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Jewish judokas win gold at Ontario meet

By **PAUL LUNGEN**
 Staff Reporter

TORONTO — Joel Gerson doesn't like to send his fighters into a major competition unless they're totally prepared, both physically and mentally.

So you'd have to consider the eight judokas from Gerson's Samurai Academy as ready, able and more than prepared, if their results at the Ontario Open Junior Novice Championships are any indication.

The Samurai Academy's young athletes wiped the mat with their opponents, winning seven gold medals and one bronze. The bronze shoulda', woulda', coulda' been a gold, except for a judging decision that Gerson doesn't really want to talk about too much.

Nevertheless, all four of the Academy's Jewish fighters — Shane Herberman, 14, Jonathan Bodenstein, 14, Michael Rubenstein, 12, and Lielle Levy, 10 — were good as gold.

"I was pretty confident in their abilities, but you never know in these things," Gerson said.

Not only did the Samurai kids win, they dominated their matches, often winning in quick order.

Herberman, a student at Westmount Collegiate Institute in Vaughan, came up with his best performance in a competition so far, winning the juvenile 69-kilo championship fight with an "uchimata" throw.

"In the last match, I got in there, we fought for a few minutes, and out of nowhere, I got this really nice throw," he explained.

The uchimata consists of quick footwork between your opponent's legs to bring him off balance, followed by a decisive push to bring him down.

In an earlier match, Herberman employed the "drop seo," a shoulder throw, which ended the fight in less than a minute. "I saw the opening and I went for my throw," he said.

A pre-competition regimen that left little to chance was a key factor in his win, Herberman said.

"There was extremely intense preparation for the physical aspects of the competition," he said. "Mentally, it's a relaxed preparation, because you want to think out your fight and see what you'll be doing."

Herberman works out at the academy four times a week for an hour at a time. His routine consists of cardio work, exercises to build strength and stamina, as well as plenty of repetition

of technique.

Gerson figures most young athletes at major competitions are in good shape, so mastering technique and being mentally prepared often makes the difference.

His group not only "worked their butts off," but they absorbed the more esoteric and even hypnotizing aspects of mental preparation. This consists of "positive visualization in a very relaxed state," he explained.

Simply put, visualization allows athletes to imagine their opponents' moves and to respond quickly with effective counter moves.

"If you can't see yourself winning, you have to go back and start again," Gerson said. "If you visualize mistakes, panic or anxiety, that tells you have to improve mentally."

"It can be pretty strong for the kids," he said. "The psychological aspects of a competition are a big deal. It's very normal to be nervous going in."

Gerson, 26, is no stranger to high pressure, big time matches. A few years ago, he and his mentor, martial arts expert Moni Aizik, travelled to Japan for a high profile, televised match against Rumina Sato, the country's five-time champion in Shooto, a mixed discipline of martial arts.

Gerson stunned the Japanese experts with a remarkable victory. The two fighters split a couple of rematches.

Gerson was introduced to the martial arts 13 years ago by Aizik, who ran lessons at the Bathurst Jewish Community Centre. He moved with Aizik to the Samurai Club when the Israeli opened his own martial arts school. When Aizik returned to Israel a few months ago, Gerson took over the academy and remained chief instructor in judo and grappling. About 100 students ranging in age from seven to 14 train under Gerson.

A proponent of hard work, Gerson believes there's a lot of truth in the old adage, "It's better to sweat in practice than to bleed in competition."

"What we're doing is building character," he said. "If you



Joel Gerson, centre, kibbitzes with gold medalists, clockwise from front left, Lielle Levy, Shane Herberman, Mike Rubenstein and Christopher MacDonald.

develop success at an early age, it carries over into other areas of adult life... We teach them to set goals and take steps to accomplish them."