

# Gordon hopes for last laugh

**Interview** Jonathan Liew talks to Winston Gordon, who refused to succumb to life on a south London estate and, at 35, still dreams of an Olympic medal

## Sportbysport Judo

the air. We were saying to them: 'Hope you've got enough paint, because you're coming to London.' 'It's going to be the best thing. The experience is just going to be incredible. It will open people's eyes. The kids of today are going to be much more engaged with sport, which is great for the health of London. More people on bikes, more people doing fitness. It's just going to kick off. It will unite everybody.'

For Gordon, a competitor in the 90kg middleweight category, this will be his third Games, and he has unfinished business. In Athens he lost agonisingly in a play-off for the bronze medal, while four years ago he was below his best due to injury and was eliminated in the first round. "Third time lucky," he says cheerfully. "If I can come away with a medal, I will."

The host nation has guaranteed places in all 14 men's and women's events at London 2012, and despite his injury problems, Gordon is still by far and away the leading candidate to represent Britain in his division. He will make his return to major tournament action at next

“There will be more people on bikes, more people doing fitness. The Olympics will unite everybody”



**Making amends: Winston Gordon departed from the Beijing Games (main picture) in the first round**

Tooting, on the ragged edge of south-west London, is the sort of town where the estate is your home rather than your car, and where gangs can all too easily become families.

It was here that Winston Gordon, a double Olympian, was raised. A pupil at Ernest Bevin School, he freely admits that he could have succumbed to a life on the streets had it not been for a school assembly given by a PE teacher, Margaret Hicks, when he was 11.

Hicks demanded a volunteer to help her demonstrate a judo hold. Gordon stepped up and to the mirth of his classmates, was unable to shake himself free.

Stung by the laughter ringing in his ears, he resolved to learn how. Now, more than two decades on, he has returned to the school to teach the sport.

Just as the gospel of judo provided Gordon with salvation, now he eulogises about its power to empower, to correct, to heal. "Judo's a very disciplined thing," he says. "It teaches you that if anything arises, you just walk on by. Let it go."

"When you get onto the mat, if you don't respect anybody who's on that mat, you're not worthy to be on it. You've got to respect everybody, whatever their creed or colour of origin. When you go on that judo mat, everybody's won."

Gordon is a proud Londoner, and has seen with his own eyes how a city can be given by discord. It is why he was glued to the television set on July 6, 2005.

He was at a training camp in Spain, watching the announcement of the 2012 Olympic host city on a television in the hotel dining room. "The French were at the next table," he remembers. "They'd all got their faces painted. When it happened, and London beat Paris, we just all went crazy."

"The French were all crying and whatnot, while we were jumping on

week's European Championships in Chelyabinsk, Russia.

The landscape of British judo in the last few years has been one of turbulence; crisis, perhaps, for a nation attempting to end a 12-year Olympic medal drought stretching back to Kate Howey's silver in Sydney.

After a dreadful World Championships in Paris last August, in which no Briton finished better than fifth, the entire elite coaching staff was sacked. One of those was performance director Hicks, the PE teacher who had gripped Gordon in his first hold.

Her replacement, Daniel Lascau, has placed a strong emphasis on youth, with 16-year-olds Hayley Willis and Kate-Jemima Yeats-Brown and 18-year-old Max Stewart among the squad for the European Championships. Yet on shifting cultural sands, amid a sea of new faces, Gordon has remained.

Now, at 35, one of the elder statesmen of the team along with the likes of Euan Burton and Karina Bryant, his body is no longer as robust as it was.

He is only just feeling his way back to full fitness after a broken finger that forced him to miss the Olympic test event at the ExCeL last December. Yet he refuses to accept that London 2012 could be his swansong, and even looks forward to competing at Rio in 2016.

"It's possible," he says. "As long as the fire's still burning. Who knows in life? Once that flame goes, that'll be the finish of me. I'm getting on now, and obviously there's a few youngsters coming through trying to nick my place. But as long as I'm still firing, nationally and internationally, I'm going to keep going."

And why not? Judo has given Gordon so much – and through his work with youngsters, it is a debt he is repaying with interest. Though the life of a judoka is nowhere near as glamorous as that of the footballers and basketball players idolised by young Londoners today, Gordon believes judo offers something richer.

"Judo's given me an opportunity to go abroad, to places like Japan, where it was founded, Korea, Russia, Germany. The judo world is like a family unit. It's opened up my eyes to other parts of the world."

"We think we're in a little bubble, but through judo you see how people live elsewhere in the globe. That's how people who weren't friends before become friends and respect each other. Judo is a way of life. It stays with you forever."



## Lascau puts Britain on track after crisis

By Jonathan Liew

The man charged with restoring success to British judo has claimed that he has instilled a winning mentality into the sport in this country after years of underachievement.

Ahead of next week's European Championships, performance director Daniel Lascau claimed that when he took over last autumn, British judo was in a "crisis situation" after failing to win a single medal at the World Championships. Britain has targeted a haul of one to three medals at London 2012.

The disappointing performance in Paris last August led to the dismissal of the entire elite coaching staff and the appointment of Lascau, a 42-year-old who was born in Romania but won gold at the World Championships for Germany in 1991.

"We are much more aggressive in the fights and have the attitude to go on to the mat as winners," he said. "It was a crisis situation after the World Championships in Paris. 'I had a very good relationship with the British Judo Association, so we just decided to take a project of 10 months to build a team for the Olympics, to make sure the coaches

and the fighters know what they have to do."

There has been a renewed focus on youth, 16-year-olds Hayley Willis and Katie-Jemima Yeats-Brown being selected with one eye on the Rio Games in 2016.

**Kick start: Daniel Lascau was appointed after Britain's dismal World Championships**



## Judo... the lowdown

### How to play

Developed from jujitsu, the hand-to-hand combat technique of ancient samurai warriors, judo basically involves throwing opponents to the floor and holding them in submission. Fighters compete in events determined by their weight, and at London 2012 there will be seven weight classes.



### Tactics and techniques

Although strength and power are important, possessing the mental agility to quickly spot and exploit your opponent's weakness is even more so. One of the first things you need to learn in judo is how to fall. This is so that when you are thrown to the ground, you are able to land safely.

### History lesson

Judo was first included in the 1964 Olympics but was clearly not a hit as it was axed four years later. However, since 1972 it has become a regular fixture with Japan, somewhat unsurprisingly, dominating with 65 medals – 28 more than second-placed France.



### Legend

Ryoko Tani (right) broke on the Olympic scene as a 16-year-old at the Barcelona Games in 1992 with a silver medal. In the following eight years, she lost only one fight – the Olympic gold-medal contest in Atlanta 1996. Ryoko finally won a gold medal at the Sydney 2000 Games and again in Athens.



### Random fact

At the Tokyo 1964 Olympics in the open class, a 1.98-metre Dutchman named Anton Geesink (left) defeated three-time Japanese national champion Kaminaga Akio in front of a stunned 15,000 crowd at the Nippon Budokan Hall. Geesink followed this up with gold at the world championships.

### What to say...

"When watching this sport you really have to respect the self-control and courage of the judoka as they achieve ippon."

### What not to say...

"I think that Superstars has gone downhill since Brian Jacks left the show."



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