

# Canadian throws jujitsu world for loop

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**UPSET IN JAPAN / Underdog Joel Gerson ends up defeating a national hero.**

**J**OEL Gerson's mission seemed impossible.

But losing isn't part of his makeup. And so, this spring, the 23-year-old University of Toronto graduate, an underdog from the world of jujitsu, pulled off a major upset in Japan, where the sport was born.

He defeated Japan's national hero, Rumina Sato, and left a Tokyo arena in shock.

It seems that Gerson is Canada's answer to Hollywood's Rocky Balboa. After his victory, the audience fell silent. Commentators in the first row stood, their mouths open in utter disbelief. One woman looked as if she wanted to cry.

Then the frenzy began. Nobody had defeated Sato in five years in the no-holds-barred martial-arts game. Pound for pound, Sato was deemed the best in the world. Forget the black belt. Sato had a gold belt. And Gerson had never fought a no-holds-barred contest before.

In a flood, the audience got over its initial shock and rushed the stage, asking Gerson for autographs, a first for a Japanese audience. Japanese media crowded around Gerson, wondering about his roots, how this upset could have happened.

Gerson wasn't supposed to win in Tokyo. When his coach, former Israeli commando Moni Aizik, first found that

Gerson was supposed to fight Sato, he shook his head. "You're not going to fight this guy, not for your first fight," he said. Aizik, a seven-time Israeli champion, learned his skills from a Japanese master.

Sato is known for his skills in punching and kicking as well as ground fighting. He is powerful, quick as a cat, and strong. He usually polishes off his opponents very quickly. Although Gerson is quick on his feet, too, he has only average strength.

On top of it all, Gerson felt weak from losing 12 pounds to make the weight restrictions. He had to halt his

training for a week before he left for Tokyo because old judo injuries flared up — so many and so often that he stopped telling Aizik about them out of embarrassment.

Gerson would hustle off to physiotherapy and cover his body in ice packs, emptying the clinic refrigerator.

And all the while Gerson was trying to adjust his body clock to Japan time, yet still attend fourth-year classes at the University of Toronto. Exams were coming up. Essays were due.

"I was burning the candle at both ends," he said. "I was under a lot of stress." His father, a University of To-

ronto professor, was seriously ill. But with his father's blessing, Gerson went to Japan. He was on a mission.

Almost four minutes into the first round, his legs already discoloured from Sato's kicks, Gerson found an opening and pinned his opponent to the mat in an arm bar, hyperextending Sato's elbow in a firm lock.

Usually a fighter submits within a second or two of such a painful lock, but Sato held on for 22 seconds, trying desperately to slither his way out of it. That's when Gerson discovered, to his dismay, that Sato was rather double-jointed.

"The whole time I was scared to death he would escape," Gerson said. He had locked Sato in such a tight hold — with his legs, arms and hips — that when the referee finally called an end to the fight because he feared Sato's arm would break, Gerson couldn't get to his feet. His legs felt like jelly, he said.

Gerson is a three-time Canadian jujitsu champion, but now the Japanese know his name. Already they have set up a rematch with Sato in November.

Japanese martial artists are now training at Aizik's Samurai Club in Richmond Hill. And Sato is keeping an eye on Gerson. He will visit Richmond Hill in June to watch the Canadian Open jujitsu championship, an international event.

## What it is

Jujitsu, was developed by Japanese samurai warriors who fought to the death. Now jujitsu competitions are won by an athlete who is able to entice an opponent into submission. The unlucky loser cries 'uncle' by tapping the floor twice. Jujitsu had fizzled on the world stage during this century as its offshoot, judo, became more popular. But over the past four or five years, jujitsu has enjoyed a resurgence in some corners of the globe, particularly with the popularity of extreme or ultimate

fighting, the flashy names North American promoters gave to no-holds-barred martial-arts contests. In no-holds-barred events, promoters decided to get all martial artists in a ring to see who could duke it out the best. As it turned out, jujitsu skills worked better than any, because 80 per cent of the time these martial-arts contests end up on the floor.

Unlike karate, with its high-flying kicks, and boxing, with its punches, jujitsu teaches highly technical skills for grappling on the ground: throws, leg locks, arm bars, ankle wrenches, choking.