

The Japanese Volunteer behind Olympian Figueroa

The 2012 Summer Olympic Games will soon take place in London. Osamu Sawaji of the *Japan Journal* reports on the work of a Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers (JOCV) member training top-level judoka in El Salvador, including one man who will compete in the London Games.

Carlos Figueroa and his coach, Asami Togo



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One of Japan's international cooperation activities is the Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers (JOCV), implemented by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA). The mission of JOCV is to contribute to the development of the economy and society, and to address issues affecting the country with local people in developing countries, and this includes sports training. During the FY2012 spring recruitment period, developing countries have requested dispatch of JOCVs in a wide range of such fields, including physical training at high schools, swimming instructors for public swimming pools, and softball training for national teams.

Athletes the volunteers will train range from ordinary youths to highly skilled members of national teams. In a number of cases athletes trained by JOCVs have gone on to successfully

participate in the Olympics. JOCVs trained eleven athletes in the Beijing 2008 Olympics Games, including a judoka who became Mongolia's first gold medalist, a female track and field athlete from Djibouti, and a swimmer from the Maldives.



Asami Togo (center) with members of El Salvador's junior judo team.



Judoka practice at the *dojo* in San Salvador, El Salvador



Coaching Judo in El Salvador

Carlos Figueroa of El Salvador, another judoka who has received training from a JOCV, will participate in the London Olympics starting in July 2012, competing in the 66 kg class. The first JOCV judo coach was dispatched from Japan in 1969. Since then the JOCV coaches have been almost continually dispatched to El Salvador, apart from the period of civil war between 1980 and 1992, and five of its judoka have participated in the Olympics.

Asami Togo is currently training Figueroa. Togo, who was a member of the Tenri University Judo Club, one of Japan's strongest, was dispatched to El Salvador in June 2011, and is training Figueroa and other national team members in the nation's capital, San Salvador.

"When I was a university student I went to France and lived and practiced together with overseas judoka, and I started thinking I might like to teach judo overseas," Togo says.

In El Salvador, Togo provides training from Monday to Saturday, and whenever she is in the dojo she speaks to the athletes offering advice on the sport. She also practices together with other judoka by taking part in *randori* (freestyle judo practice).

"When I was new to the country I often had conflicts with the local coaches, perhaps because I had different opinions about training and because I was young and female," Togo says. "With the language barrier I went through some tough times when I couldn't clearly express what I wanted to say and they would not accept my opinions. However, what supports me is my past experience and the fact that the judoka always communicate with me with respect. Their attitudes toward judo have greatly improved compared to when I was a new volunteer."

As the opening of the Olympics draws near, local media are increasingly focusing on the nation's judo team, which is also raising expectations. With the strong request of Figueroa, and the cooperation of the El Salvador Judo Federation and National Olympic Committee, it was decided that Togo would accompany him to London as a special coach.

"In the Olympics I want Figueroa to aim for the top eight by using all his abilities to fight without giving way to any of his opponents," Togo says. "I know that he can continue to draw on his best techniques against his opponents and create winning opportunities in all his bouts, so I have really high expectations." 