

Coming off the bench: My exploration into Sambo

By Ted Chittenden 10/30/2022

The Russian combat sport Sambo has always intrigued me. As a former competitive judoka, former high school wrestler, and former Brazilian jujitsu competitor my interest in Sambo came from what outwardly looks like a hybrid of the three sports. It's always been something I wanted to try but never had the time nor the opportunity.

That changed recently when I was invited to a Sambo tournament near Charlotte South Carolina. Although I am no longer a competitive athlete, far from it, I decided I would go ahead and give it a try just to appease my curiosity. I moved my schedule around and headed south for the tournament. Having had no idea what the rules were, I felt it prudent to go down the night before and attend the rules meeting. It was a very relaxed format, very much a question-and-answer session.

The night prior

As I entered the area, I noticed I was visibly the oldest competitor by what seemed to be a very large margin. My assumption was that the next morning would be completely driven by weight (I weighed in at 88 kg). I introduced myself to the tournament director, we had chatted over email, but had never met in person. Shortly after, the rules meeting started. As the rules meeting progressed, I found I was the only one asking questions. The director is also a Judoka, so I framed my questions in comparison to Judo rules when I asked them. Framing the questions that way was extremely helpful and painted a picture of what the contest will look like. Although I suspect the other participants in attendance were wondering why I was asking such weird questions. At the conclusion of the meeting, I had a rudimentary idea of what I was getting ready to do. I tried to visualize a game plan for the contest to have some measure of a foundation to work from in the morning.



The tournament day

I slept in until about 8 o'clock on the morning of the tournament, which is later than I normally sleep but having pre-registered and weighed in there was no need to get there early and I figured I needed as much rest as possible in anticipation of clashing with competitors who will likely be younger stronger and faster than I. Like most mornings I woke up with a stiff back neck and shoulders, a constant reminder of decades of competitive combat sports. I took a warm shower and did my stretching and breathing routine (which is proven to be tremendously helpful in maintaining mobility), got dressed, ate the continental breakfast at the hotel, and thought a little more about game planning.



I headed to the venue and arrive about 40 minutes early. I went in and talked with one of the referees I knew from my Judo years. Scanned the crowd again and validated my assumption that I was in fact the “old guy”. Some place along the line I may have turned into the guy I used to want before or after a hard match working my way through the bracket. I put a little tape on my feet and ankles for some additional support then cover it up with my old wrestling shoes. I probably hadn't worn them in over 25 years, luckily, they still fit, unfortunately it does give evidence to my wife's argument that I'm turning into a hoarder.

At 11:00 they had all the competitors line up on the mat and they did another quick overview of the rules and let us vote if we wanted chokes (not legal in sport Sambo at larger events), the majority wanted chokes, so they were allowed.

Some great things I learned about Sambo.

1. It's a lot of fun!
2. It is very much like a Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu match, with pins done with the pace and intensity of wrestling (it was physically exhausting 😊)
3. On the feet it is very much a blend of wrestling and Judo.
4. If someone is in your guard (any guard - open, closed, half, etc) and brings their chest down, you are being pinned.
5. You only have one minute to finish a submission, or they will stand you up and keep the match going.



6. Respect and sportsmanship are a very important part of the culture.

Click Here to see one of my matches:

<https://youtu.be/cwpS31dvhcU>



It was a great experience, and I met some great people. My only regret is I didn't try it back when I was really a competitor. I really don't think this wonderful sport gets the credit it deserves. I would strongly recommend any participant of Judo, Jiu-Jitsu, or wrestling give it a try. It will help polish the edges between the three sports and help make any combat athlete more well-rounded.