

Move Over Japan as Russia Takes Charge of Judo Mat

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LONDON — If Beijing had been a warning for the Japanese, London was the Olympics where they truly lost their judo crown, with resurgent Russian and jubilant French teams taking over the mantle as the dominant forces on the mat.

The question now is whether Japan, birthplace of the martial art, can turn it around again in Brazil in 2016 or whether the rest of the world has caught up with or even overtaken the Japanese.

The Brazilians, the hosts in four years, are among an ever-growing clutch of strong judo nations and will be one of the teams to beat in Rio after bringing home two golds from London, including the first for a Brazilian woman.

Despite an inexperienced team, Japan was pegged to win more than half the 14 golds up for grabs in the seven weight categories for men and women, improving on the four won in Beijing, which was only half as many as in Athens.

But things started badly when top seed Tomoko Fukumi left empty-handed from the women's 48 kg division, and they did not improve much during seven days of competition.

Only Kaori Matsumoto managed to win a gold.

It was the first time that Japan failed to win a men's judo gold since judo became an Olympic sport in 1964.

Not even rule changes that banned certain moves and had been expected to help Japan made a difference.

Contrast that with the fortunes of the Russians, who failed to win a single medal in Beijing and had not won a gold since the Soviet collapse.

One of the most memorable sights of the tournament was an ecstatic President Vladimir Putin, himself a black belt judoka, embracing Tagir Khaibulaev after he won his country's third judo gold.

"Russia's turnaround from bottom of the medal table in Beijing to top here in London is phenomenal," said the International Judo Federation, the sport's governing body.

That success has been chalked up to Italian coach Ezio Gamba, a gold medalist himself in 1980, who overhauled Russia's judo set-up and introduced a centralized training regime.

Their men will now be the team to beat in Brazil.

Gamba "is the magician who achieved what nobody had before," said Alexander Mikhaylin, who won silver in the men's heavyweight section.

France, where judo has long been hugely popular, had not recorded a gold since 2000, but two titles in London and an overall haul of seven medals secured in front of massive French support at the ExCel arena bode well for the future.

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