



Back to the Mat

Knee replacement surgery gives a judo master a second chance.

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Judo has played a powerful role in Tony Mojica's life since childhood. Tony, 62, took up the martial art as a third-grader who needed to get out of his shell. In the more than five decades since, he exclaims, "I've never stopped! I haven't taken any breaks."

Tony competed in local tournaments throughout his school years. After graduating he spent a year-and-a-half in Japan studying judo and the Japanese language. He was an alternate for the 1980 Olympic Judo team and a coach for the 1992 Olympic Judo team.

Throughout his career, Tony made time to teach judo to children in low-income communities. He established the Mojica Judo Club and Training Center as part of the Baldwin Hills Parks and Recreation Center in 1995.

He credits his longevity in the sport in part to Andrew G. Yun, MD, the director of knee replacement at Providence Saint John's Health Center who gave Tony his mobility back.

Throwing and grappling on judo mats took their toll on Tony's right knee. He had knee reconstruction surgery at the age of 28 and was told to quit practicing judo. But Tony couldn't bear the thought

of retiring from the sport he loved.

He underwent another procedure in his 40s and had fluid repeatedly drained from the knee. Each time he was urged to give up judo.

Tony grew resigned to living with pain, but the intensity made life increasingly difficult. He thought about having a total knee replacement but had heard stories about procedures going wrong. He was afraid to take that chance.

The pain grew so intense that Tony could only coach judo from the sidelines. A fellow judo black belt sensei (teacher) advised Tony to see Dr. Yun, medical director of joint replacement services at Saint John's.

A board-certified orthopedic surgeon, Dr. Yun is a nationally recognized specialist in hip and knee joint replacement. He graduated from Princeton University, received his medical doctorate from Stanford Medical School, and finished his surgical training at Harvard.

Under the directorship of Dr. Yun, the knee replacement and hip replacement services at Saint John's have been recognized by *U.S. News & World Report*. In 2016 the joint replacement program was also recognized by Healthgrades with an Excellence Award.

Dr. Yun knew what judo meant to Tony. He had seen Tony in action when Tony visited Dr. Yun's son's judo club as a guest sensei. Tony consulted with Dr. Yun about surgery and was immediately put at ease. "He said he could do the procedure and was very confident," Tony recalls.

"Tony is a living legend, but he could barely walk," says Dr. Yun. "It was hard for him to move, let alone coach or demonstrate any skills. I felt that if I could reconstruct and rebalance his knee, Tony could get on the mat again."

Tony underwent knee replacement surgery in June. He started physical therapy while still in the hospital, and a Saint John's physical therapist visited him at home for three weeks. Following his home therapy, Tony continued his knee rehab at a facility close to his home. He missed only about two weeks of coaching.

"I was impatient to get better. I did a lot of work at home and worked really hard," he says.

Less than five months following his surgery, Tony reports feeling better and stronger each day. He organized a November tournament to raise funds to help kids in need travel to various competitions. He's resumed his own judo workouts and can already throw people. He plans to compete one more time, in Greece, next year.

Dr. Yun brought his 11-year-old son to Baldwin Hills to see Tony coach, and Tony showed the boy some techniques. "Watching him, I thought, 'That's why we do this,'" says Dr. Yun. "It would have been a shame for Tony to stop coaching. He's such an asset to his community."

Looking back, Tony appreciates the quality of care he received at Saint John's. "Everyone was so nice and kept me so comfortable," he says. "I had back surgery a few years ago at another hospital, and it was a terrible experience. This was so much different."

Tony is thankful that he took the leap of faith and trusted Dr. Yun to perform the knee replacement surgery. "I can't thank Dr. Yun enough," says Tony. "He gave me my life back." •

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