose the BJA, something I never regretted.

I arrived one Saturday morning to grade having been made aware by Mr Jones that to move up a belt you had to pass a theory test and then engage in a judo contest against someone of your grade, a novice player roughly the same weight.

In my time in sport I had played many a football match, league table tennis matches and even a school lawn tennis final. I had even played in front of an audience with a couple of pop groups in my early days when I fancied myself as an Eric Clapton, but nothing could have prepared me for a judo contest. The nerves were just unbelievable. Sitting there waiting to be called out for your first opponent was the most nerve-wracking feeling I have ever experienced in my sporting life.

Finally I was called out and, as I faced my first-ever opponent, the nerves vanished, and I set about the task in hand. I knew I had to win one fight to be awarded a yellow belt and I secured a win with a Tai Otoshi (body drop throw). I repeated a similar win in my second contest and was, at the end of the grading, the proud owner of an orange belt, having jumped the yellow at my first attempt. I have to admit my wins were a little sneaky as I had trained with both opponents for some weeks and let them beat me most of the time, all the while saving my body drop speciality until the day of the grading. Both players must have thought it was just a good day but I had actually planned it. I knew by their sizes they would be my likely opponents.

Perhaps I should have quit after a two-month judo career; winning an orange belt hardly suggested I was on course to ever be involved in Olympic judo. As my son Colin would later tell many an interviewer I would probably have been a millionaire had it not been for the countless overseas trips I eventually subsidised.

However, that was never going to be the case. As a proud owner of an orange belt I wanted the next one up; my next target was the green belt. It is strange how quickly you forget the sick nerves before a judo contest, that is until the next time which came about four months later.

This time my task would be much tougher. A couple, maybe three, contests against fellow orange belts. Again that sickening feeling before the contest amazingly cleared as I approached the mat but this time I tasted defeat for the first time to a skilful opponent.

Fortunately I was given one more contest against a much taller player and somehow managed to get underneath his guard and shoulder throw him to be subsequently awarded my lower green belt. This was an interesting contest as I had turned up for the grading having just recovered from a horrible bug and was not feeling very well. During this contest I was being battered and was on the point of quitting until I went underneath him and we both tumbled over. I stood up firmly expecting the referee to award the fight to my opponent but to my surprise it went my way. I had heard rapturous applause as we tumbled and when I gave my name to the control table they both congratulated me on a brilliant throw. As I walked past the referee he whispered, and I quote, ‘You don’t have a clue, do you?’ How right he was; in the days before video I still do not know what went down.

Over the coming months I trained as hard as I could and was even given the privilege by Mr Jones of looking after some of the novices that started after me. One evening he asked me to look after a new French girl. I taught her the usual stuff like breakfalls and O Soto Gari (major outer reap); she had her own judo suit which made life easy. After a hard session a group of us used to go over the road to a pub to rehydrate, usually with lager. After my first encounter with the French girl my friends were raving about how good-looking she was. To their amazement I confessed that I had not noticed; I think it was then I realised that all I ever saw on a judo mat was a person in a judo suit and I have always seen players that way ever since, sometimes not recognising people even today in a supermarket. I have to admit though the following week I did notice what they meant.

The gradings were getting tougher and I thought just maybe I would get to blue belt if I trained hard but beyond that I thought I would struggle somewhat.

It is often said that judo builds confidence and self-belief and nothing could be more true than one night on my journey home from the Poly. I was walking back from Gidea Park station when two gentlemen (loosely put) were sitting outside the shop window of a video shop (remember them?). As I walked past they were clearly poking fun at me and making unsavoury comments. How odd is it that these types all look the same – ugly. What, I wonder, comes first – being an obnoxious human being, or the ugliness? It was the same with the bullies at my school. Anyhow, I had just done a great two-hour session at the Poly and was quite hyped. I actually stopped walking, looked at these would-be male models (if they could have afforded a face job), and contemplated my position. As I learnt through my days in the Crown Court later in life, in a street fight the loser is the victim and the winner is the defendant. In either scenario there was generally a witness statement involved and a sweaty appearance in court to contemplate in one capacity or another. I walked on as anyone with a brain should have done.

As the years rolled into the early 80s, the Thatcher government began cutbacks in subsidies to the local authorities and sports clubs had to increase their fees quadrupling the cost of training at the Poly.

The fact that I was a homeowner with a large mortgage and record-high interest levels (again courtesy of the Thatcher

government) forced me to cease attending the club. In fact the Thatcher government had reduced us to buying the cheapest brand products and there was no Aldi to fall back on in the 80s. I was also down to driving a Kermit green 1968 Ford Escort my dad had given me. Yes, I was the original Mr Cool.

At this point I had ground out a lower brown belt. A much higher grade than I ever expected. The gradings at the Poly were for lower-level players and I had now progressed to the higher Kyu Grade which meant I had to travel to the London Judo Society in Balham, London. I had also secured a transfer in my job to the audit section which meant I would be travelling around the country and this would leave little time for judo anyway. So it seemed my interest in judo was at an end. I had reached brown belt, had engaged in about 16 or so judo contests in the process and, courtesy of the London Judo Society gradings, had fought some up-and-coming young players such as Jamie Johnson and James Warren (later to appear in one of my favourite films – *Snatch*) and realised just how high the standard was. I was in little doubt there was no likelihood of further progress. I could now advance to being a middle-aged dad who could take his children to the park on a Sunday morning as I made my way to the mid-life crisis and beer belly that would inevitably be associated with family life.

I made a few appearances at the Romford and Hornchurch Judo Club but in essence I had quit.

Sadly I never did get to thank Mr Jones for his work trying to turn me into a half-decent player and I know not what became

of him or the club. Over the years I often wondered if he ever made the connection between Colin and myself?

By this time my daughter Charlotte and my first son David had been born, and over the next four years, my wife Denise and I would be blessed with Colin, in 1983. I am not too sure if 'blessed' is the correct description. Colin was born naturally (probably the last thing natural about him) on 7 June 1983 at Harold Wood Hospital in Essex. I did the hard part of the birth as all men do and was present when he said hello to the world. It was probably the first grey hair he gave me as he did not cry as my first daughter had on delivery. I asked the nurse if this was a problem and got my head bitten off (Jenny Agutter of *Call the Midwife* they were not). He may well have been the easiest of my wife's births but he sure made up for it in the coming years.

Colin showed, from an early age, a very high pain threshold, on one occasion ripping off a flapping fingernail at the age of five. I nearly passed out but Colin did not seem to feel any pain. He started walking so young that he bent his feet inward and would trip over every time he tried to run. The medics told us he would sort the problem out by himself and he did. The determination in this child stood out even as a baby, especially when it was a matter of not doing what he was told. Had I stuck a tennis racket in his hand or enlisted him for rugby or football he would have been a fine player. He was the personification of sport, giving everything from an early age, never giving up.

David, my first son, was a caesarean birth and my first view of him was in an incubator. In truth I walked past him actually

expecting a fair child like Charlotte had been and I went to the blond baby who looked really cute. I was redirected to David, who had so much dark hair and to this day he seems able to grow hair at an alarming rate. Our daughter Vicky was born in 1986 to complete the family. Again, another caesarean, and an opportunity to strike back at the nurses and midwives who thought me a hindrance. I was asked by the nurse if I would like to give my daughter a bottle of water. I think she thought she was my first child and much to her amazement I did all the right things in handling and feeding a baby. As she congratulated me I was tempted to punch the air as if I had scored the winner at Wembley but I feared I might drop the baby on her head so decided that was not one of my best ideas.

The mid-80s saw a minor deviation in our martial arts studies as my wife Denise, older daughter Charlotte and David took up karate at the local club in Gidea Park.

Denise rose to brown belt and both Charlotte and David obtained lower grade belts. This style of karate was of the non-striking variety and coming from a hands-on martial art such as judo it was difficult for me to get too enthusiastic about their involvement. There is no doubting it is both skilful and a wonderful confidence boost to those who participate in the sport.

The years passed all too quickly as they do and by 1989 it was clear that David was unhappy at karate and more to the point a five-year-old Colin was beginning to find an interest in sport.

I had moved from my job in audit to a post as court clerk at Snaresbrook Crown Court, a job that gave me a broad insight into

criminal law but, more to the point, with our local magistrates' court in Havering being one of our committal courts, I could see first-hand the extent of the drug problem in my local area of Romford. I had previously worked at Inner London Crown Court at the Elephant and Castle and to be fair there was little to choose between the two areas in relation to crime generally. Illicit drugs are a 20th-century curse that will probably be with us for the rest of time but as a father of four I had to consider the best way to protect my children from the dangers. It may seem strange, given many athletes abuse drugs for performance and recreational purposes, nonetheless I took the view if I taught my children to respect their bodies through sport it might just keep them on the straight and narrow. Oddly at this time I did not know of any good children's sessions as I had only attended adult clubs. I did not at this stage figure on judo as a sport for life – this idea was far from my mind.

I was unable to train very often during this period, having effectively quit, but I did manage to get to the Romford and Hornchurch Judo Club one night where I recall having a feisty scrap with a police officer. Well, one thing led to another and we sort of got stuck in as you do resulting in one of the greatest black eyes I ever received. I would add that in this crazy sport we accept we can receive the odd knock and the police officer was a friend who never intended to inflict any injury on me.

Being a court clerk at Snaresbrook I fronted the court sitting just below the judge and that morning I had what was called a section 18 trial which in English translates to a grievous bodily harm with intent. It was a big case with four or five barristers

sitting opposite me representing five clearly misunderstood lads. Before the judge came in I could hear the barristers whispering; they seemed to be fascinated by the state of my face. Eventually curiosity got the better of them as one asked, ‘What happened to your face?’ I assumed it was a reference to my black eye and not just a general observation about my looks and with great delight replied, ‘A fight with a copper last night in Romford.’ There was a couple of minutes’ silence as they pondered my response. No doubt they were wondering which of them would be defending me in the near future, before I gave them the full story. Even the defendants were laughing although their joy only lasted a couple of days. A unanimous conviction and a four-year stretch took the smiles off their faces. My judge was less than impressed that his court clerk looked a bigger thug than the defendants, all of whom had discarded the cloth caps and hoodies for off-the-peg ill-fitting suits to impress the jury (it did not work) but I think he felt safer in my presence than the 300-year-old court usher.

If ever there was a case of fate, David had two friends, John and Robert Evans in and around April 1989 who came over to our house in Hornchurch and both spoke of a judo club at Hornchurch Leisure Centre on a Saturday morning. Neither David nor Colin had any idea their father had ever done judo and Colin had been showing skills with a football at this stage, but it seemed like a good idea and I had little better to do on a Saturday morning, there being no Sky Sports back then, so I thought we would give it a try. I would miss watching *Tiswas* with Chris Tarrant though, and what a show – it was wasted on

kids. Okay, so in truth I was really watching the show because of Sally James and what a beauty she was.

The club was called Circles and was run by a coach named Nick Wakefield. I watched as the children trained and there were many on the mat, maybe some 30 children or so. Oddly in the world that we live in today one could be expected to research the coach through the internet to confirm his qualifications and track record but back in 1989 there was no internet and the British Judo Association was almost a one-man band based in London only, it seemed, concerned with the issue of licences. Nothing like the size the Association is today. Also criminal record checks for individuals working with children were many years away. In theory Al Capone could have set up a judo club back then. A very respected coach many years later told me the British Judo Association were great in the 60s and 70s but unfortunately went downhill in the 80s, when they started getting involved in judo (this coach had a hell of a sense of humour). The British Judo Association certainly got their act together over the coming years, in fairness.

In essence it was down to the parent sitting on the sideline to make a judgement, the same as in any sport at that time and what I saw pleased me. Nick Wakefield was a fine coach, very patient and knowledgeable. To this day I do not know if the club was affiliated to the British Judo Association or whether Mr Wakefield was a British Judo Association coach. All I knew was that my sons had a great Saturday morning and Mr Wakefield did a great job.

Most of the children were under eight and in those days not eligible for a BJA licence in any event, so Mr Wakefield used

to run gradings for under-eights along the same lines as a BJA one but instead of awarding belt colours would award ‘circles’ for their belts.

My sons had been attending the club for a few months and as I got to know Mr Wakefield better it became apparent to him that I had a history in judo and, as I found out many years later, no self-respecting judo coach will leave alone a parent that once did the sport and so Nick asked me to come on the mat and gently get back into it.

My return to the mat started with a groundwork tussle with Nick. What an eye-opener that turned out to be. After just a few minutes on the ground with Nick I was blacking out. It was not that Nick was much bigger than I was but he was certainly stronger, fitter and much more skilful than me and that combination spelt rest or blackout. It could not be said that I was unfit per se but clearly being fit is not the same as being fit for judo.

Anyhow, it seemed like a good idea to get back on the mat so I started to train after the boys on a Saturday morning. What a sacrifice giving up *Tiswas* and Sally James for judo. More to the point Nick had planned a grading so it would be my first opportunity to see my boys fight for the first time.

Sadly, this was just before the video age. However, I remember David won two and lost two and fought very well. Colin on the other hand lost both his opening fights to children much bigger but never stopped trying. Nick decided to match him with a little girl who had also lost both contests. Back then it was not uncommon to match boys against girls at five or six years old.

My son managed by the skin of his teeth to just edge out the little girl, who was no easy opponent, for what was his first-ever judo victory. Neither the little girl nor her parents will ever likely know she lost to an eventual double Olympian and double European medallist as well as a Commonwealth champion.

Quite frankly, if at that grading the ghost of futures to come arrived and told me then what lay ahead, I would have died laughing. However, what a shame there were not the betting opportunities of today – what odds would I have got for this five-year-old boy being an Olympian?

In the months that passed, Colin persevered and started to look okay on the mat, and by the time we reached the point of the next grading I had higher expectations of him.

The grading was held at a hall in Dagenham and this time Colin took apart two opponents with clinical ease given he was still only five years old but what followed was beyond my imagination. At these gradings Nick would quite rightly try to give everyone a win and so when Colin was matched up to be a boy's 'sacrificial' goat, I had no problem with that. I supported his view of encouraging children in this manner. However, Colin again destroyed his bigger opponent to secure win number three. Nick then gave him an even bigger boy and again Colin threw him within seconds. At this point I had lost touch of the fact that older brother David had turned in another solid performance, winning two contests. It became clear to me Colin was showing real potential.

We had struck up six wins on the day and, as I was leaving the hall, a coach of another judo club, Terry Adams, took me

to one side and advised me to step up my sons to a bigger club. Advice I decided to take on board.

In the late 80s and early 90s judo was very much more popular in Great Britain than it is today. The past 20 years or so has shown a growth in different strains of martial arts which has split the audience so to speak but so popular was judo that Hornchurch Leisure Centre housed not just Nick Wakefield's Circles judo club but a huge club called the Kyu Shin Kwai coached by Doug Wilson.

I watched the club a few times and decided that a move here would be progress so we ceased going to Circles and joined the Kyu Shin Kwai. It was due to Doug that I set out on the pathway toward being a coach. Doug often let me take the warm-up on a Monday evening and I really enjoyed helping out with the novices.

At this time I was battling again at the London Judo Society judo gradings in Balham in a bid to win my black belt. Time and time again I ventured to London and always I came back pointless as well as sore. To win a black belt in judo back then you had to win two preliminary contests during the morning and then win a line-up beating three brown belts in succession without a break or beat brown belts on a 7-point score or a 10-point score and accrue 100-points over a period of time; this is still the way it's done competitively but you now have the option to go down the theoretical route. Being a 36-year-old man I was classified as a veteran player so had the concession of only needing 75-points rather than 100 for a younger man.

As far as I was concerned the number of points could have been 20; I was not good enough to win a contest. In fairness

I was working five days a week and many of the players who beat me every month were Great Britain squad players, some of whom were full-time players at the Neil Adams Centre in Coventry training five days a week. In fact the list of players that beat me reads like a who's who of judo of that period.

My monthly visits were made pleasant by a very nice lady that constantly asked me if I was over 30 when I registered. I was flattered until one day some guy in front of me, who looked like a zombie long before they were fashionable, was asked the same question; she was clearly being polite rather than the question reflecting the age I looked.

However, I always seemed to draw these young players. That was until I met a canny lad from the Tyne who gave me some tips. You might think it was advice on my style or my tactics. No, it was where to stand in the queue. He told me that whenever someone walked into the London Judo Society hall, all the young guys would take a look and, if it was an older player, try and stand behind them on the basis the names would be close on the sheet and they would match you accordingly, as long as there was not too much disparity in size. Clearly an older man was a prime target for a fit young athlete and looking back what he was telling me was that the players were eyeing me up as an easy 10-point win.

So I watched next time and he was right. I even saw some cheeky swine move from the front of the queue to behind me. That was it, I went to the toilet and watched who was coming in and, yes, the plan was to stand behind an older guy if I could find one – it was not that easy. Wait I did, and what luck, in walked

the oldest-looking judoka I had ever seen, so I made a dash to stand behind him and, what do you know, we were matched. What could go wrong? Sadly I had something of a conscience and decided to let the fight run a minute or two before moving in mercilessly for the kill. I wanted to give him his money's worth. The old sod caught me for a seven score and that was that. I battered him for the next 30 seconds or so but to no avail. I got him next month, though I moved like an eagle and took him out. Yes, I stood behind him again in the queue, well fair's fair?

Seriously, one should never underestimate any player in sport. The next month I had managed to sandwich between two older players and I started to accumulate the points. Now, don't get me wrong, this did not mean I was knocking over all the over 30s because I was not. Some of those older guys were good fighters and I took my share of defeats.

Through the help of Doug and the Kyu Shin Kwai club I managed to grind out a couple of wins over players my age or thereabouts from this point onwards.

Meanwhile, Colin and David were preparing for their first-ever judo competition at Abbs Cross School in Hornchurch, organised by the Kyu Shin Kwai. The club at that time had an enormous membership of around 300 players and the club tournament always attracted around 120 of them. Despite my experience of judo grading contests I had never attended a tournament before so this was a learning exercise for the family.

First up was David who won a contest but lost his next two and went out. Colin, in the under-eight-years-old section, won five contests in a row to secure a gold medal.

He had continued in the same vein as the last grading he fought at the Circles Club. He actually asked his mum if his dad was proud of him.

It was the first-ever judo medal won by a family member and took pride of place on the mantelpiece; many years later most of these medals would find their way into black dustbin bags but at that time we were very proud parents. Colin Oates's long journey that would take him all over the world had begun at a school in Hornchurch, Essex; indeed, one I may well have attended had I not failed the eleven-plus.

Just when life seemed to be settled I was offered a job in Norwich, which meant we would have to move home and not just leave our family and friends but lose the social side of my boys enjoying their time at a great judo club, and my wife and daughter Charlotte would lose their karate club too.

The move was too good to refuse and in April 1991 we moved from our home of ten years in Hornchurch to the tiny village of North Lopham in Norfolk. Driving past the Village Hall, where our club would eventually operate from, in our 1977 Ford Cortina estate en route to our new house, I never imagined even then what the future would hold. We had a dog called Ben at the time and we had given him a tranquilliser for the journey. Of course it did not work until we got to the house and then, and only then, he passed out. The dog was an amazing character, being the only member of the family to spend a night in Diss police station (to my knowledge anyhow) after going out for a solo walk one evening and getting apprehended. They probably took him into custody for stalking some bitch in the next village;

it was never made clear what his offence was but the mangy mutt cost me £70 to get back.

I also remember walking into the Kings Head pub in North Lopham for the first time. As Denise and I entered the bar it seemed all the conversation ceased. It went totally silent. I expected that at any moment someone would approach us and say they did not like strangers in this town and show me their gun. Little did we know then but the successive owners of that pub and the people of North Lopham would in just a few years' time raise huge amounts of money to support not just Colin Oates but their local judo club and we would succeed in putting Lopham on the television and radio.

Saying goodbye to the Kyu Shin Kwai was hard. I had so much respect for Doug Wilson. At times I thought he was a little cynical about the sport but when I look back on his history it is easy to see why. Doug was behind and had produced a number of eventual Olympians but those players had either left his club prior to their rise to Olympic fame or had been poached by other clubs, mostly the latter, and there never seemed to be any mention of the base he had built for those athletes. There was no doubt in my mind that Doug was the inspiration of many of those players. Later in my life I too would suffer those same experiences and feelings of losing players at the Olympic stage so would eventually fully appreciate how coaches become cynical. Although my two players were never actually poached in that way I did in many ways feel I had lost them. Doug was never attributed the credit for his input into a number of fine players, but that is judo.

Despite moving up to Norfolk I kept in touch with the Kyu Shin Kwai and often travelled by train there, but the cost proved too great and our final appearance with the club would be a tournament to be held in the summer of 1991.

Before moving to North Lopham I had checked with the BJA as to the nearest club, which was the Diss Judo Club run by Chris Clancy.

On a Thursday evening we packed our bags and strolled down the A1066 to join the club.

The club in Diss was a small one with maybe about 18 children and seven or eight adults. Although they did not consider themselves a competition club in the true sense, they did a team fight at the end of the session which kept the competitive edge of my sons on the sharp side. Sadly my wife and daughter Charlotte were unable to find a local karate club that recognised their belt ranks and so they gave up karate and both started to train in judo at Diss.

The coach, Chris Clancy, was not happy to let my youngest daughter Vicky on the mat as she was just five years old at the time so it meant we now had five family members doing judo with Vicky having to wait her turn.

It became clear to me that the boys would need two nights a week of training and I found that at the other end of the A1066 there was a club in Thetford, run by Stewart Collings (who would become a pillar of support as time went on) and this too was a well-run club with around 20 or so children. The senior class, however, consisted of 20 to 30 seniors, run by a Great Britain International, Paul Adams. I was aware of the existence

of this club as I had graded at an Eastern Area Grading in January 1991 before we had moved.

The session Paul ran was brilliant. I was a very poor brown belt and through Paul I felt my game continue to improve, so much so that I started to consider perhaps entering the National Veterans tournament at High Wycombe. Every Wednesday was a painful experience, the evening was in essence one big punch-up, but it was an addiction. It was a session you always gave second thoughts to attending because of the intensity, but after, when you were returning home from it, you had a kind of buzz. They were truly memorable evenings.

The summer Kyu Shin Kwai tournament was looming and Colin was about to defend his gold medal. It was July 1991 and we journeyed back to Hornchurch and the Abbs Cross School one last time fully expecting another gold medal. The good news was Turan Kiani, a real seven-year-old prospect and our main rival, was in a different weight group so the way was clear. Unfortunately sport does not work that way and Colin got beaten in the final by a young lad named Chris James and had to be content with a silver medal.

This was the beginning of the video age and I hired a camera (they were too expensive to buy at that time) and recorded all of Colin and David's fights. They are the earliest recordings of both boys fighting. I would add that the camera was both huge and awkward. It had to be carried in a massive case. Technology advanced in leaps and bounds in the coming years to a point where the mobile phone in your pocket could produce better quality video.

We lost touch with Doug in the years that followed but the Kyu Shin Kwai carried on even though many of their competition players either left the club or were poached. I do not know for sure but I think the club no longer exists but I did hear of the sad passing of Doug Wilson, a man we owed so much to.

The next event a member of the family would fight in would be the British Veterans tournament in High Wycombe. I would be the first in the family to engage in a national-level tournament – it would be the first of many National Championships the family would fight in – and I had no expectations whatsoever. With just 20-points toward my black belt, all I wanted was the opportunity to fight players my age and weight (often at gradings I could give many kilos away as well as youth).

My wife and I booked a hotel in High Wycombe on the Friday night as I could weigh in the evening. Fighting at -60k it was always something of a struggle to make weight but in weighing the night before it is possible to see the amount of players in your group, in my case seven fighters. In retrospect it was probably a bad idea. At 38 years old I was about to fight a tournament, a National Championship at that. Having effectively starved myself all week (well, cut out the apple pies), I returned to the hotel feeling so sick I could not eat. Also staying at the hotel were a team from Newcastle and, try as they might, even with their wacky sense of humour, they could not make me feel any better.

The night before a competition a judo player will probably fight 200 contests in their mind and I was no exception. Given most of the time you will be lucky to fight even two the following

day, it is somewhat a waste of energy, even if it is only in your head. I drove to High Wycombe with rock music blasting out of my car cassette in a bid to lift my game. Young guys would be listening to rap music but my music would be John Mellencamp, true quality rock. I had failed to eat breakfast so tanked up on chocolate and bananas.

The wonderful thing about being the lowest weight is the fact you are the first group called so there is not too much waiting to fight. My first contest was against the defending champion Malcolm Ellis and, as I walked out to face him, amazingly, just like at the gradings, the nerves vanished. I won the fight with two 7-point scores. Being in a pool of four meant I simply needed to win one more and I was likely to be in the semi-final and, more to the point, the win over Malcolm Ellis was 10 more points toward my black belt, the main purpose of entering the event. My next fight, however, was a nightmare; leading by a 7, I found myself thrown for a winning 10-point throw, which now meant I had to win my next fight or I was eliminated. I set out in my third fight to take no chances and beat my opponent with a hold down. As I saw the clock ticking down I knew it had taken me into the semi-final and at the very least a bronze medal.

The semi-final was later in the day and I walked out much more relaxed as the job had been done, but it was not to end there. I threw my opponent for a 10-point win, only to hear a Geordie accent, I think the voice of Jon Ponder, yelling, 'You can eat your breakfast now.' I had reached a National final at my first attempt.

The final was an anti-climax as I tussled over with my opponent and was adjudged to have been thrown. When I shook hands with the other fighter he said he had no idea what that was all about, and that just about summed up the situation.

Perhaps that was my first brush with a referee's decision I failed to understand. In truth the player that beat me would have thrown me at some point in the contest. All day I thought he was good but I would have preferred to have really lost. Even looking at a video replay, I failed to comprehend the decision, especially coming from a top referee at that time. We simply tumbled over, there was no throw involved, but that was judo and there was no sense in dwelling on decisions.

We returned to Norfolk in pounding rain but on a high note, 30 black belt points and a silver National medal was my proud achievement, but my judo was secondary to that of my sons and anything I was doing was for their long-term benefit, and our attention must next focus on Colin's first official BJA competition, the Haverhill Mini Mons in October 1991.

It was in truth the first real children's competition I had attended, as the Kyu Shin Kwai events were friendly. We, the parents, all knew each other and somehow those two events had been somewhat civilised. I was soon to find out the realities of junior judo.

Without really knowing how good Colin was, we did not know what to expect. I think deep down I thought Colin would knock over these kids just like in London. There were two groups of four with a cross-over semi-final so it did not seem too difficult; two wins and usually your player is in the semi-final. All went

according to plan in Colin's first fight – a comfortable win – but the second fight was quite different. Colin's opponent Kevin Addison from the Kumuichi Judo Club in King's Lynn made Colin look weak and he easily beat him. When this happens, as a dad, you look for excuses. I remember thinking the other lad was bigger, older and more experienced. You feel they are under-graded or the referee was harsher on your son than the opponent. It only occurs to you many years later the boy your son was fighting was simply better but that is so hard to admit.

Colin managed to reach the semi-final where another boy, Craig Peters from Feltwell Judo Club, beat him and so we had to settle for a bronze. Again you look for the same excuses. The lesson I did learn was that clubs that turned up en masse seemed to have a parent base that could make it very difficult for the player without that same backing. The heavy cheering for your son or daughter's opponent can, at first, upset you as a parent and even at times angers you but regardless of your feelings it was and still is part of the junior circuit. Both Kevin Addison and Craig Peters would figure in some way in Colin's development over the next few years as rivals at local level.

Toward the end of 1991 I completed a coaching course. I do not recall if I had aspirations of running my own club at that time but I did want to learn how to improve my family.

By 1992 all the Oates family were training somewhere, as I had found a club in Brandon run by Maurice Thorpe, another excellent coach and true gentleman, that took five- and six-year olds, which meant my youngest daughter, not able to train at Thetford or Diss, could now be part of the team, so to speak.

Throughout the year we participated in competitions up and down the country with a high level of success. My two daughters were winning medals as well as Colin but older brother David was struggling at this time.

It was in 1992 that I first experienced the spectator fee – an event in Wanstead, Essex – and to this day I fail to understand it. Without the parent at a children's event there is no competitor, so how can you implement that charge? Years later it would shape how Denise would run tournaments in the East of England and even today we will never charge spectators, as to our minds it is a dishonest fee. It could be loaded on to the competition fee maybe.

The expense of travelling to different judo clubs as well as the cost of the competitions was having a profound effect on my finances. Something had to give as my car was covering thousands of miles per month with the knock-on effect of wear and tear but the bug had caught hold of all of us. If there was a tournament we had to be there; it mattered not if we could afford it.

A tournament that needs special mention is the Willesden International. This was a truly magnificent event attracting many overseas judo clubs. In May 1992 the entry in David's weight category totalled 63 players and in Colin's category there were 37 players. In David's case it is true to say it matters not how many players are in your group– it only takes one or two (depending on the competition system) to knock you out and that was exactly what happened.

However, Colin battled to the semi-final and a fight with a Dutch boy. I was, to say the least, a little alarmed that there

was a Dutch referee and Dutch line judge, the other judge being British. The fight was tough and back then if there was no score the officials would give a decision by holding up flags at the end of the contest. To my horror the fight went to a decision and I kind of knew which way it was going when the Dutch female referee patted the Dutch boy on the head as she went to collect her flags. Well of course it was a 2-1 split to the Dutch boy. This decision brought my usual protests. What was unusual and not expected at judo tournaments was the emergence of a ‘flying’ Dutchman wielding a knife in my direction and threatening to slice me. Fortunately, he gave more thought to his predicament and took off somewhere. I often wondered what became of this cheerful chap. He was probably the first real idiot I encountered at an event, but sadly by no means would he be the last.

Anyway, back to the judo and Colin was left with a bronze medal final that he won. We returned home with a magnificent trophy as was the norm for this tournament. On trying to return to our car for our trip home we had to take a detour because the police had cordoned off the road that led directly to where we were parked. Apparently there had been a violent crime committed down this particular street. It really was that kind of weekend.

The tale does not even end there as Steven Flanagan, who was another of my players, battled to a final that day and collected a brilliant silver medal for himself and the club. We returned home very contented (once we got to our car) but, three days later at Thetford Judo Club, Stewart Collings asked if I heard what happened to Steven at the weekend? My reply was

simple enough, being, and I quote, ‘Yes, fantastic wasn’t it?’ Stewart looked somewhat amazed and responded by telling me Steven had been hit by a Transit van whilst out on his bike on the Sunday. Needless to say I explained I was talking about his medal the day before. Fortunately Steven made a complete recovery and went on to take a medal at the prestigious Liberty Bell tournament in the USA some years later. Today he is a successful photographer.

We realised that we had to find a club that catered just for competition judo and the club Craig Peters attended at Feltwell fitted the requirement. At this club Vicky too was welcome and suddenly we had the backing of a rowdy bunch of parents that were capable of intimidating my family’s opponents at competitions. The club was run by Richard Ashton, who I had actually met when I fought him at the London Judo Society grading some years earlier. He was an excellent trainer and a first-class referee.

By mid-1992 Colin’s reputation as a cadet player was beginning to take off, as was evidenced by the rampant cheer that went up from the Jodan Judo Club after Robert Wyles beat my son in the final of an event in Sheerness called the Island judo competition. Their coach apologised for the outburst, which I took as flattery. I was in no way offended by their response. This would also turn out to be the last year I would wear a wedding ring after being slung out at the National Veterans Championship in Gateshead. It was the opening fight of the day and I think I was still asleep. A simple error in not removing a ring proved costly. For such a long journey it was a harsh way to

lose a contest I was otherwise winning, my opponent pointing to the ring after I had notched up the lead in the contest. My only other fight was a mauling from Colin Small.

It was also the year I fought in younger men tournaments. I had travelled to Milton Keynes for the Renzoko tournament and had entered myself as well as Colin. It was one of those days where you get out of bed and just do not feel like it. So when I got there I told the nice tournament organiser, a man named Ray Taylor, I had forgotten my licence. He then told me he knew I was up to date and that was no problem. I then said I had forgotten my suit; no problem again, he had a spare. I then confessed I had brought the suit but was not really in the mood. Again, no problem, there were only three of us in the group and I would be doing him a favour. I thought, just two contests, I can handle that. Not so, there were five of us which meant four fights.

My first contest against an 18-year-old gorilla nearly killed me. I scored an early 7-pointer and spent five minutes defending it. At the end of the fight I collapsed in a heap by the edge of the mat. The table tried to call me on two fights later but took one look at me and gave me another five minutes to recover. I won two and lost two that day and got a bronze. I was only able to walk in a straight line about four days later. Looking back I am pleased I fought as it was one of my better performances but it really hurt. In fact, just writing this, it still hurts. Of course, Colin made winning a gold medal that day look easy with five straight wins, as was often the case.

Our time at Diss Judo Club was coming to an end – many years later we would eventually return and save the club from

extinction – but for now and throughout 1992 and 1993 competition experience for Colin, David and Charlotte was the order of the day with Colin clearly beginning to stand out as a quality player. I could, however, be very grateful to Chris Clancy and Diss Judo Club as he showed me a gentler approach to coaching non-competitive children which would be very valuable to me some years later but, even more importantly, he showed me the power of the press. Any accomplishment a Diss player achieved, Chris would send a report to the *Diss Express*, and parents, myself included, loved seeing their children's names in the local paper.

Indeed I remembered how proud I was back in 1967 when the *Romford and Hornchurch Recorder* reported the goal (yes, it was the goal and one of not many) I scored for Rainham Rangers. I still have the cutting to this day. Reporting judo results to the local press was not something I would ever have thought of but, even after we moved from Diss to the Feltwell club, I continued to report the family results to the *Diss Express* who would strike up a very close relationship with the Oates judo family and Kumo Judo Club over the next 20 years.

Training and fighting out of the Feltwell club was not without problems. The club was full of highly skilled players and without doubt the most prolific medal-winning club in the Eastern Area (which consisted of Norfolk, Suffolk and Cambridgeshire) at that time and the coach Richard Ashton was a great coach. However, with competitive junior players there are more competitive parents, and relationships between each became strained as time went on. We felt a little like

gatecrashers at a wedding, not truly accepted, especially being from London.

As a family, we had the key tournament of the year in our sights, the Junior Nationals held at Crystal Palace in November. At this time, if your child reached a National final, they would gain entry to the British Cadet squad and on selection for any overseas trip would be given their Union Jack flag to sew on to the judo suit jacket. The flag was to many a parent and child alike more important than the medal. In fact it made your child stand out at judo competitions, as often you would target beating the player with the flag and the winning of a medal was less important.

In 1993 Colin was still too young to compete at the Junior Nationals but David and Charlotte were eligible. The selection process in the East was by managers appointed by the Area Committee who took into account their competition record and their attendance at organised squad sessions held at Breckland Leisure Centre. There was an Eastern Area competition that was closed to players that were members of clubs within the East only, and as such it was also possible to identify the Area champions. It seemed a simple process to me but the catch was that only two players per weight and age group could be selected, which meant if there were three excellent players aged 12 and in the -31k weight group the Area manager could only select two which meant, unless one wanted to fight up a weight (not ideal), they could not attend the premier event of the year.

The Eastern Area was then and still is one of the smaller of the British Judo Association's 12 regions consisting of, in 1993,

about 40 clubs, and given that many clubs are non-competitive, fighting junior players were not that much in abundance and as such the squad was not huge. It is not being too unkind to suggest that as a small area with a limited amount of volunteers running the committee, squads and area competitions, the individuals involved were very close-knit, to say the least. We, as ex-Londoners, were very much the outsiders. I was told, when we moved in to the village of North Lopham, it would take some 25 years to be accepted as a local. So I always knew that we were on the outside looking in. I was aware that David was unlikely to be selected as there were two players in his age and weight that were clearly more successful than him so he was out of the picture. On the other hand Charlotte had a good year and met the eligibility of area squad selection in that she had attended the squad sessions and had won many medals that year. The *Diss Express* had a picture on their back page of Charlotte with her medal haul for the year and a headline, 'Charlotte waits with bated breath.' It seemed all we needed to do was wait for the letter of selection with details of the weekend. Every morning we waited and every evening I told my 14-year-old daughter, on her return home from school, we will get the letter tomorrow.

The letter never arrived. I complained to a member of the Eastern Area Committee who explained they (the squad managers) did not consider her good enough to go. There seemed to be no appeal process and no transparency as to the whole selection, with players with less medals than Charlotte selected, even some Charlotte had beaten that year. As a parent I was outraged; I expected the Feltwell Judo Club to take up

her case, but soon realised that nobody there cared either. The parents, the coach were preoccupied with their own children as you would expect. We were on our own. The girl selected in place of Charlotte did not medal; looking back this is not to say that Charlotte would have taken a medal either. It was the lack of clarity in the selection process that troubled me.

That year the family haul of National medals increased with a further Veterans silver medal I won at High Wycombe, but it was of little consolation as all my efforts in judo were geared to promote and improve the family, especially Colin. I was learning more lessons, however, and discovering that players seemed to have a better chance of squad selection if they attended sessions at the Area squad manager's club or the managers were your mates. I had also discovered that other areas as small as the East ran selection trials for the Nationals which made me wonder why there was ever a need for a subjective selection process which often demoralised other children and their parents, not just my daughter who truly felt she had qualified her selection with her results. This was never likely to be an option I would choose.

I had recently passed my coaching course and was able to start my own club if I felt the need. The experiences of Charlotte had left me with a bitter taste with the Eastern Area selection process and the Feltwell Judo Club where we were never truly comfortable.

At this stage I believed that a trials system was preferable rather than a process based on subjective selection. Ironically this view would change in 2005 when Colin and I were presented with the trials from hell.

COLIN OATES: ACCIDENTAL OLYMPIAN

I had struck up a friendship with the coaches of Kevin Addison, who Colin had lost to in his first BJA competition and who ran Kumuichi Judo Club in King's Lynn, and it was through Chris Payne and Jo Brook we would taste our first experience of overseas judo which would in turn shape Colin's style and development over the coming years. At this stage I realised that Colin was a cut above the rest and I saw with overseas connections there would be advantages to him experiencing continental judo at an early stage in his career.