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Step Onto the Mat

Journey to True Success

by Kevin Asano



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Journey to True Success**

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*This book is dedicated to my family:
To my wife Mari, my best friend and constant support,
And to my three beautiful daughters,
Rena, Anna, and Maya,
May this book inspire you to live a life that will glorify God.*

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Foreword

I first met Kevin Asano in 1978 at Grace Bible Church after a Sunday evening service. He was a rather smallish freshman on the Pearl City High School judo team and I remember praying with him. A week or so later, Kevin won the first of many national championships by defeating a stronger, more experienced competitor before a pleasantly stunned statewide television audience. It was his “coming out” moment.

In the media interview that followed, Kevin attributed the landmark win to his newfound relationship with God. It marked the beginning of an incredibly storied judo career that climaxed with the winning of the silver medal in the 1988 Olympics in Seoul, Korea. Kevin went far beyond most people’s expectations. Except that Kevin is not “most people.”

Kevin was deemed a long shot to succeed beyond high school competition. Experts said he was too small, too light, and too weak to step onto the mat and engage the “big boys,” much less make the U.S. Olympic team. Therein lies the lesson from Kevin’s life:

Put your trust in God
and never let anyone tell you that you can’t do something until
you step onto your “mat,”
engage your opportunity, wrestle your opposition,
and give it your best shot.

Nearly 30 years later, Kevin continues to do just that. Parlaying the lessons learned in judo, his journey has taken him through a stint in the ministry as a pastor and now as a successful financial planner in the business world. More importantly, he is a family man, happily married to Mari and the doting father of three darling girls. And, yes, they too, have stepped onto the mat to learn lessons that far transcend the sport of judo.

SO WHAT ABOUT YOU?

What gift has God given you with which to bless others? What passion burns within you that when unleashed will add immense value to the lives of others? What are you waiting for?

Grab hold of the God who put you here, step onto the mat, and go for it!

Norman Nakanishi,
Senior Pastor, Grace Bible Church,
Pearl City, Hawaii

Introduction

This book began with a prompting and grew into an urging that wouldn't go away. As I discussed the wild-and-crazy idea of writing it with those close to me, I realized that I had a unique story to tell. This story goes beyond me and has the potential power to encourage anyone, even you, no matter what walk of life you come from.

You will quickly see that I am an ordinary man with many faults and shortcomings. Any glory should be reserved for the Lord Jesus Christ who has given me the sustaining strength to go beyond my personal limitations. I pray that this story gives you hope and inspiration to live your life in a way that will bring you true and lasting success.

*"Delight yourself in the LORD
and he will give you the desires of your heart."*

Psalm 37:4

*"Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it.
But one thing I do:
Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead,
I press on toward the goal to win the prize
for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus."*

Philippians 3:13-14

Prologue

On the morning of September 26, 1988, I stood on a bridge that overlooked the Olympic Village in Seoul, Korea. Most of the athletes were still in bed as the sun slowly came peeking through small patches of clouds and over the newly constructed high-rise buildings. The sound of birds singing in the crisp, cool morning air brought feelings of joy and wonder as I stood in my own quiet celebration.

Just the night before, I had competed in the extra-lightweight division judo finals in front of a worldwide audience. My quest for Olympic gold had ended, after losing to the Korean champion, but I was still thrilled and overwhelmed to stand on the winners' platform to receive the silver medal.

As I enjoyed the still ambience of the morning, I lowered my head over the railing and tears began to flow freely. Images from my eighteen-year journey to the Seoul Olympics flooded my mind. I saw myself as an excited seven-year-old boy eager to step onto the mat for the very first time. At nine years old, I saw myself win my first tournament and the Most Outstanding Player trophy that stood nearly three feet tall. I pictured my sensei's garage, where I spent many grueling hours training with my high school teammates. I remembered being victorious at national championships as a skinny, inexperienced freshman, and finishing off my high school career with my team winning the championships four years in a row.

Though the scenes held many successes, I also flashed through the hard times I faced: When my physical and emotional strength failed. When I was filled with so much discouragement and doubt that I wondered if I'd ever fulfill my goal of becoming an Olympian.

Yet each instance – whether glory or gory – came from the same source: God, who empowered me to pursue my destiny and complete the journey He had laid out for me.

This is my simple life story laid out like the framework of a house. Except that within the building of this house, breathed a living mystery of power beyond my person. And forged within was a giving treasure of lessons beyond anything I could claim to know. I reveal the mystery and the lessons both to you here.

ONE

The Journey Begins

There's a saying that good things come in small packages. Most babies look plump and healthy with rosy cheeks, but I came into this world looking like a skinny, wrinkled old man. Upon seeing me in the delivery room, my mom announced, "This can't be my son. Someone made a mistake!" At only six pounds and five ounces, I was a lightweight from the start.

I was born in Honolulu, Hawaii on April 20, 1963, to Henry and Karen Asano, third-generation Japanese Americans and parents for the first time. My parents were typical children of the 1940s and '50s. Like many of their peers in rural Oahu, their parents had worked hard on the sugar plantations. Determined to succeed in life, my dad volunteered for the Marine Corps. While serving his last year, he married his high school sweetheart, Karen Yoshikane.

Six months after I was born, our family moved to San Jose, California. Now with a family to support, he struggled through college while Mom worked full-time as a secretary at Lockheed. After graduating, he found a position working for the United States government in Okinawa.

JUST SUMMER FUN?

Our new town, which was located outside the United States military base, was full of wide-open spaces. What I liked best about living in Okinawa was my freedom. At the age of seven I was bursting with energy, and by the end of first grade Mom needed to find a summer activity that would keep me busy and out of trouble. What does a mother do with a boy who has boundless energy?

One morning as I waited across the street from our house for the school bus, my mom called out, "Kevin, would you like to take judo this summer?" I had no idea what judo was but it sounded like fun. "Yeah, I'll take judo," I yelled back. Little did I realize that this was the spark that would launch a lifelong journey. It was a chance encounter that would change the course of my life.

My summer was spent at the Kadena Judo Club on a United States military base. On the first day of practice, I was excited to see the other boys wrestling and couldn't wait to get onto the mat. As a beginner, I wasn't especially talented. In fact, I was one of the smallest, weakest players. Still, by the end of the summer, I was able to trade in my beginner's white belt for a yellow one. Rather than receive a brand new belt from my *sensei*, we had to hunt for a store in the open marketplace that sold yellow dye. Although you could buy a brand new yellow belt, the *sensei* probably thought I wouldn't continue judo, so this would be a cheaper, less permanent fast fix. However, in my little heart, that yellow belt was the greatest achievement in my seven years of life.

FIRST LESSON: HUMILITY & THE RUNT

Though the summer program ended, I was still excited about judo. My dad heard about a successful program at the U.S. Army Ryukyu Islands Judo Club, so he enrolled me there. My new teacher, Tsuruo Fukushima, was also from Hawaii. Fukushima *sensei* was in his mid-forties, a solidly built man with broad shoulders and kind eyes.

At first, I was a little intimidated by the size of the class, over 100 students. My only confidence came from my newly dyed, yellow belt tied around my waist. *Sensei* immediately stripped away my hard-earned yellow belt, demoting me back to a white belt. It was demoralizing, my first lesson in humility. Sometimes one has to take one step back before taking two steps forward.

Fukushima *sensei* was a strict disciplinarian. I had not quite mastered the technique of tying my belt into a square knot. When we lined up to bow after practice, he would call out, "Asano, come here." *Sensei* would untie my belt, then retie it the correct way and rap me on the head with his knuckles for me to remember. The pain lasted for a moment, but I loved having *Sensei's* undivided attention in front of the entire class.

Sensei wisely toughened us up. When a student cried because he stubbed his finger, *Sensei* inspected it to make sure it wasn't serious and then said, "You still have nine other good fingers!" He knew when a child was faking it and when it was real. Most of the time, our pride was hurt more than our bodies. With the older boys he was strict and harsh, but with us his actions displayed care and love more than anything else.

As the runt of my class, my peers usually got the best of me. But I was also a scrapper, ready to go with anyone even if I typically ended up on my back. I liked the challenge. Seeing my initiative, *Sensei* encouraged my dad to keep bringing me back.

MY DAD'S BEST MOVE

Dad was usually the one who took me to practice and that thirty-minute drive became "our time." He often told me stories about forest animals and their fun-filled adventures. Sometimes the stories were so funny that he would laugh too; years later I found out his stories were made up on the spot.

When we discussed my judo he always showered me with positive affirmation. Because of my fighting spirit, he nicknamed me Tiger, and even stopped using my real name. I complained, "Stop calling me Tiger. It's embarrassing!" I sulked, thinking *What if my friends hear him?* Yet by calling me Tiger, my father was building my confidence; I began to believe that I was fierce enough to take anyone on the mat.

FINDING MY ROAR

It took awhile before I could actually prove my ferocity in tournaments. In the first few competitions, when I won a match, I would sit straight with my head held high like a champion. When I lost, I dejectedly hung my head as tears welled in my eyes. It felt like the end of the world.

It took me months to finally win my first trophy. In the final match for a championship, Doug, a fellow teammate who was a head taller and twenty pounds heavier, demolished me. I settled for first runner-up, but it became the new highlight of my life. My heart swelled as I showed the high school boys my great achievement. Even my dad made a fuss, taking it to the local trophy shop to have my name engraved on the nameplate. When we went to pick it up, I was a little discouraged to find that my eight-inch trophy was puny compared to the others. But the disappointment faded as I walked out, my new trophy a gleaming symbol of success.

MY GREATEST FANS

Although Dad and Mom were my greatest fans, they approached the tournaments in different ways. Dad, the silent type, was always in the background, never saying much until the match was over.

Mom, on the other hand, yelled at the top of her lungs. Even with over 500 cheering fans, I could still hear my mom's "*Come on,*

Kev!" As embarrassing as it was, it felt good to have someone on my side. Mom was also there to absorb my nervousness. She was the one who got pre-tournament headaches, stomachaches, and butterflies. With her love and support, how could I possibly lose?

Where Dad and Mom were my frontline supporters, my younger siblings, Gary and Michelle, were my silent cheerleaders. They had no choice but to tag along to every tournament and special event. Although I stepped onto the mat alone, my whole family was with me.

STEPPING ONTO YOUR MAT

After all these years, I can still see myself in front of Fukushima sensei. His attention told me that he cared for and believed in me. And I can still hear my dad calling me Tiger because he saw my potential. Both men started me on a lifelong journey of judo that has since impacted all aspects of my life.

Who are the people in your life that have played an important role in nudging you along on your life's journey?

If you are older, who are the people in your life that you are intentionally working with to make a lasting impact in their lives?



Kevin Asano's 18 year journey from humble beginnings training in his judo coach's garage in Pearl City, Hawaii to the pinnacle of sports success representing the United States at the 1988 Seoul Olympic games is filled with lessons and insights that will resonate with all of us. Against all odds, Asano earned the silver medal in judo at the Seoul Olympic Games. In 2000, he was inducted into the Hawaii Sports Hall of Fame and in 2002 into the San Jose State University Sports Hall of Fame. He is a 6th degree black belt and a professor of judo.

Asano is a partner in Pacific Wealth Strategies, LLC, a financial planning organization, and the co-founder of Personal Transformation International, a non-profit organization committed to transforming individuals by helping them find their life's calling.

Kevin and his wife, Mari, have three children and reside in Hawaii. He is a graduate of Pearl City High School and graduated with distinction from San Jose State University.