



Dojo Expansion Roadmap

A guide to grow judo dojos in
New South Wales

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Their personal experience operating dojos, practical knowledge and deep understanding of the judo community have been invaluable in shaping this resource. Their contributions have ensured the Dojo Expansion Roadmap is future focused on how the sport can grow and adapt to new markets and opportunities while respecting the history and traditions that remain foundational to judo and the realities of running a grassroots dojo.

Judo NSW gratefully acknowledges the funding support provided by the NSW Office of Sport. This support has enabled Judo NSW to undertake a considered, evidence-based review of opportunities to expand and strengthen the dojo network across the state.

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Acknowledgement of Country

Judo is grounded in the respectful transmission of knowledge, discipline and tradition, shaped through generations by learning from those who came before and by practising with humility, care, and mutual respect.

In that same spirit, Judo NSW acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the lands and waterways on which our dojos are located and judo is practised. We recognise the enduring connection of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to Country, and the knowledge, culture, and traditions that continue to be passed from generation to generation.

We pay our respects to Elders past, present, and emerging, and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Disclaimer

Every effort has been made to provide information in this report which is accurate and useful, using a standard of care, skill, diligence, prudence and foresight that would reasonably be expected from an experienced State sporting organisation. However, the information contained in this report is of a general nature and has not considered any specific personal circumstances. It should not be relied on as professional legal or governance advice.

Engaging in starting a business creates significant legal obligations which you should make sure you understand fully. Therefore, it is strongly recommended you seek independent professional advice before starting a dojo or coaching business.

MESSAGE FROM THE JUDO NSW BOARD

The Judo NSW Dojo Expansion Roadmap comes at an important time for the sport. Our rate of participation growth has slowed, there are more sport and recreation options available to the community than ever before, and we are facing increased competition from newer combat sports such as Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu. Our sport has been slow to respond to these shifts in market conditions and consumer expectations, and without action, judo risks losing further ground.

Despite the challenge in front of us, the value of judo to the community remains undiminished and arguably more important than ever. Beyond the competitive aspects of the sport, judo instils discipline, builds confidence, strengthens resilience and creates connections, all qualities vital to building strong and healthy communities. This is exactly why judo is worth investing in now.

The consultation undertaken through this project confirmed that while the judo community understands what the sport can offer, it is not widely understood by the broader community. The consultation also identified that many of our clubs and dojo operators are working within challenging conditions, including limited access to suitable facilities, a reliance on volunteer-led operating models, constrained coach capacity and increasing competition from other combat sports with more contemporary business models. From this, the research identified five practical steps to encourage and support growth:

- Improving access to more suitable and permanent dojo spaces
- Strengthening club and business capability
- Expanding participation programs
- Supporting the training and development of more coaches
- Better promoting the unique value of judo as both a community activity and lifelong sport

This Roadmap brings these elements together into a logical, coordinated and practical framework designed to help clubs and dojo operators adapt, grow and secure judo's place in the NSW sport and recreation landscape for years to come.

Importantly, this is not simply a document about facilities, it is about creating the environment that will enable our clubs and dojo operators to thrive. While accessing appropriate spaces is a critical enabler, so too are strong leadership, appropriate business models, contemporary participation products and pathways, and effective partnerships. Sustainable growth will depend on all these elements working together.

The Judo NSW Board would like to acknowledge and thank the stakeholders who contributed their experience and insights to this work. Their perspectives have helped ensure this resource is grounded in the realities facing judo today, while ensuring the sport is well positioned to meet the challenges and grasp the opportunities that lie in our future.

Judo's future in NSW will not be secured by standing still. With the right people, focus, support and investment, we can turn this Roadmap into real growth across New South Wales and that work starts now.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	5	Part 5: Choosing Your Dojo	33
Before You Begin	6	Your Facility	34
Is Starting a Dojo Right for You?	7	Fit-Out and Lease Considerations	35
Where Are You Starting From?	8	Functional Requirements of a Judo Facility	36
Part 1: The Opportunity	9	The Three Facility Stages	37
Judo in NSW	10	Shared Facility	37
The Mindset Shift	11	Semi-Permanent	38
What Can We Learn from BJJ	12	Dedicated Dojo	39
Judo's Competitive Advantage	13	Part 6: Growing Your Membership	40
Part 2: Understanding Your Market	14	Growing Your Membership	41
Understanding the Judo Market	15	The Participation Funnel	42
Assessing Your Local Conditions	16	Awareness	43
Defining Your Program Focus	17	Consideration	45
Defining Your Value Proposition	18	Discovery	47
Part 3: Structuring Your Business	19	Conversion	48
Building Your Business Model	20	Retention	49
Choosing Your Legal Structure	21	Part 7: Tracking Your Progress	50
Your Revenue Streams	25	Tracking Your Progress	51
Understanding Your Costs	26	Finding Support	53
Setting Your Pricing	27	Conclusion	54
Part 4: Building Your Team	28	Appendix	55
Building Your Team	29	Appendix: Judo In NSW - Snapshot	56
Volunteers	30	Appendix: Facility Evaluation and Checklist	57
Transitioning to Paid Roles	31	Appendix: Dojo Self Assessment Tool	58
Growing Beyond You	32	Appendix: Glossary of Key Terms	59

Introduction

What you need to consider before you begin.

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

This guide has been developed to help anyone with a passion for judo consider, plan and establish a sustainable dojo, and grow judo across New South Wales. It does not assume you are already an elite judo coach with years of experience, a former Olympian or someone who has spent decades on the competition circuit.

If you have these credentials, wonderful, but they are not a prerequisite for what comes next. This guide is written for anyone who loves and has a passion for judo, believes in what it offers, and is ready to do something about it.

You might already be a qualified coach who has been running classes for years and wonders whether something bigger is possible. You might be a parent who has watched your child thrive on the mat and thought someone should be doing more of this in our community. You might be a business-minded person who has fallen in love with the sport and can see an opportunity that others are missing. Whatever brought you here, this guide was written for you.

You will not need a black belt or long competition history, just a genuine passion for judo and what it can do for people, the willingness to think like an entrepreneur and business owner, and the confidence to back yourself. This guide will help you with the rest.

It draws on the real experiences and insightful observations of many judo stakeholders, including many current and former dojo operators, as well as key learnings from the broader martial arts and sports sectors. We identify and discuss some of the key pitfalls and challenges experienced by those who have considered this path before you, so that you can learn from their challenges and replicate their successes.

Together we can encourage more people to take on the challenge of running their own dojo and collectively grow judo and the benefits it provides to both individuals and communities across NSW.

How to Use this Guide

You do not need to read it cover to cover in one sitting. Use the overview below to find the sections most relevant to where you are right now and return to other parts as your journey develops.

Part 1: The Opportunity

An honest picture of where judo in NSW sits today, what the sport can learn from the rapid growth of BJJ, and why judo's own strengths position it well for growth.

Part 2: Understanding the Market

How to assess the opportunity in your local area before you commit, by understanding who your potential participants are, your local competition and defining what makes your dojo worth choosing.

Part 3: Structuring Your Business

The financial and operational foundation of a dojo, covering legal structures, revenue streams, cost structures and how to price for genuine value.

Part 4: Building Your Team

How to build the people and structures your dojo needs to grow, so your dojo doesn't depend on you alone.

Part 5: Choosing Your Dojo

What to look for and what to avoid when selecting a location and facility for your dojo, including practical guidance on commercial leasing and fit-out.

Part 6: Growing Your Membership

Understanding the participant journey and how to engage and retain participants at each stage, from first awareness through to long-term advocacy.

Part 7: Tracking Your Progress

Tools to keep your dojo on track, including what you should review monthly and a self-assessment check-list to help you identify where to focus your energy and when to ask for help.

IS STARTING A DOJO RIGHT FOR YOU?

Starting a dojo, or taking an existing one to the next level, can be one of the most rewarding things you can do in the sport. It is also a genuine commitment and it deserves an honest assessment before you proceed. The following questions are designed to help you go in with clear eyes.

Your motivation

- What is driving your interest in starting or growing a dojo?
- Are you motivated primarily by growing the sport, building a business, developing athletes, or some combination of all three?
- Is your motivation strong enough to sustain you through the difficult early period when members are few and the work is considerable?

Your time

- How much time can you realistically commit each week, including not just coaching sessions but administration, marketing, member communication and facility management?
- Do you have support at home or work that will allow you to make this commitment sustainably?
- Are you prepared for the reality that in the early stages, the hours will be significant and the financial return modest?

Your skills and resources

- What skills do you bring to the administrative side of running a dojo, financial management, marketing, people leadership, administration?
- Where are your gaps, and do you have people around you who can fill them?
- Do you have access to the capital or financial reserves needed to get started and sustain operations through the early growth phase?

Your local opportunity

- Is there genuine demand for judo in your area that is currently unmet?
- Do you have a sense of where you would operate, who you would serve, and what would make your dojo different from other options available locally?

Your support network

- Are you a qualified judo coach, or do you have a partnership with a qualified coach? How will you grow your coaching support as your dojo grows?
- Are you connected to Judo NSW and aware of the support, resources and guidance available to affiliated operators?

There are no right or wrong answers. Their purpose is to surface the areas where you will need to invest, plan carefully, or seek support before those gaps become problems. If you cannot answer all of the questions, do not worry. The rest of this guide will help you address each of them in turn.

WHERE ARE YOU STARTING FROM?

Building a sustainable dojo is a journey, and this guide is designed to be useful to you at every point along that journey. Whether you are just starting out and yet to run your first session, working through the early challenge of building a reliable membership base, or already leading an established program and thinking about what comes next, the questions you are wrestling with are ones that other operators have faced before. This guide draws on the experience of those who have travelled this path before.

The three stages below are a map of where a typical dojo journey starts and tends to go. They are not rigid categories; real dojos move between them unevenly, and the boundaries are blurry by design. But they reflect the distinct sets of challenges and priorities that tend to dominate at different points, and they will help you locate yourself as you work through the guide.

	Stage 1: Startup	Stage 2: Developing	Stage 3: Established
Typical membership	15 to 30 participants	40 to 70 participants	80+ participants
Facility	Shared venue	Semi-permanent access	Permanent or dedicated
Team structure	Operator led.	Transition to team model	Defined roles, paid positions
Financial position	Covers costs, marginal surplus	Sustainable, operator paid	Viable small business, growth investment
Key priority	Refining the value proposition	Establishing a member base	Consolidation and scaling
Key risk	Underestimating costs or demand	Operator holding on too tightly	Overcommitting to facility too soon

Not every section of this guide will be equally relevant to you right now. Some of the detail on team structure and facility planning matters a great deal at Stage 2 and beyond but is premature if you are still finding your feet. Other sections, particularly those on program design and community engagement, are foundational regardless of where you are.

Keep your stage in mind as you read and treat the guide as a resource to return to rather than something to work through once and set aside.

The transition from one stage to the next rarely happens all at once. It tends to be gradual, sometimes frustrating, and often only obvious in retrospect. That is normal. The purpose of naming the stages is not to create pressure to advance, but to help you recognise where you are, make decisions that fit your current situation, and see the progress that is already happening.



Part 1: The Opportunity

Why judo needs passionate people and why now is the right time.

JUDO IN NSW

Judo in New South Wales is at a crossroads.

The sport has a proud history, deep community roots, and a product that, when delivered well, is genuinely transformative. Parents choose judo for their children because it builds discipline, confidence and resilience in ways that few other activities can match. Adults who find judo often describe it as a sport that hooks you for life. The Olympic pedigree, the structured progression pathway, the physical and mental demands of the sport are not weaknesses. They are genuine points of difference in a crowded marketplace.

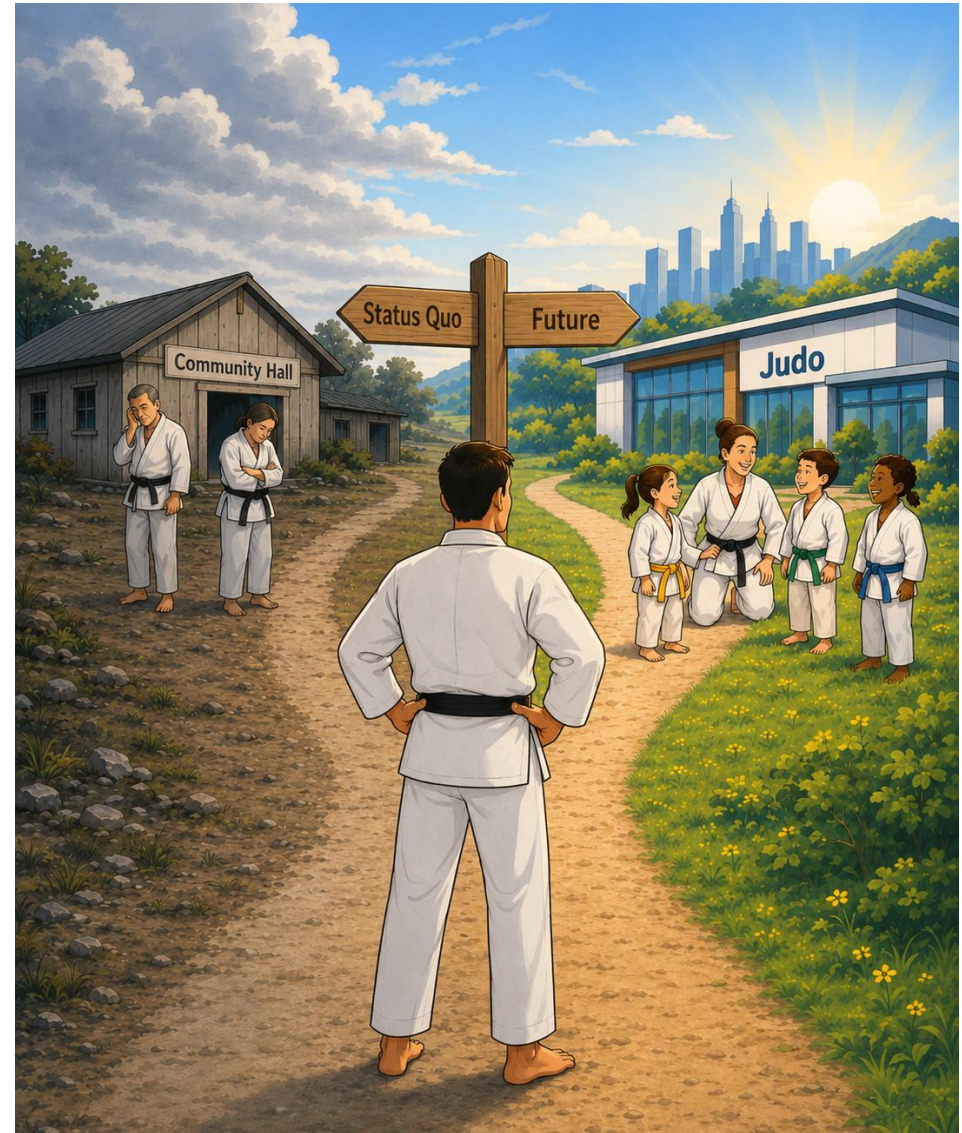
Despite this, the numbers tell a complicated story. While participation across NSW has been broadly stable in recent years, stable is not the same as healthy. Judo NSW membership has dipped to just over 1,900 registered members in 2025, down from a peak of over 2,100 just a few years earlier.

The club network has held at around 45 to 50 affiliated clubs, but behind that number sits a more uncomfortable reality: many clubs are fragile, heavily reliant on one or two committed volunteers, and not well positioned to grow. Many clubs are operating with fewer than twenty members and the majority run from shared spaces such as halls and community centres.

The people running these clubs are not doing anything wrong. They are, in almost every case, deeply committed to the sport and to their participants. But commitment alone has limits.

The challenge facing judo in NSW is not a product problem. Judo is an outstanding sport. The challenge is a delivery problem. Too many dojos are operating on models designed for a different era, models built around volunteerism, grant funding and word-of-mouth growth that many other sports have moved beyond.

The good news is that delivery problems are solvable, and the people best placed to solve them are passionate, motivated operators willing to approach the sport with fresh eyes and a different set of tools. That is where you come in.



THE MINDSET SHIFT

The most important transition a dojo operator can make has nothing to do with facilities, programs or marketing. It happens in how you think about what you are building.

Most dojos in NSW begin (and remain) as passion projects run by people who love judo and measure success primarily by the quality of the experience on the mat. These are genuinely admirable motivations and they should never be lost. But passion alone does not pay venue hire, cover cost, fund new mats, support coach development or sustain a marketing campaign, and it does not protect you when membership drops unexpectedly and the bills keep arriving.

“Few run dojos as a business, most are a hobby.”

— Judo NSW Club Stakeholder

This observation is not a criticism of the people who have dedicated themselves to judo clubs across NSW. They deserve enormous credit for keeping the sport alive in their communities. But it points directly to the single biggest lever available to grow judo in this state: mindset.

Running a sustainable dojo requires you to hold two things simultaneously:

- A deep commitment to judo and what it offers people, and;
- A clear-eyed approach to the financial and operational realities of running an organisation that depends on revenue to survive.

These are not in conflict. The more seriously you take the operational side of your dojo, the more effectively you can deliver on the judo side.

That mindset shift is not about all dojos becoming commercial businesses. It is about applying the same discipline, intentionality and commitment to continuous improvement to the running of your dojo that judo demands of its practitioners on the mat.

A not-for-profit club with twenty members and a volunteer committee can operate with exactly this mindset just as readily as a commercial dojo with a full-time operator.

In practice this means thinking carefully about revenue and costs as a foundation, not an afterthought. Pricing your programs to reflect their genuine value. Investing in your facility and your marketing rather than hoping word of mouth will do the work and building systems and structures that allow your dojo to function and grow beyond your own individual effort.

None of this requires a business degree. It requires the same qualities judo already asks of you: discipline, honest self-assessment, and the willingness to keep improving.



WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM BJJ

If you have been involved in judo for any length of time, you will have noticed the rise of Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu(BJJ). BJJ gyms have appeared across metropolitan and regional NSW at a remarkable pace. How has a younger, less established martial art grown so quickly while judo has struggled to maintain its numbers?

The answer contains some of the most important lessons this guide has to offer.

BJJ grew rapidly in Australia not because it is a better martial art than judo. It grew because its operators figured out how to run sustainable businesses and provide participants with an experience they were looking for. They created welcoming, flexible environments, reduced barriers to entry and marketed themselves effectively. They thought about their participants as customers whose experience needed to be earned and maintained, not just as members whose affiliation fees were collected once a year. They set up in high-traffic locations, branded themselves professionally and invested in their own growth.

Despite this, judo has the stronger product. The Olympic credibility, the depth of technical tradition, the belt progression system, the physical and mental discipline are all advantages that BJJ cannot replicate. But for too long, judo has allowed those advantages to do the marketing work, assuming the quality of the sport speaks for itself. In a market where participants have more choices than ever, that assumption is no longer safe.

The shift that is needed is not a betrayal of judo's values. Discipline, respect and continuous improvement, the philosophical foundations of judo, are not just consistent with running a well-organised, professionally presented, financially sustainable dojo. They demand it. The BJJ model is not something to resent. It is something to learn from and, in many respects, to surpass.

“Judo is very traditional and hasn't adapted. It hasn't been as nimble and flexible, and there is too much resistance to change from within our community.”

— Judo NSW Stakeholder



JUDO'S COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

Most people who build dojos do so because judo changed something for them. But the trap that catches many experienced practitioners is assuming others want what you wanted. To the people you are trying to reach, judo is a blank canvas. Fitness, self-defence, competition, community, discipline for a restless kid, somewhere to belong. The appeal is wider and more varied than many long-time practitioners stop to consider. A dojo that grows is one that understands this from the start.

Judo's core advantages are genuine and worth understanding clearly:



Physical and mental development

Judo develops balance, coordination, spatial awareness, explosive strength and cardiovascular fitness. It also develops focus, emotional regulation and respect for others. These outcomes are central to what judo is, outcomes that parents actively seek for their children and that adults increasingly value for themselves.



Judo as a foundation sport

There is growing recognition among physical education professionals that judo is one of the most effective foundation movement sports for young children. Safe falling, body awareness, controlled contact and spatial reasoning underpin performance in almost every other sport, making judo a compelling first sport rather than a niche pursuit.



The belt progression system

Few things in sport are as consistently motivating as a visible, tangible marker of progress. The grading system gives participants a clear sense of where they are and where they are going. For children this is particularly powerful. Retention in judo, for participants who make it past the first few months, is genuinely strong. The challenge is getting people there.



Community and belonging

At its best, a judo club is far more than a place to train. The relationships formed on the mat between coach, participant and training partners can be some of the most enduring in sport. This sense of belonging is something more commercially transactional models often struggle to replicate.



Olympic credibility and legitimacy

Judo is one of the original Olympic sports, and that heritage carries real weight with parents and adults alike. Just do not assume it lands the same way for everyone. For many new participants it is background detail rather than a deciding factor, so lead with the benefits that are most relevant to them.

Part 2: Understanding Your Market

Who your participants are and how to
reach them

UNDERSTANDING THE JUDO MARKET

Before you commit to a location, a facility or a program, you need to understand the market you are entering. This does not require a formal business degree or an expensive market research report. It requires curiosity, honest observation and a willingness to ask the right questions before you invest your time and money. Think of this section less as a one-time exercise and more as an ongoing discipline. The best dojo operators revisit these questions regularly as their business evolves.

Who Participates in Judo and Why

One of the most common mistakes new dojo operators make is assuming they know who their participants will be before looking carefully at who is actually available to them. Judo has traditionally skewed heavily toward junior male participants, and while juniors remain vital, they represent only one part of a much broader opportunity.

Judo in NSW is currently dominated by junior participants, with males making up the significant majority. Participation is heavily grassroots in nature, driven largely by

family and community connections. Most participants find their way to judo through word of mouth rather than through any deliberate marketing or outreach effort. A sport that relies almost entirely on organic referral for growth is leaving a significant portion of its available market unreached.

Key Market Segments

As you think about who you want your dojo to serve, consider each of the following segments. Regardless of which segments you focus on, modern participants expect flexibility in how they engage with a sport, a welcoming and well-presented environment, clear communication about what they are signing up for and what it will cost, visible progress relatively quickly, and the ability to trial an activity before committing. Meeting these expectations is simply a matter of designing your programs and environment with the participant's experience at the centre rather than around the traditions of the sport.

 Children	 Teenagers	 Adults	 Women & Girls
Parents who choose judo for their children are typically motivated by developmental benefits as much as by the sport itself. Families are also a multiplier: one child who has a positive experience on the mat often brings siblings, and engaged parents become volunteers and advocates.	Drop-off rates in the teenage years are high across most youth sports. Programs designed specifically for this age group with appropriate social dynamics, structured progression and a sense of identity and belonging can make a significant difference to both retention and long-term club health.	The recreational adult participant wants fitness, skill development, social connection and mental challenge without the ongoing commitment of competition. This segment is well served by BJJ and MMA gyms but poorly served by most judo clubs. This represents one of the clearest growth opportunities for dojos.	Women-only sessions, beginner programs designed to reduce the intimidation factor of a contact sport, and targeted marketing that speaks to women's motivations are all practical steps that can encourage more women and girls to take up judo.

ASSESSING YOUR LOCAL CONDITIONS

Before you commit to a location, design a program or spend a dollar on equipment, you need to understand the environment your dojo will operate in. The strongest programs are not simply the ones with the best technical instruction, they are the ones that have found the right fit between what they offer and what their community actually needs.

The steps below will walk you through a practical approach to understanding your local market. None of it requires specialist skills or significant investment, just a sense of curiosity, a willingness to spend time in your community and an honest eye for what you find.

Step 1: Start with what you can observe

You do not need sophisticated research tools to get a strong initial read on your local market. Spend time in the area you are considering. Visit local schools, community centres and recreation facilities. Look at what martial arts and fitness options are already available nearby. Talk to people in your community, parents at school pickup, staff at community centres, local council recreation officers. Ask what sporting activities families in the area are engaged in and what gaps they feel exist.

Step 2: Understand your location's accessibility

Whatever location you are considering, accessibility should be a primary filter. A dojo that people cannot easily get to will always struggle to grow, regardless of how good the program is. Consider whether the location is easily reachable by both car and public transport. Ample, safe parking or convenient pick-up and drop-off areas is particularly important for families. Ideally, your chosen location will have a degree of foot traffic or street visibility. High-visibility locations do come at a premium, and we address the tension between visibility and cost in Part 4. But the principle is worth holding onto: a dojo that people can see is a dojo that markets itself.

Step 3: Map your competition

Spend time understanding what else is available to potential participants in your area, not just other judo clubs but the full range of competing options: BJJ gyms, MMA facilities, karate and taekwondo schools, general fitness studios and community recreation programs. For each competitor you identify, try to understand:

- What do they offer and who are they targeting?
- How are they priced and presented?
- How busy do they appear to be?
- What are participants and parents saying about them online?

This is not about copying competitors or being discouraged by their presence. A thriving BJJ gym nearby may actually be a positive signal as it tells you there is a market for martial arts in the area. Your job is to understand how your offer can be genuinely different and better for the participants you are targeting.

Step 4: Identify the gaps

Once you have a picture of your local market, look for the gaps. These might be:

- **Geographic:** an area with strong demand but no nearby martial arts options.
- **Demographic:** a community with a large population of older adults, or a high proportion of young families, not being served by existing providers.
- **Programmatic:** a market where BJJ and MMA dominate but where the structured, values-based, Olympic-credentialed offer of judo is genuinely absent.

The gap you identify will shape not just where you locate your dojo but what programs you prioritise and how you communicate your value to potential participants.

DEFINING YOUR PROGRAM FOCUS

Your assessment of the local market is not just background preparation, it is a key input into the most important strategic decision you will make as a dojo operator: who are you primarily going to serve and what programs are you going to build around them?

By starting with a clear primary market focus, you have a much stronger foundation to build your dojo than trying to be everything to everyone from day one.

Children or adults, or both?

A junior-focused dojo typically builds membership more quickly in the early stages, because parents are actively seeking structured activities for their children. It also tends to generate strong community connections and family loyalty. The trade-off is that junior programs are heavily dependent on school term structures, family schedules and the competitive landscape of children's activities, a crowded and seasonal market.

An adult-focused dojo takes longer to build but tends to generate more consistent revenue, because adult participants are making their own decisions and are generally less subject to scheduling constraints. Adults who commit to a well-run program tend to stay longer and engage more deeply. The challenge is that adult beginners require a carefully designed entry experience; the traditional judo class environment can feel intimidating and unwelcoming to someone who has never trained before.

A mixed offering can capture the best of both, but it requires more careful program design to ensure different participant groups feel the dojo has been built for them rather than accommodating them as an afterthought.

Niche programs worth considering

Beyond the core judo program, several niche offerings represent genuine market opportunities and a chance to differentiate your dojo:

- **School programs and community engagement** offer one of the most effective pipelines for junior participation. Partnering with local schools to deliver introductory judo programs puts judo in front of children and families who might never find their way to a dojo independently.
- **Women-only programs** address a genuine gap and align with a broader cultural shift toward women's participation in combat and contact sports. A women-only beginner program removes commonly cited barriers to entry and creates a space where women can develop skills and confidence at their own pace.
- **Self-defence programs** offer an accessible entry point for adults who might not initially identify as martial arts participants. Judo's practical applications are highly relevant to a self-defence context, and a well-designed program can serve as both a standalone offering and a pathway into broader participation. No special accreditation beyond standard judo coaching qualifications is required.
- **Fall prevention for older adults** is a niche with significant and growing demand. Judo's foundational emphasis on safe falling (ukemi) is directly applicable to fall prevention, and positioning this through local health networks, aged care services and community centres can open doors to a participant base that would never encounter judo through traditional channels.
- **Contact sport introduction programs** serve a growing market of participants, particularly parents of children, who want a structured, safe and values-based introduction to combat sport. Judo's regulated approach to physical contact makes it one of the safest introduction points available.

DEFINING YOUR VALUE PROPOSITION

Your value proposition is the answer to the question every potential participant is silently asking: why should I choose your dojo over everything else available to me? It is not a marketing slogan, although it will inform your marketing. It is a clear, honest statement of what you offer, who you offer it to, and why it is genuinely better for them than the alternatives.

The most common mistake operators make is starting with what they want to offer rather than what their target participant actually needs. Judo is a wonderful sport, but that is not a value proposition. A safe, structured and genuinely fun introduction to martial arts for children aged five to twelve, delivered by qualified coaches in a welcoming community environment, that is closer to a value proposition, because it speaks directly to what a parent is looking for.

Your value proposition needs to be grounded in something real: your location, your program design, your facility, or your coaching quality. Whatever it is, it needs to be genuine and defensible. A value proposition that sounds compelling but does not survive contact with the actual participant experience will generate enquiries but not retention.

Treat your value proposition as a living document. Revisit it at least annually and test it regularly against the feedback you receive from participants, families and the broader community. It does not have to be perfect on day one, as long as you are asking the right questions.



Part 3: Structuring Your Business

How to structure your dojo for sustainability and success

BUILDING YOUR BUSINESS MODEL

A dojo that is run like a business is not a less authentic version of judo, it is just a more sustainable one. A sustainable dojo is one that can afford better facilities, employ better coaches, deliver better programs and serve more participants. It does not risk collapse when the one committed volunteer burns out or moves on. Over time, a financially sustainable dojo becomes an asset, something of real and lasting value to its operator, its participants and its community.

Yet for many dojo operators, the word "business" still carries an uncomfortable edge. It can feel at odds with the values that drew them to judo in the first place; the discipline, the community, the tradition of passing on knowledge without expectation of reward. This tension is understandable, but it is worth examining honestly. Running your dojo with financial discipline does not mean chasing profit above all else. It means taking seriously your responsibility to keep the doors open, the mats clean and the lights on, year after year, not just in the seasons when passion runs high.

This section is about giving your dojo the structural foundations it needs to operate effectively as an organisation. That means understanding how money flows in and out of your dojo, how to price your programs with confidence, how to manage the administrative load that comes with running any membership-based operation, and how to think about growth in a way that is deliberate rather than accidental.

None of this requires a background in finance or business degree. What it requires is a willingness to look clearly at how your dojo currently operates and to make considered decisions about how you want it to function going forward. The goal is not to turn you into a business manager but make sure that the dojo you have worked hard to build does not succeed in spite of how it is run but because of it.



Disclaimer: This section contains general guidance on financial and business planning. It is not a substitute for professional financial, legal or accounting advice. Before making decisions about legal structure, pricing or financial commitments, we strongly encourage you to seek independent professional advice tailored to your specific circumstances.

CHOOSING YOUR LEGAL STRUCTURE

Understanding your options

One of the first and most consequential decisions you will make as a dojo operator is how to legally structure your operation. This decision affects everything from how you are taxed and what funding you can access, to who ultimately owns what you build and what happens to it in the future.

There is no universally right answer. The right structure depends on your personal circumstances, your goals, your appetite for risk and the kind of dojo you want to build. What matters most is that you make this decision consciously and with a clear understanding of the implications, rather than defaulting to whatever structure seems most familiar or convenient.

In the Australian context, dojo operators typically choose between two primary models: a not-for-profit incorporated association or a private commercial entity. A small number operate hybrid arrangements, but for the purposes of this guide we will focus on the two primary models and what each means in practice.

Consider if...	NFP	Commercial	Hybrid
Primary goal is community, not building a personal asset	Yes	No	Yes
Accessing grant funding is important to your financial model	Yes	No	Yes
You want to own and potentially sell what you build	No	Yes	Yes (coaching business)
You value fast, flexible decision-making	No	Yes	Partial
You have an independent and trustworthy committee available	Yes	No	Yes (required)
You are establishing in a market with strong commercial viability	Yes	Yes	Yes
You are building in a regional or lower-income community	Yes	No	Yes

 **Worth knowing:** Starting a business creates significant legal obligations which you should make sure you understand fully. It is strongly recommended you seek independent legal and financial advice to ensure you chose the most appropriate legal structure for your specific circumstance.

CHOOSING YOUR LEGAL STRUCTURE

The Not-for-Profit (NFP) Model

A not-for-profit (NFP) incorporated association is the traditional structure for community sport clubs in Australia. The vast majority of existing judo clubs in NSW operate under this model, and it has genuine advantages, particularly for operators whose primary goal is community development rather than personal financial return.

An NFP incorporated association is a legal entity in its own right, separate from its members. It is governed by a committee elected by its membership, operates under a constitution, and is required to reinvest any surplus into the organisation rather than distributing it to individuals. In NSW, incorporated associations are registered with NSW Fair Trading and are subject to the Associations Incorporation Act 2009.

The advantages

Access to government grants and community sport funding is one of the most significant advantages of the NFP model. The majority of state and local government sport funding programs are designed for NFP community organisations, and an incorporated association is well positioned to access these streams. Equipment grants, facility improvement funding, participation programs and coaching development grants are all more readily available to NFP entities than to commercial operators.

The NFP model also tends to carry lower perceived barriers for participants and families, who may feel more comfortable engaging with a community club than a commercial business. And it aligns naturally with the community-building ethos that is central to judo's identity.

The risks

There is a risk associated with the NFP model that is rarely discussed openly in the community sport sector, and it deserves to be stated clearly here.

When you build a dojo as an incorporated association, you are building something that is technically owned by its members, not by you. The committee elected by those members governs the organisation, and that committee has the authority to make decisions about its direction, its leadership and its future. In most cases this works well, particularly when the founding operator retains the trust and support of the membership. But it is not guaranteed.

A Warning

There have been cases, across sport and other community sectors, where individuals have invested years of their time, energy and personal resources into building a successful club/organisation, only to find themselves outvoted or removed by a committee that has different ideas about the organisation's direction. This is not a hypothetical risk. It is a real one, and it is worth taking seriously before you choose this structure.

 **Worth knowing:** If you are considering the NFP model, think carefully about how your constitution is drafted, what protections it provides for founding members and what governance arrangements will give you appropriate influence over the organisation you are building. Take independent legal advice before you proceed.

CHOOSING YOUR LEGAL STRUCTURE

The Private Commercial Model

A private commercial dojo operates as a business, typically structured as a sole trader, a partnership or a private company. The operator owns the business, makes the decisions and bears the financial risk. Any surplus generated by the business belongs to the operator.

A commercial dojo is, in essence, a small business that delivers judo programs. It is subject to standard business regulations; tax obligations, employment law, consumer protection requirements, and operates without the governance structures of an incorporated association. Decisions are made by the owner, not by a committee.

The advantages

The most significant advantage of the commercial model is clarity of ownership. What you build is yours. The dojo is an asset that you own, that grows in value as the business grows, and that you could potentially sell in the future. There is no committee with the authority to remove you from the organisation you created. Your investment of time, money and energy creates something of lasting personal value.

The commercial model also offers greater operational flexibility. Without the governance requirements of an incorporated association, you can make decisions quickly, adapt your programs and pricing in response to market conditions, and invest in your business without navigating committee approval processes.

The challenges

Access to funding is the most significant challenge facing commercial dojo operators. The majority of government sport funding programs are designed for NFP community organisations, and a private commercial business is generally ineligible. This is not a reflection of the value these operators provide to their communities, commercial dojos often deliver outstanding community outcomes, but simply a function of how government funding programs are structured.

It is worth noting that this challenge is not unique to judo. Many gymnastics clubs, dance studios and other martial arts gyms across Australia face the same funding gap. While there are some small business grants and programs that commercial sport operators may be eligible for, access is inconsistent and the landscape is complex. Seek independent advice about what may be available in your specific circumstances.

 **Worth knowing:** The commercial model places the full financial risk on the operator. There is no membership base sharing the cost of equipment or facility upgrades, and no committee distributing the administrative load. This is manageable, particularly as the business grows, but it requires honest financial planning from the outset.

CHOOSING YOUR LEGAL STRUCTURE

The Hybrid Model: NFP Club with Private Coaching Business

For operators who want the benefits of both models without full exposure to either's risks, a third option is worth serious consideration, and is more common in the broader sport and recreation sector than many people realise.

The judo club is set up as an incorporated association with a committee that governs the club, holds the facility relationship, owns equipment, and accesses grants. Separately, the coach establishes a private coaching business entity and is engaged by the NFP under a formal services contract to deliver the coaching program.

This structure elegantly separates the two core functions of a dojo. The NFP club handles what NFPs do best: community governance, grant access and organisational compliance. The private coaching business handles what a motivated individual operator does best: delivering a high quality judo program, building membership and growing the business.

Under a well-drafted services contract, the coach's involvement, responsibilities, and remuneration are legally protected for the duration of the contract, addressing the key ownership risk of a straightforward NFP structure, while the NFP retains the governance independence it requires.

The Advantages

Because the NFP is a genuine incorporated association, it retains full eligibility for community sport grants and government funding. Equipment purchases, facility improvements, and participation programs can all be funded through grant income, reducing the capital burden on the private coaching business. At the same time, the coach operates a private entity that offers commercial flexibility and contractual certainty. This combines the financial benefits of both models.

The Challenges

This model is more structurally complex than either of the other two options. The relationship between the NFP and the private coaching business must be clearly defined, the services contract needs to be professionally prepared, and both parties must understand their respective obligations and protections. The additional legal and administrative setup involved means this structure suits operators who are serious about long-term viability and willing to invest in getting the foundations right.

 **Worth knowing:** Establishing an NFP incorporated association requires a minimum number of founding members, typically at least five in NSW. These should be genuinely independent of the coaching business, not employees, contractors or close family members of the coach, and capable of exercising genuine governance oversight. A committee that exists only on paper provides neither the governance the NFP requires nor the legal protection the coach needs.

YOUR REVENUE STREAMS

A sustainable dojo generates enough consistent revenue to cover costs, reinvest in growth and, where relevant, provide a reasonable return to the operator. This is more achievable when income is drawn from multiple sources rather than membership fees alone.

Membership fees are predictable and simple to manage but relying on them exclusively creates risk. Seasonal departures, slower enrolment periods or unexpected facility costs can quickly move a break-even dojo into deficit. There are also limits to how far fees or membership numbers can grow before affordability, space and coaching capacity become constraints.

Identifying and creating diverse revenue streams address this fragility in two ways.

1. They reduce dependence on any single income source, smoothing out the natural fluctuations in membership that every dojo experiences across the calendar year.
2. They open up income opportunities that do not require proportional growth in ongoing costs.

Over time, a dojo with multiple revenue streams is better positioned to invest in its facilities, retain and reward quality coaches, and absorb the kind of unexpected costs (i.e. equipment replacement, fee increases, rent reviews) that can destabilise an operation running on thin margins.

financially sustainable dojos.

- **Beginner courses:** Six- to eight-week standalone programs can attract new participants by offering a clear, low-commitment entry point. A structured conversion offer at the conclusion can support ongoing membership growth.
- **Grading fees:** Fees should reflect the cost of administering gradings, and the value participants place on formal recognition of their progress.
- **Merchandise and equipment:** Gi sales, club apparel and equipment referrals can provide a modest, low-effort supplementary income stream.
- **Events and competitions:** Entry and spectator fees can generate revenue and increase visibility, although events are generally more viable for established dojos with sufficient operational capacity.
- **Facility hire:** Dojos with dedicated premises can hire unused space to compatible users such as martial arts, yoga, fitness or dance providers.
- **Government grants and funding:** Not-for-profit operators should actively explore local, state and federal grants. Commercial operators may have fewer options but should investigate relevant small business and participation funding opportunities.

In addition to traditional revenue streams, Judo Australia promotes initiatives such as Sporting Schools, J-Girls, Adaptive Come and Try and Dynamic Balance, which can help dojos reach new participant groups and generate supplementary income.

Other opportunities may include programs for home-schooling families, children's birthday parties, school holiday activities and indoor training sessions for outdoor team sports during wet weather or periods of restricted ground access. These activities can broaden the dojo's offer, improve facility utilisation and introduce judo to new audiences.

UNDERSTANDING YOUR COSTS

One of the most common reasons new dojos struggle financially is that operators underestimate their costs before they start. Understanding your full cost base before you open is one of the most valuable things you can do.

- **Venue costs** - Typically the largest single cost for operators in shared or semi-permanent facilities. Expect to pay anywhere from \$20 to \$80 per hour for community hall hire in metropolitan NSW. Permanent leases in commercial or industrial locations carry fixed monthly costs ranging from a few hundred dollars in regional areas to several thousand in metropolitan locations.
- **Membership/Capitation fees** - Judo NSW affiliation is currently structured on a per-member basis, meaning your affiliation costs scale with your membership.
- **Equipment** - A basic mat setup sufficient for a 100 square metre training space can cost anywhere from \$3,000 to \$8,000 depending on mat quality. Mats are a long-term investment when properly maintained, but budget for ongoing maintenance, cleaning and eventual replacement.
- **Coaching and staffing** - In the early stages of a commercial dojo, the operator is typically the primary paid coach. Casual coaching rates in NSW typically range from \$30 to \$60 per hour. If you are not a qualified judo coach, engaging a qualified coach on a casual basis is a viable model, but it requires sufficient upfront financial investment to cover coaching costs before membership revenue reaches a sustainable level.
- **Marketing and administration** - Budget for at least \$500 to \$1,500 per year for basic marketing activity at startup, including website, social media and Google Business listing. This investment should grow as your membership and revenue grow.

Break-Even Illustration

The following scenarios illustrate approximate break-even positions at different stages of development. All figures are indicative only.

	Scenario 1: Startup	Scenario 2: Developing	Scenario 3: Established
Club Size	~20 members, shared venue	~50 members, semi-permanent	~100 members, dedicated facility
Venue hire/lease	\$400/month	\$1,200/month	\$3,000/month
Membership/ Affiliation fees	\$200/month	\$500/month	\$900/month
Equipment and maintenance	\$50/month	\$100/month	\$200/month
Coaching/staffing	—	\$400/month	\$2,000/month
Marketing/admin	\$100/month	\$200/month	\$700/month
Total monthly costs	~\$750	~\$2,400	~\$6,800
Revenue (blended rate)	\$1,400/month (\$70 avg)	\$4,250/month (\$85 avg)	\$9,000/month (\$90 avg)
Monthly surplus (pre-operator pay)	~\$650	~\$1,850	~\$2,200

These scenarios demonstrate an important principle: financial viability improves significantly with scale. The journey from 20 to 50 to 100 members is not just a participation milestone, it is a financial one. Every new member improves your cost efficiency and your capacity to invest in quality.

SETTING YOUR PRICING

Pricing is one of the areas where judo operators most consistently undervalue what they offer. There is a cultural tendency in community sport to keep prices as low as possible. The result is programs priced at levels that cannot sustain quality delivery and which ultimately undermines the very accessibility they were designed to protect.

Understanding the Market

Before setting your pricing, understand what comparable options in your area charge. BJJ gyms, karate schools, swimming lessons and gymnastics programs are all competing for the same family budget. In metropolitan areas of NSW, club based Judo programs typically range from \$10 to \$25 per week when calculated on a membership basis over 12-months (excluding Judo NSW membership fees). BJJ gyms on the other hand, charge anywhere between \$30 and \$90 per week.

These benchmarks suggest that well-priced judo programs have significant room to move beyond the modest fees that many clubs currently charge.

Understanding Cost vs Value

A common belief amongst many judo operators is that lower prices attract more members and help grow a program. While a low-cost offering may generate initial interest, it tends to work against the operator over time. Programs priced below market rate can carry a low perceived value. Prospective members and families often equate price with quality, and a budget price can signal a budget experience, regardless of what is actually being delivered on the mat.

There is also a practical constraint: when revenue is thin, so is the operator's capacity to invest. A low-margin program leaves little room to improve facilities, develop coaches, run events, or create the kind of community experiences that build loyalty and retention. The program becomes trapped at a baseline level of delivery, unable to evolve.

A moderately priced program, delivered well, changes this dynamic. When participants perceive genuine value; professional coaching, a clear progression pathway, a welcoming community, and tangible outcomes, they are willing to pay for it. That revenue, in turn, gives the operator the resources to reinvest and add further value: better equipment, additional sessions, grading events, social activities, or enhanced communication and support. This creates a virtuous cycle where investment in quality drives satisfaction, satisfaction justifies pricing, and pricing funds continued improvement.

The goal is not to charge the most the market will bear, but to price in a way that is sustainable, reflects the genuine value of what you offer, and gives you the capacity to keep improving it.

How to Set Your Pricing

A useful starting point is to calculate your cost of delivery and then add a margin that reflects the value you are providing. That value includes not just the session itself but the coaching expertise, the progression pathway, the community, the facility and the broader outcomes that judo delivers.

The following figures are illustrative only and will vary depending on your location, facility, program quality and competitive environment:

- Beginner course: \$150 to \$200 for six to eight weeks
- Term membership: \$200 to \$300 per term
- Monthly membership: \$80 to \$120 per month

Flexible payment options, family concessions, sibling discounts and reduced rates for financial hardship cases can address genuine accessibility concerns without setting a pricing precedent that undermines your overall revenue model. Be thoughtful about how you structure and communicate any concessions, and make sure they are sustainable within your financial plan.

Part 4: Building Your Team

BUILDING YOUR TEAM

No dojo grows on one person alone. No matter how passionate and capable you are, there is a ceiling to what any single operator can sustain, in energy, in time, and in the quality of experience you can offer your members.

Building a team is not a sign that you can't manage; it is the single most important step you can take to ensure your dojo keeps growing.

This section walks you through the two foundational roles every dojo needs, how staffing typically evolves as your membership grows, and the practical considerations around engaging coaches and support staff.



The Two Roles Every Dojo Needs

Building a successful dojo requires two distinct skill sets to be present and functioning well: operational leadership and technical coaching. In the dojo environment these roles are traditionally defined as:

- **The Dojo-Cho.** The owner and operational lead, is responsible for financial management and budgeting, membership administration and communication, facility management and compliance, strategic planning and marketing, and the overall participant experience. These responsibilities require organisation, business acumen, people skills and strategic thinking. They do not require a black belt, although a genuine understanding of and passion for judo is essential.
- **The Sensei.** The lead coach and technical director, is responsible for program design and delivery, participant development and progression, coaching standards and culture, and the maintenance of judo's values and traditions. These responsibilities require genuine judo knowledge, coaching qualifications, and the ability to create an environment where participants of all ages and abilities feel challenged, supported and valued.

In the early stages of most dojos, the operator will inevitably cover both roles. If you are a qualified judo coach starting your own dojo, you will likely be both simultaneously. However, if you are a business-minded operator without coaching qualifications, you will need to engage a qualified coach to be the Sensei from the outset, either as a business partner or on a casual hourly basis, while you focus on the operational side.

As your membership grows, your first priority should be building coaching capacity. An assistant coach, initially perhaps a senior student or a part-time qualified coach, allows you to expand your program, serve more participants simultaneously, and begin the process of reducing your personal dependence on being present for every session.

VOLUNTEERS

Volunteers are the lifeblood of community sport in Australia. Many dojos (particularly those with a NFP structure) begin with a mix of volunteer and paid contributions, and many continue this way for years.

A senior student who helps warm up junior classes, parents who manage sign-in sheets, club members who help maintain equipment are all the types of volunteer contributions that can make a huge difference to the smooth operations of the dojo.

That said, volunteers are not simply unpaid employees, and treating them as such creates problems, especially in a commercial structure. Some things to keep in mind when engaging volunteers:

- **Be clear about expectations.** A volunteer who is given unclear or ever-expanding responsibilities will quickly burn out or feel taken advantage of. Be clear on the task or role you are asking them to perform.
- **Recognise their contribution.** A thank-you, a reduced membership fee, or simply being acknowledged in front of the group costs very little and matters a great deal.
- **Don't create dependency.** If your program cannot function without a particular volunteer, you have a risk. Make sure critical roles have some level of redundancy or succession.
- **Check your insurance.** Volunteers should be covered under your club's public liability and personal accident insurance.



💡 Worth knowing: In NSW, anyone who works or volunteers in a child-related role (including assistant coaches, mat supervisors, and parent helpers with regular involvement) is required to hold a valid Working With Children check.

This requirement applies to unpaid volunteers just as it does to paid staff. Being a well-known club member or a parent of a participant does not exempt someone from this requirement.

TRANSITIONING TO PAID ROLES

When a volunteer's contribution becomes regular, significant, and something your dojo genuinely depends on, it is time to consider a paid arrangement. This is not just about fairness, it is also about clarity, reliability, and your legal obligations.

One of the most common reasons operators delay transitioning to paid staff is the assumption that they simply cannot afford it. In practice, the question is usually more nuanced and the cost of not having the right support often exceeds the cost of having it.

Rather than thinking of a coaching hire as an additional cost, consider it as part of what makes your program viable. A second coach allows you to:

- Run parallel sessions (e.g. juniors and seniors at the same time)
- Increase your session capacity without stretching yourself thin
- Take time away from the mat to focus on the operational side of the business
- Cover sessions when you are unavailable, so your program never has to cancel

When modelled this way, the question shifts from “can I afford to pay an additional coach?” to “what additional membership growth do I need to cover the cost?”. In most cases, the answer is more achievable than operators expect.

Employment Arrangements

In Australia, dojo staff are generally engaged in one of three ways.

- **Casual employment:** Paid on a per session basis, with no guarantee of regular hours. Most coaching roles in small dojos will fall here initially.
- **Part-time or full-time employment:** Staff working regular weekly hours. This is appropriate for dojos with more established programs.
- **Contractors:** Where a coach operates their own business and invoices your dojo for their services. This can work well for specialist coaches or guest instructors.

⚠ **Common trap:** A contractor arrangement must reflect genuine independence and not a way to avoid paying employment entitlements such as superannuation, leave loading, or casual loading. The ATO takes sham contracting seriously, and the penalties for operators who misclassify employees as contractors can be significant.

Ask yourself: does this person set their own hours, work for multiple clients, and carry their own insurance? If the honest answer is no, they are likely an employee — not a contractor. Seek advice before proceeding.

Onboarding for Success

Bringing someone into your dojo, whether as a volunteer assistant or a paid coach, is an investment. The return on that investment depends largely on how well you set them up from the start.

A good onboarding process does not have to be elaborate but it does need to be intentional. A simple one-page overview of how your dojo runs, what you expect, and who to ask when something is unclear will dramatically reduce the friction of bringing someone new on board. Other important items you may wish to cover include:

- **Your dojo's values and culture:** what you stand for, how you treat members, what makes your program distinctive
- **Practical logistics:** where things are, how sessions are structured, what to do if something goes wrong
- **Safeguarding and safety:** Working with Children checks, emergency procedures, incident reporting
- **Communication:** how and when you'll check in, what good performance looks like, how feedback flows both ways.

GROWING BEYOND YOU

From Operator to Manager

The transition from doing everything yourself to leading a team is one of the hardest shifts any small business operator makes, and dojo operators are no exception. In the early stages of building a dojo, doing everything yourself is not just unavoidable, it can often be genuinely more efficient. You are the fastest, most knowledgeable person for almost every task, and the overhead of explaining, delegating and following up can feel like it slows you down.

The problem is that this model has a limit and failing to plan how to bring in additional support is the number one reason many dojos stop growing. A dojo that depends on a single operator for its coaching, its administration, its marketing, its member communications and its financial management is not a business, it is a job.

The transition to genuine management requires a shift in how you think about your role. The measure of your effectiveness stops being how much you personally accomplish and starts being how well the people around you are supported to accomplish things on the dojo's behalf. This is a conceptual shift as much as a practical one, and many operators resist it because delegation feels like losing control rather than gaining capacity.

Some practical anchors for making this transition:

- **Document before you delegate.** If a task exists only in your head, you cannot hand it to someone else without significant risk of it being done differently than you intend. A simple written process, even a bullet-point checklist, reduces that risk and makes delegation sustainable.
- **Delegate outcomes, not just tasks.** Telling someone what to do and telling someone what result you need are different things. The second approach gives people the context to make good decisions without referring back to you constantly, which is the point of delegation.
- **Accept that things will be done differently than you would do them.** Differently is not the same as worse. A dojo where everything must be done the operator's way is a dojo that cannot grow beyond the operator's personal bandwidth.
- **Build accountability without micromanagement.** Regular, brief check-ins (i.e. a five-minute conversation at the start of a session, a monthly review of how a role is going) creates the feedback loop that keeps things on track without the overhead of constant supervision.
- **Give people room to grow into roles.** Most people perform better in responsibilities they have been given the chance to develop into than in responsibilities they have been handed fully formed. A developing coach who has been progressively trusted with more responsibility will outperform, over time, a fully qualified coach who has been given a rigid role description and no autonomy.

Part 4: Choosing Your Dojo

How to find, set up and grow your physical space.

YOUR FACILITY

Your facility is more than a place to train. It is the physical expression of your dojo's identity, the first thing a new participant sees, the environment that shapes every session, and one of the most significant factors in whether people stay or leave. Getting your facility right does not mean starting with the perfect space. It means understanding what you need at each stage of your journey, making the most of what you have, and planning deliberately for what comes next.

Why Your Facility Matters More Than You Might Think

Walk into a well-presented, permanent judo dojo and the experience is immediately different from arriving at a school hall where mats are still being laid out ten minutes before class. The dedicated dojo communicates professionalism, permanence and commitment. The school hall, however clean and well-managed, communicates something more temporary. It raises questions about whether this program will still be here next term.

This is not an argument against shared venues. They are a practical and often necessary starting point. It is an argument for understanding how your facility shapes perception and experience, and for making deliberate choices about how to maximise both regardless of what space you are working with.

Disclaimer: The facility costs and figures referenced in this section are indicative only and will vary significantly depending on location, facility type and individual circumstances. Always seek independent financial and legal advice before entering into any lease, licence or fit-out commitment.

Choosing the Right Location

The most visible, accessible locations are also the most expensive. The most affordable locations are often the least visible. Judo shares this challenge with gymnastics and other indoor sports requiring significant clear floor space. The floor area needed for a functional dojo mat (ideally 200 square metres or more for an established program) is simply not affordable at retail rents in most metropolitan locations, pushing operators toward industrial and commercial precincts.

This is not necessarily a disadvantage. Many of the most successful martial arts facilities in Australia, including some of the highest-performing BJJ gyms, operate from industrial locations fitted out to a high standard and marketed effectively. What matters is not the postcode but the presentation, the accessibility and the quality of the experience inside.

 **Worth knowing:** When evaluating a potential dedicated facility location, prioritise accessibility by car and public transport, adequate parking for family drop-off and pickup, clear and visible signage opportunity, and ceiling height sufficient for safe judo practice. A minimum clear ceiling height of around 3.5 metres is generally considered appropriate for throwing techniques. A well-presented industrial unit that ticks all of these boxes will outperform a poorly accessible retail location every time.

FIT-OUT AND LEASE CONSIDERATIONS

Taking on a dedicated facility involves navigating a commercial lease and a fit-out process that many first-time operators find unfamiliar. The following covers the key things to understand and the most common traps to avoid.

Leases

A commercial lease is a legally binding commitment, typically for a term of three to five years with options to renew. Unlike a residential tenancy, commercial leases offer limited statutory protections for tenants. The terms are largely negotiated between the parties, which means your ability to negotiate matters significantly. Before signing any lease, have it reviewed by an independent solicitor with commercial property experience. This is not an optional step.

Key things to negotiate and clarify before signing:

- **The rent-free period.** It is standard practice in commercial leasing for landlords to offer a rent-free period at the commencement of a lease to allow the tenant to fit out the space. In the current market this might be anywhere from one to three months. Always ask for it, even if it is not offered.
- **The fit-out contribution.** Some landlords, particularly those with vacant properties they are keen to lease, will contribute financially to the cost of fitting out the space. Always ask.
- **Permitted use.** Ensure the lease explicitly permits the use of the premises as a martial arts or fitness facility. Some commercial leases restrict permitted use in ways that could create problems down the track.
- **Make-good obligations.** Understand what you are required to do at the end of the lease. Some leases require tenants to return the space to its original condition, which can mean removing fit-out at significant cost. Negotiate this at the outset.

Fit-Out

Fitting out a dedicated dojo space involves at minimum the installation of quality judo mats, appropriate flooring or underlay, storage solutions, changing facilities if not already present, and basic branding and signage. Depending on the condition of the space it may also involve partition walls, lighting upgrades, ventilation improvements and a reception or waiting area.

A functional dojo fit-out can begin from approximately \$5,000, although costs will vary significantly depending on the size of the space, the number of members to be accommodated and the standard of finish required. As an indicative guide, smaller fit-outs may range from \$5,000 to \$15,000, while larger or more comprehensive fit-outs may cost \$20,000 to \$50,000 or more.

Judo NSW may also be able to support eligible operators for any grant or assistance opportunities which may be available.

Operators should budget conservatively and allow for costs to exceed initial estimates. Priority should be given to the elements that most directly affect safety, functionality and the participant experience, including mat quality, lighting, ventilation, storage, amenities and overall presentation, before investing in non-essential aesthetic upgrades.

⚠ Common trap: Operators sometimes sign leases without fully understanding their make-good obligations, then face unexpected costs of tens of thousands of dollars when they vacate a premises. Always understand and negotiate your make-good position before you sign.

FUNCTIONAL REQUIREMENTS OF A JUDO FACILITY

Regardless of whether you are operating from a shared hall or a dedicated facility, there are functional requirements that every judo space needs to meet. These are the baseline for safe, credible delivery.

Area	Minimum Requirements	Developing dojo	Dedicated dojo
Mat area	Safe clear training space, approved mats, safety buffer around perimeter	100 to 150 sqm mat area	200 to 300 sqm, sprung floor or shock-absorbing underlay
Storage	Basic mat storage solution	Secure on-site storage	Integrated storage as part of fit-out
Amenities	Toilets and drinking water	Changerooms, basic waiting area	Showers, social/observation space
Location	Accessible location	Parking and public transport access, basic signage	High-visibility location, strong branding
Safety	Safe access and egress, appropriate lighting and ventilation	Child safety and supervision arrangements in place	Disability access, full compliance

Even a modest waiting area or informal gathering space makes a meaningful difference to the participant and family experience. Parents who have somewhere comfortable to sit and watch their child train are more engaged, more loyal and more likely to become advocates for your dojo.

Three Stages of Your Dojo

Rather than thinking about facility types as fixed categories, think about them as stages on a development pathway. Most successful and growing dojos move through some version of these three stages over time.

1. Shared facility: a community hall, school gymnasium or similar space accessed on a scheduled basis.
2. Semi-permanent facility: where you have priority access and can leave equipment in place between sessions.
3. Dedicated facility: a space leased or owned exclusively for your dojo.

Each stage has its own advantages, limitations and financial profile. They also have a natural ceiling which can limit your growth. Understanding where that ceiling is before you hit it is what allows you to plan your next move rather than react to it.

An overview of the key features of each stage is provided on the following pages.

 **Worth knowing:** Gymnastics clubs in Australia offer a useful reference point for understanding the facility journey in a comparable sport. Many of the most successful gymnastics clubs began in shared community spaces and progressed over years to purpose-built facilities. The ones that made this transition successfully did so deliberately, planning their facility pathway from the beginning rather than simply reacting to growth as it happened. The same disciplined approach applies to judo.

THE THREE FACILITY STAGES - SHARED FACILITY

Stage 1: Shared Facility

A shared facility is any space you access on a scheduled basis without exclusive use. School halls, community centres, church halls, PCYC venues and council recreation spaces are the most common examples in NSW. You arrive, set up, deliver your program and pack down.

Shared facilities offer the lowest barrier to entry for a new operator. Costs are typically modest, lease risk is minimal, and the administrative burden is largely carried by the venue operator. For a startup dojo testing demand, this is an entirely appropriate starting point.

The limitations are real and worth understanding before you commit. Access is constrained by the venue's broader schedule. School holidays, community events and competing bookings can disrupt your program consistency. The requirement to set up and pack down mats for every session is more than an inconvenience: it is a meaningful operational burden that accumulates over time into a significant constraint on growth. Branding and identity are also challenging in a shared space.

If you are starting in a shared facility, there are practical steps that will make a meaningful difference:

- **On-site storage.** A lockable storage room or cage eliminates the need to transport equipment every session and can save hours of effort every week.
- **Visual identity.** Invest in portable signage, a club banner and branded clothing for coaches to communicate professionalism in an environment that might otherwise feel generic.
- **Negotiate your access agreement carefully.** Ensure you have guaranteed access during school holidays and right of first refusal on additional time slots.
- **Get everything in writing.** Verbal agreements with venue managers who later move on are one of the most common sources of disruption for shared-facility operators.



⚠ Common trap: Many operators stay in shared facilities longer than they should because the low cost feels financially safe. The reality is that the ceiling on growth in a shared facility, limited access hours, no permanent setup, restricted programming, can itself become a financial constraint. The cost of staying too long is not always visible on a spreadsheet, but it is real.

THE THREE FACILITY STAGES - SEMI-PERMANENT

Stage 2 : Semi-Permanent Facility

A semi-permanent facility is an arrangement where you have regular, priority access to a space and some ability to leave mats or equipment in place between sessions. This might be a council facility with a formal licence agreement, a dedicated area within a larger recreation centre, or a commercial space leased on a part-time basis.

The transition from shared to semi-permanent is one of the most meaningful steps in a dojo's development. The reduction of setup and pack-down requirements frees up time and energy for coaching, marketing and member engagement. Semi-permanent access also typically enables a broader program schedule, making it possible to offer daytime sessions, additional evening classes or women-only programs that would have been impractical in a tightly constrained shared venue.

⚠ Common trap: Operators sometimes invest significantly in improving a semi-permanent space, purchasing better mats, installing storage, adding signage, only to find that the venue operator claims ownership of improvements or uses them as leverage in lease renewal negotiations. Always clarify in writing who owns any improvements you make to a space before you make them.



THE THREE FACILITY STAGES – DEDICATED DOJO

Stage 3: Dedicated Facility

A dedicated facility is a space you lease or own exclusively for operating your dojo. Whatever its form, it is yours: permanently set up, consistently available and fully branded as your dojo.

A dedicated facility is the strongest platform available for dojo growth. It enables a full program schedule, a professional and consistent participant experience, strong branding and street presence, and the operational efficiency that comes from never having to set up or pack down. The most successful operators in comparable sports (gymnastics clubs being the clearest parallel) have almost universally made this transition as the foundation of their long-term sustainability.

A dedicated facility comes with significantly higher fixed costs. Rent or lease payments, utilities, insurance, maintenance and fit-out costs all need to be covered by your membership revenue before you see any return. This requires a sufficient and stable membership base before you commit, and honest financial modelling to ensure the numbers work.

⚠ Common trap: One of the most common mistakes operators make when taking on a dedicated facility is committing to a space that is larger and more expensive than their current membership can support, on the assumption that the better facility will quickly drive membership growth. Sometimes it does. Sometimes it does not. Always model your break-even position based on your current membership, not your projected one.



Part 5: Growing Your Membership

How to attract, convert and retain
participants

GROWING YOUR MEMBERSHIP

How to attract, convert and retain participants

A great facility and a well-structured business model are the foundations of a sustainable dojo. But neither means anything without members.

Building a stable and self-sustaining membership by attracting the right participants, converting their initial interest into commitment, and retaining them through the inevitable moments when life competes for their attention, is the ongoing work of every dojo operator. This starts on the first day you open and continues to the day you hand the business on.

This section takes you through the participation funnel, from the moment someone first hears about your dojo to the point where they become one of its most committed advocates.



THE PARTICIPATION FUNNEL

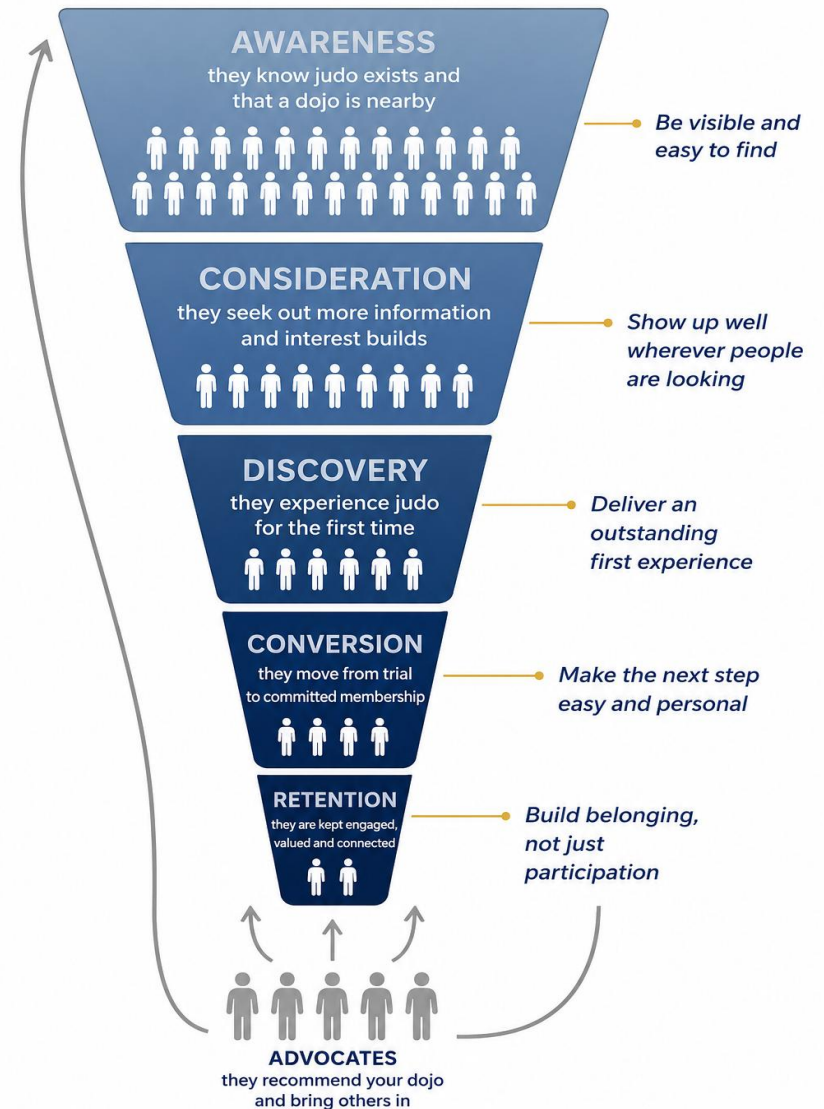
Between a person first becoming aware of your dojo and becoming a committed long-term member, there are several distinct stages, and each stage requires a different response from you as an operator.

Think of this journey as a funnel. At the top, a large number of people become aware that your dojo exists. Some will become curious enough to make an enquiry. Some of those will attend a com and try session or a beginner course. Some of them will convert to membership, and some of those members will stay long enough to become genuine advocates; people who recommend your dojo to others and contribute to its culture and community.

At every stage, people drop out. The job of a dojo operator is to understand where the drop-out is happening, why it is occurring and then respond by adapting the design of your programs, communications and environment to reduce it.

For many judo clubs, the majority of potential members are lost before they ever set foot on the mat. Not because the program is poor, but because the awareness and enquiry stages are handled poorly or not at all.

Understanding and actively managing the full participation funnel (not just the coaching that happens once people arrive) is one of the clearest distinctions between a dojo that grows and one that stagnates.



THE PARTICIPATION FUNNEL - AWARENESS

Awareness sits at the top of the funnel. Before a person can enquire, try a class or become a member, they first have to know your dojo exists. For most operators this is where the largest volume of potential members is lost, not through poor programs or bad experiences, but simply through invisibility.

Building your digital presence

For most potential participants today, the first thing they do when they become curious about judo is search online. If your dojo does not appear (or appears poorly) in that search, you have lost a potential member before they ever made contact.

Building a basic but effective digital presence is not technically complex or particularly expensive, however it does require consistent attention and a willingness to show up online with the same professionalism and care that you bring to your coaching. There are three key areas to focus your attention when building your digital presence:



Google Business Listing

A Google Business listing is the single highest-priority digital asset for a local dojo. It is free, relatively straightforward to set up and ensures your dojo appears when someone searches for martial arts or judo in your area.

Keep it up to date with accurate opening hours, contact details and photos.

As you get participants through your dojo, encourage them to post a participant reviews. Positive Google reviews are one of the most powerful conversion tools available to a local business and should be actively encouraged from satisfied members.



Website

Your website does not need to be elaborate, but it needs to answer the questions a potential participant is asking:

- What is judo?
- What programs do you offer?
- Where are you located?
- How much does it cost?
- How do I get started?

A clean, mobile-friendly website with clear calls to action (e.g. “book a trial” or “sign up for a beginner course”) is sufficient for most operators in the early stages.



Social Media

Social media is where awareness is built and community is expressed. For most dojo operators, a well-managed Facebook page and Instagram account are sufficient. The content that works best is not polished advertising but authentic, human content that gives potential participants a genuine sense of what your dojo looks and feels like. This includes

- Short training footage clips
- Grading celebrations
- Coach introductions, and;
- Participant stories.

These all serve to build trust and connection in a way that promotional messaging rarely does.

THE PARTICIPATION FUNNEL – AWARENESS

Paid Versus Organic Reach

This is one of the most important and least understood aspects of digital marketing for small operators, and it is worth understanding clearly so you can generate the best returns on your investment into social media.

- **Organic reach** refers to the audience you reach without paying. These are the people who see your content because they already follow your page, or because someone they know has shared it. Organic reach on most social media platforms has declined significantly over the past decade. A post on your Facebook page will typically be seen by only a small fraction of your followers, often less than ten percent unless it generates significant engagement or you pay to promote it.
- **Paid reach** refers to the audience you reach through paid advertising (i.e. boosted posts, targeted ad campaigns, sponsored content). Paid social media advertising allows you to put your dojo in front of people who do not already follow you and may never have heard of you, targeting them by location, age, interests and behaviour.

A modest paid digital advertising budget (as little as \$100 to \$250 per month) can generate meaningful awareness in your local area if the advertising is well-targeted and the content is compelling.

⚠ **Common trap:** Many operators invest significant time creating social media content that reaches only their existing followers, then conclude that social media does not work for growing their membership. Social media absolutely works, but organic content alone rarely drives significant new member acquisition. A small, well-targeted paid advertising budget alongside quality organic content is a far more effective combination than either alone.



THE PARTICIPATION FUNNEL – CONSIDERATION

The next stage in the participant funnel is consideration. This is where potential participants move from passive awareness to active evaluation; researching your dojo online, encountering judo through community events and school programs, or hearing about it from someone they trust.

The question they are answering is no longer simply "does judo exist?" but "is judo right for me?"

Your job at this stage is to shape the information they find to give you the best chance of progressing them to the next stage.



Community partnerships and local visibility

Not every potential participant will find you through a search engine. For many, the moment of consideration begins in the community itself; at a school event, a local fair, or through a conversation with someone who already trains. Community partnerships with local schools, health services, council recreation programs and community organisations place your dojo in front of people in contexts that carry an implicit endorsement no digital advertisement can replicate.

Demonstrating judo at local events, connecting with local media around competition results or human interest stories, and building relationships with organisations that serve your target participant groups are all low-cost, high-credibility ways to shape what people see and hear about your dojo while they are forming their view of it.

Word of mouth

Word of mouth operates in the same space. When a trusted friend or family member speaks positively about your dojo, it carries a weight that no marketing campaign can match, by arriving at exactly the right moment, from exactly the right source, to someone who is already asking whether judo might be for them.

But word of mouth itself is not a strategy. It is an output, the natural result of consistently delivering an outstanding participant experience. A dojo that relies on it word of mouth alone will grow slowly in good times and contract quickly in difficult ones.

Your existing membership defines the ceiling of your word-of-mouth reach, and for most dojos that ceiling is reached well before the dojo reaches its potential. Nurture it and create the conditions for it, but never mistake it for a substitute for deliberate outreach.

THE PARTICIPATION FUNNEL – CONSIDERATION

Responding to enquiries

When a potential participant makes an enquiry, they have moved through awareness and consideration and are signalling that they are ready to take a next step. How you respond to that signal (i.e. how quickly, how personally, and how clearly) will determine whether they take it.

The most common failure point at this stage is not rudeness or bad information. It is delay. A person who sends an enquiry on a Tuesday evening and receives a response four days later has almost certainly moved on, not because they lost interest in judo but because the gap gave their hesitation time to win. Enquiries should be responded to within 24 hours as a baseline, and within a few hours where possible. The faster the response, the more likely the person is still in the mindset that prompted them to reach out. Speed matters, but so does tone. A response that feels generic, impersonal or transactional misses the opportunity that a warm enquiry represents.

Where possible, a phone call or voice message is more effective than a text or email at this stage. It is harder to ignore, warmer in tone, and it begins to build the personal connection that will carry the person from enquiry through to trial.

A few practical habits that make a meaningful difference:

- Assign clear responsibility for responding to enquiries so nothing falls through the cracks during busy periods or when a key person is unavailable.
- Keep a simple log of common enquiries and question. This can help you refine the information and messaging on your website and social media.
- Follow up if someone does not respond to your response to their enquiry. A single gentle nudge a few days later recovers a meaningful proportion of enquiries that would otherwise lapse.



THE PARTICIPATION FUNNEL - DISCOVERY

A person who is curious about judo is not yet a member. Getting them from awareness to actually setting foot on your mat is a distinct challenge, and one that many operators typically rush in an attempt to convert them into membership.

Come-and-try sessions

A single come-and-try session (a free or very low cost, open to anyone, with no obligation to continue) is one of the most effective top-of-funnel tools available to you.

It removes every barrier to initial trial and puts your program in front of people who might never have committed to a full beginner course without experiencing judo first.

The key to making come-and-try sessions work is the follow-up. A well-run session with no structured follow-up communication is a missed opportunity. Every participant who attends a come and try session should receive a personal follow-up (ideally within 48 hours). This may be as simple as a message or email that thanks them for their attendance, provides an opportunity to answer any questions they might have, and provides clear and simple instructions on what to do next.

Beginner Course Design

For many dojo operators, the conventional approach to introducing a new participant to judo has involved dropping them into a regular class alongside experienced practitioners, expecting them to acquire a Gi and immersing them immediately in formal judo etiquette and structure.

For a child who has never been on a mat, or an adult who is slightly nervous about trying a contact sport, this experience can feel intimidating and unwelcoming, particularly in this early stage before they have decided whether they enjoy the sport or not. In today's market, that model loses potential members before they have had a chance to discover what judo can genuinely offer them.

A better approach is to design an effective beginner program that caters specifically for people who have never tried judo before. This approach meets them where they are and introduces them progressively to judo's techniques, values and community.

The most effective programs generally:

- Have a defined start and end point, typically six to eight weeks, which removes the open-ended commitment that deters many potential participants.
- Are delivered separately from regular training classes, so beginners are not intimidated by the skill level of experienced practitioners, at a similar time so they are still exposed what regular classes look like.
- Allow participants to start in activewear before requiring the purchase of a Gi, removing a financial and psychological barrier to trial.
- End with a clear and compelling invitation to continue, ideally a structured conversion offer that makes the next step easy and attractive.
- Provides the participants with a guided transition into regular classes.

 **Worth knowing:** A beginner course priced as a standalone program, rather than as a discounted introduction to ongoing membership, tends to attract more initial sign-ups because it feels like a lower commitment. The conversion to membership happens at the end of the course, not at the beginning. This is a small but meaningful structural difference that can significantly improve your conversion rate.

THE PARTICIPATION FUNNEL - CONVERSION

The moment a beginner course ends is one of the most important operational moments in your dojo's membership cycle. A participant who has completed a beginner program has already invested time, built some early skill, and formed initial connections with coaches and fellow participants. They are more likely to continue than at any previous point. But they will not automatically take the next step. They need to be asked, clearly and personally.

This conversion moment requires deliberate design. It is not enough to mention at the end of the final session that ongoing membership is available. Effective conversion requires a structured and personalised offer, not a generic message requiring the participant to take additional step. What this looks like is:

- **A personal conversation**, not just an email or flyer, between the coach and each participant at the conclusion of the course.
- **A specific offer**, a discounted first month or a bundled Gi and membership deal that creates a reason to act now rather than later.
- **A simple and frictionless sign-up process** that can be completed at the dojo on the day, while motivation is highest.
- **A clear articulation of what comes next**: which classes they would join, who they would train with, and what they would learn in the coming months.

The same principles apply to participants who attended a come-and-try session without proceeding to a beginner course. Follow up personally, remove barriers, and make the next step obvious and easy.



THE PARTICIPATION FUNNEL - RETENTION

Attracting new members is important. Retaining the members you have is more important. A dojo that attracts twenty new members a year but loses fifteen is not growing, it is running to stand still.

Drop-off in judo participation tends to cluster around a small number of predictable transition points:

- Conversion from beginner course or trial to ongoing membership.
- Junior to teenage participation.
- Recreational participation to competitive pathways.
- End of the membership year.

Understanding where and why members leave, and designing deliberate responses to those moments, is one of the highest-return investments a dojo operator can make.

The belonging factor

Beyond specific program interventions, the single most powerful retention tool available to any dojo operator is culture. Participants who feel a genuine sense of belonging, who feel known, valued and connected to the people around them, keep coming back. Participants who feel like customers in a transactional relationship leave when a cheaper or more convenient option appears.

This is one of judo's most genuine and underutilised competitive advantages. The relationships formed on the mat, between coach, participant and training partners, can be some of the most enduring in sport. Cultivating these relationships deliberately, celebrating milestones and achievements visibly, and creating opportunities for the dojo community to connect beyond the mat are all low-cost, high-return retention investments.

⚠ Common trap: Operators who focus exclusively on attracting new members while neglecting the experience of existing ones create a leaky bucket. No matter how much new membership flows in at the top, the retention failures at the bottom undermine growth. Always balance your recruitment effort with deliberate attention to the experience of the members you already have.

Balancing participation and performance

For many operators the performance pathway (developing athletes who compete at state, national and international level) is a central part of their dojo's identity and purpose. While this can be entirely appropriate; a dojo designed exclusively around competition and performance is leaving the majority of its potential participants unserved.

Most people who try judo are motivated (initially) by fitness, self-improvement, social connection, personal challenge or the developmental benefits for their children. A dojo that communicates, explicitly or implicitly, that it is primarily for serious competitors creates a barrier for the recreational participant who might otherwise become a committed long-term member.

The most sustainable dojos offer both pathways clearly and without hierarchy. Recreational participants provide the financial base that supports the competitive program. The competitive program provides the aspiration and credibility that attracts new participants. Neither exists as well without the other.

💡 Worth knowing: A broader participation base directly strengthens your competitive program over time. A larger pool of participants means a larger talent pool from which competitive athletes emerge. Investing in recreational programs is not a distraction from competitive programs, it is the foundation.

Part 6: Tracking Your Progress

Simple tools to know if your dojo is healthy.

TRACKING YOUR PROGRESS

Building a dojo is not a set-and-forget exercise. The most successful operators are not necessarily the ones who get everything right from the beginning, they are the ones who pay attention, notice when something is not working, and act on it before small problems become large ones. You do not need sophisticated software or a business analyst to know whether your dojo is healthy. You need a small number of meaningful indicators, an honest habit of reviewing them regularly, and the confidence to seek support when the picture is not as good as you would like.

The Five Numbers That Matter

Tracking twenty metrics inconsistently is far less useful than tracking five metrics religiously. The following five numbers give you a clear, real-time picture of your dojo's health. Review them monthly without exception, record them somewhere simple, and look for trends over time rather than reacting to individual data points.

- 1. Total active members.** This is your single most important number. Not registrations, not trial participants, not people who came once, active members who are currently enrolled and attending regularly. A dojo that does not know exactly how many active members it has at any given moment is a dojo that cannot plan, price or grow effectively.
- 2. New members this month.** How many genuinely new participants joined this month? A consistently low new member number is an early warning sign that your pipeline is blocked somewhere; either awareness is low, your trial experience is not converting, or your beginner program needs attention.
- 3. Cancellations and reasons.** How many members left this month, and why? Tracking the reasons is more important than the number itself. A pattern of cancellations citing cost suggests a pricing or value communication issue. Scheduling suggests a program flexibility problem. Loss of interest in juniors suggests a retention issue at a key transition point.

- 4. Average session attendance rate.** Divide total session attendances in a month by active members multiplied by the number of sessions available to them. A declining attendance rate, even before cancellations appear, is often the earliest warning sign that members are disengaging.
- 5. Monthly revenue versus costs.** Are you covering your costs? Are you generating a surplus? A simple monthly comparison of what came in and what went out, tracked consistently over time, gives you everything you need to make informed decisions.

The Dojo Health Self-Assessment Tool

The five numbers tell you what is happening right now. The self-assessment tool found in the appendix helps you step back and evaluate the overall health and maturity of your dojo across the four key dimensions that matter most. Use this tool at least twice a year, and be honest with yourself.

 **Worth knowing:** A brief, friendly exit conversation or a simple one-question message to departing members, "We are sorry to see you go, could you tell us one thing we could do better?", generates invaluable intelligence at almost no cost. Most people are willing to share honest feedback when they are leaving. Use it.

 **Common trap:** Many operators review their finances only when something goes wrong. Monthly financial review, however brief, transforms financial management from a crisis response into a planning tool. Schedule it. Do it. It takes less time than you think and provides more value than almost anything else you can do for your business.

TRACKING YOUR PROGRESS

Self-Assessment Tool: Interpreting your results

Mostly green across all four dimensions suggests a dojo that is well-founded, growing sustainably and positioned for the next stage of development. Focus on consolidation and deliberate investment in the areas that will drive the next phase of growth.

A mix of green and amber is entirely normal for a developing dojo and reflects honest progress across a complex set of challenges. Identify the amber statements that, if addressed, would have the greatest positive impact on your dojo's sustainability and growth, and focus your energy there first.

Any red ratings deserve immediate attention. A single red in one area can undermine progress across all others. If your financial model is not working, facility improvements will not save you. If your retention is broken, marketing will not grow you. Reds are not causes for alarm, they are causes for action

 **Worth knowing:** Your self-assessment results will look very different at six months than they do at three years. That is exactly as it should be. The purpose of this tool is not to achieve a perfect green score, it is to give you an honest, consistent picture of where you are so you can make better decisions about where to focus next. Keep your previous assessments so you can see how far you have come.

Knowing When to Ask for Help

There is a particular kind of pride that runs through the judo community, a self-reliance that comes from a sport that teaches you to get back up, adapt and keep going. It is one of judo's most admirable qualities. It is also, occasionally, one of its most counterproductive ones.

Running a dojo is hard. Not all the time, and not in every respect, but genuinely, meaningfully hard in ways that even experienced operators can find isolating. The most important thing to understand is this: asking for help is not an admission of failure. It is what experienced operators do.

Recognise the early warning signs

The time to ask for help is before a problem becomes a crisis, not after. Common early warning signs include:

- **Membership has declined for three or more consecutive months** without a clear seasonal explanation.
- **Monthly costs are consistently exceeding revenue** and you do not have a clear plan to address the gap.
- **You are feeling consistently overwhelmed** by the operational demands of the dojo and your coaching quality is suffering as a result.
- **You are avoiding reviewing your finances** because the picture is uncomfortable.
- **You have been relying on the same two or three people** for everything and one of them is showing signs of burnout.

None of these situations is irreversible. All of them are easier to address early than late.

FINDING SUPPORT

Where can you find support

Talk to other operators

One of the most practical and immediately accessible forms of support available to you is a conversation with another dojo operator who has faced similar challenges. The judo community in NSW includes operators at every stage of the development journey, from people who are just starting out to people who have been building sustainable dojos for decades. Their experience, hard-won and genuine, is available to you if you are willing to ask for it.

Judo clubs in NSW are not competing with each other for the same pool of participants. They are all competing with the same external forces: the proliferation of alternative activities, the changing expectations of modern participants, and the structural challenges of delivering community sport in a demanding environment. What strengthens one dojo ultimately strengthens the sport. Remember, a rising tide lifts all boats.

Lean on Judo NSW

Judo NSW exists to support the clubs and operators that make the sport possible. Whether you need guidance on affiliation, coaching accreditation, program development, funding applications or simply a conversation with someone who understands the challenges you are facing, reach out. The organisation is not a compliance body to be managed at arm's length. It is a resource to be used and can help with details of the specific support programs, tools and introductions to other operators. If you are unsure where to start, the best first step is always a direct conversation.



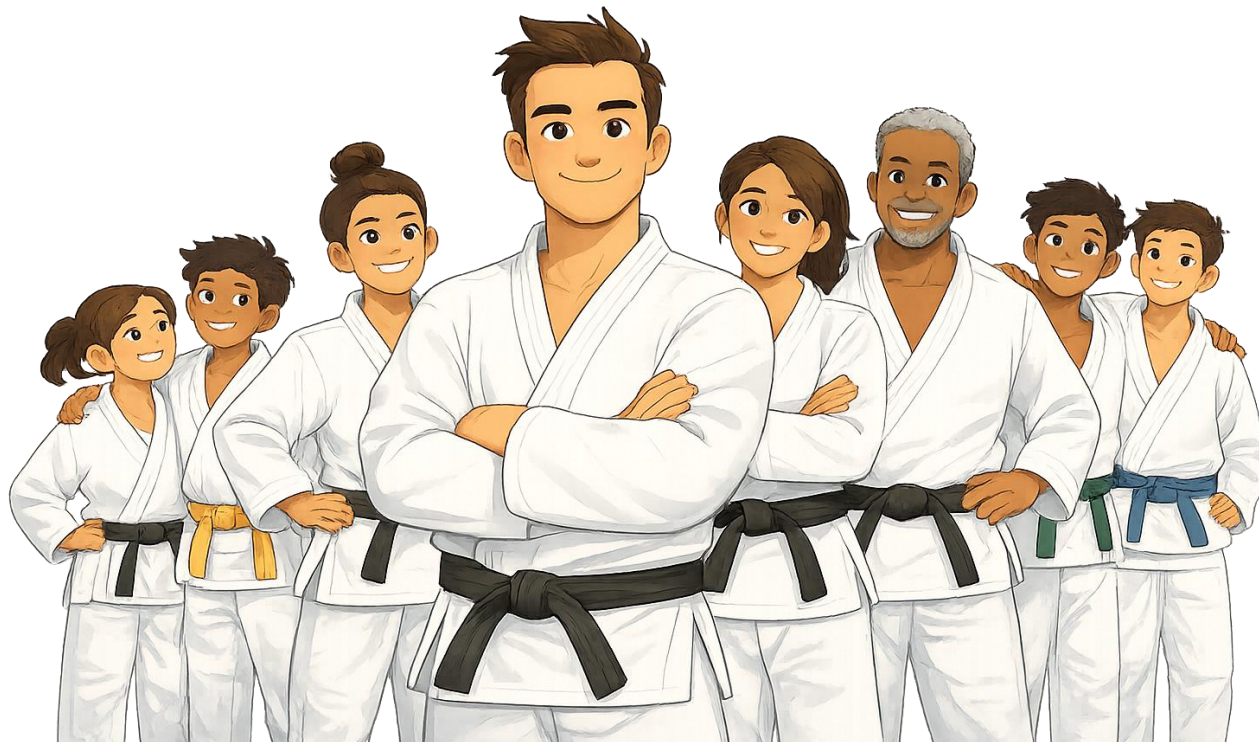
CONCLUSION

And finally...

You started this journey, or are considering starting it, because you believe in judo and what it can do for people. That belief is the most important thing you bring to the role of dojo operator. Everything else in this guide, the business model, the facility, the marketing, the retention strategies, the financial planning, is in service of that belief.

The sport needs people like you. Not just coaches, not just competitors, but operators. People with the passion, the capability and the commitment to build something sustainable, something that will still be serving its community long after the current generation of operators has moved on.

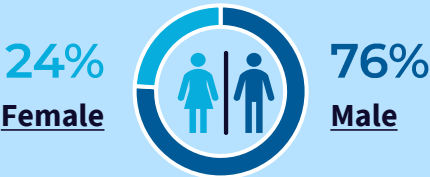
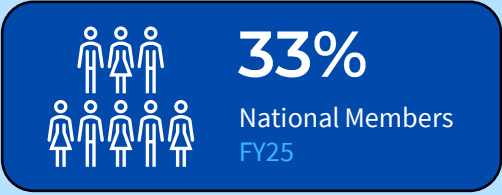
Build it well. Ask for help when you need it. And remember that every person you get on the mat, every child who finds confidence through judo, every adult who discovers a community they did not know they needed, every teenager who stays when everything else is pulling them away, is the reason all of this is worth doing.



Appendix

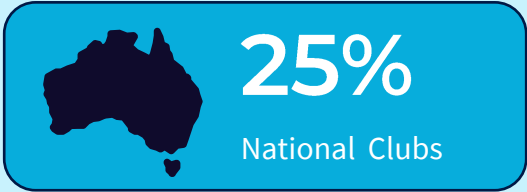
APPENDIX: JUDO IN NSW

PARTICIPANT PROFILE



Age Bracket	Total Membership	Male	Female
Under 5	<1%	50%	50%
5-9	11%	75%	29%
10-14	29%	71%	30%
15-19	17%	70%	26%
20-24	10%	76%	24%
25-29	9%	77%	20%
30-34	6%	84%	15%
35-39	5%	90%	10%
40-49	7%	86%	14%
50+	6%	88%	11%

AFFILIATED CLUB PROFILE



Club Size	No.
10 members or less	11
11-20 Members	13
21-50 members	13
51-100 members	8
100+ members	3

APPENDIX: FACILITY EVALUATION AND CHECKLIST

This checklist is a general planning aid to help evaluate and select a venue for your dojo. Always seek professional review before signing a lease, licence or fit-out commitment.

Location & Accessibility	
Reachable by both car and public transport	☐
Ample, safe parking or convenient drop-off/pick-up area for families	☐
Some degree of foot traffic or street visibility	☐
Clear signage opportunity	☐
Safe access and egress at all times of the day	☐
Access for people with a disability.	☐

Space & Mat Area	
Minimum clear ceiling height of ~3.5 metres	☐
Sufficient clear floor space for a safe training area, with a safety buffer around the mat perimeter	☐
Mat area appropriate to your current stage: Startup: safe clear training space, approved mats Developing: 100–150 sqm mat area Dedicated: 200–300 sqm, sprung floor or shock-absorbing underlay	☐

Storage and Amenities	
Participant access to toilets and drinking water (essential)	☐
Access to changeroom and showers (not essential)	☐
Basic waiting area away from mat area	☐
Appropriate lighting and ventilation (heating/cooling where relevant)	☐

Shared Facility	
Access to on-site storage (lockable room or cage)	☐
Ability to erect portable signage or display a club banner	☐
Confirm guaranteed access during school holidays	☐
Secure right of first refusal on additional time slots	☐
Get all access agreements in writing (not just a verbal arrangement)	☐

Dedicated Facility	
Lease reviewed by an independent solicitor with commercial property experience	☐
Rent-free period negotiated for fit-out (typically 1-3 months)	☐
Fit-out contribution requested from the landlord	☐
Make-good obligations understood and negotiated (what you must remove/restore at lease end)	☐
Confirm lease term and renewal options	☐

APPENDIX: DOJO SELF ASSESSMENT TOOL

Business Model	Green	Amber	Red
I have chosen a legal structure that suits my goals and circumstances and I understand its implications			
My pricing reflects the genuine value I deliver and covers my costs with a sustainable margin			
I have more than one revenue stream and am not entirely dependent on membership fees			
I have a clear picture of my monthly costs, and I review my financial position regularly			
My business model could sustain a period of lower-than-expected membership without putting the dojo at risk			

Facility	Green	Amber	Red
My current facility is appropriate for the size and nature of my program			
My facility creates a positive and professional first impression for new participants			
I have a clear plan for how my facility will develop as my dojo grows			
My mat space, storage and amenities meet the functional requirements for safe and effective judo delivery			
I understand the costs and commitments associated with my next facility step			

Membership	Green	Amber	Red
I have a structured entry-level program that introduces new participants effectively and converts them to membership			
I am actively marketing my dojo beyond word of mouth and reaching people who do not already know me			
I have programs that serve more than one participant segment			
I am managing retention deliberately at the key transition points in the participant journey			
My membership has grown or remained stable over the past six months			

Operations	Green	Amber	Red
The coaching and operational responsibilities of the dojo are not entirely dependent on one person			
I have a plan for what happens to the dojo if I am unavailable for an extended period			
I am investing in my own development as an operator, not just as a coach			
I have clear systems for member communication, fee collection and record keeping			
I know what the next stage of my dojo's development looks like and I am actively working toward it			

Assessment Key:

Green

This is genuinely true for my dojo, achieved through deliberate, documented or reliable action.

Amber

This is true to some extent, but it's inconsistent, informal, untested, or not yet resilient.

Red

This statement isn't true for my dojo right now, or I haven't yet addressed this area.

APPENDIX: GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS

Affiliation	Formal registration of a dojo with Judo NSW. Provides access to insurance arrangements, competition pathways, coaching accreditation and national programs. Affiliation fees in NSW are currently charged on a per-member basis.	Dojo-Cho	From the Japanese, meaning 'head of the dojo.' The owner or operational lead responsible for business management, financial oversight, membership administration, facility coordination and strategic planning. Distinct from the Sensei role, though in smaller dojos one person often fills both.
Break-Even Point	The membership level or revenue amount at which total income exactly covers total costs. A fundamental financial planning tool that tells you the minimum viable membership needed to sustain your operation.	Drop-In Fee	A per-session fee for participants attending without an ongoing membership commitment. Typically set higher than the equivalent per-session membership cost, creating a financial incentive to convert to membership.
CAF 2.0	Judo Australia's Coach Accreditation Framework, updated in March 2024. Provides four levels of coaching accreditation — Assistant Coach, Sensei Coach, Senior Coach and Specific Coach and includes: Dynamic Balance Coach/Kata Coach/ and soon Self Defence Coach. Advanced Coach — each with defined prerequisites and practical requirements. Coordinated at the state level by Judo NSW.	Fit-Out	The work involved in converting a commercial space into a functional dojo, including mats, flooring, storage, signage and changing facilities. A significant capital investment requiring careful planning and budgeting before a lease is signed.
Cash Flow	The movement of money in and out of your dojo over a given period. A dojo can be technically profitable but still face cash flow problems if income and expenses are poorly timed, for example if annual costs fall due before term fees are collected.	Gi or Judogi	The traditional judo uniform consisting of a jacket, trousers and belt. A symbol of judo tradition and identity. The upfront cost and commitment of purchasing a Gi can be a barrier for new participants. Allowing beginners to start in activewear before transitioning to a Gi is an increasingly common approach in entry-level programs.
Commercial Model	A dojo operating structure in which the business is owned by an individual or private entity, typically as a sole trader, partnership or private company. The operator owns the business as a personal asset, bears full financial risk, and makes decisions without a member-elected committee. See also: NFP Model.	Grading	A formal assessment of a participant's judo technique and knowledge, resulting in the award of a new belt rank upon successful completion. Gradings provide visible milestones of progress, support participant retention and represent a legitimate revenue stream through grading fees.
Conversion	Moving a potential participant from one stage of their journey to the next, for example from a trial session to a beginner course, or from a beginner course to ongoing membership. Conversion rate refers to the percentage of participants who successfully make each transition.	Incorporated Association	A legally recognised structure for community groups and sporting clubs in NSW, registered under the Associations Incorporation Act 2009. A separate legal entity governed by a member-elected committee operating under a constitution. The most common legal structure for NFP judo clubs in NSW. See also: NFP Model.
Dojo	From the Japanese, meaning 'place of the way.' The facility or space where judo is taught and practised. Used in this guide to refer both to the physical space and the broader operation, the programs, the people and the community built around it.		

APPENDIX: GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS

Kyu / Dan Grades	The two-tier belt ranking system in judo. Kyu grades are student ranks progressing from white belt through yellow, orange, green, blue and brown. Dan grades are black belt ranks beginning at Shodan. The grading system provides a structured progression pathway that is one of judo's most effective retention tools.	Performance Pathway	A structured route through judo designed for competitive athletes motivated by grading progression and competition success. Connects club-level training to state and national competition and high performance programs.
Lease	A legally binding agreement granting a tenant the right to occupy a property for a defined period in exchange for regular rent. Commercial leases for dojo facilities are typically three to five years with renewal options. Independent legal advice before signing is strongly recommended.	Randori	From the Japanese, meaning 'free practice.' Freestyle judo sparring between two practitioners, as distinct from kata or drilling. A central component of judo training and participant development at all levels.
Make-Good Obligation	A lease clause requiring a tenant to return premises to their original condition at the end of the tenancy. In a dojo context this can mean removing mats, flooring and other fit-out at significant cost. Must be understood and negotiated before a lease is signed.	Rent-Free Period	A period at the start of a commercial lease during which no rent is payable, typically provided to allow the tenant time to fit out the premises. Standard practice in commercial leasing and always worth negotiating for, even if not initially offered.
Membership Fee	The regular payment made by a participant to maintain their dojo membership. The primary revenue source for most dojos, structured as term-based, monthly direct debit or annual payments.	Retention	The ability of a dojo to keep existing members engaged over time. Driven primarily by the quality of the participant experience, the strength of the dojo community and the clarity of the progression pathway available to members.
NFP or Not-for-Profit	An organisational model in which any surplus must be reinvested into the organisation rather than distributed to individuals. Provides access to government grants and community sport funding but comes with governance obligations and the risk that the organisation is owned by its members rather than its founder. See also: Incorporated Association, Commercial Model.	Revenue Stream	A source of income for a dojo. Sustainable dojos draw from multiple revenue streams rather than relying solely on membership fees. Common examples include beginner course fees, school program fees, grading fees, event income and merchandise sales.
Participation Pathway	A structured route through judo designed for recreational participants motivated by enjoyment, fitness or social connection rather than competition. A dojo offering both participation and performance pathways serves a broader range of motivations and builds a more sustainable membership base.	Sensei	From the Japanese, meaning 'one who has gone before' or 'teacher.' The lead coach and technical director of a dojo, responsible for program delivery, participant development, coaching standards and judo culture. Distinct from the Dojo-Cho role. See also: Dojo-Cho.
		Sensei Coach	The second level of coaching accreditation under CAF 2.0. Requires a minimum senior blue belt, one to three years of coaching experience and completion of a practical accreditation course. Suitable for coaches running their own sessions at club level.

APPENDIX: GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS

Succession Planning The process of identifying and developing the people and systems needed to ensure a dojo can continue operating if key individuals step back or become unavailable. A dojo without a succession plan is a fragile one, regardless of its current health.

Tatami The traditional Japanese term for the mat surface used in judo. In modern usage, refers broadly to the judo mat area within a dojo. Mat quality and specification directly affect participant safety and experience.

Ukemi The judo practice of safe falling, techniques used to absorb the impact of being thrown and land safely. One of the first skills taught to beginners and fundamental to safe participation at all levels. Directly applicable to fall prevention programs for older adults.

Value Proposition A clear statement of what your dojo offers, who it is for, and why it is worth choosing over the alternatives. Informs your marketing, program design and pricing. The most effective value propositions are grounded in a genuine understanding of what target participants are looking for.



Solucio

Melbourne office

Unit 35, 328 Reserve Road,
Cheltenham, VIC 3192

Brisbane office

L2, 15 Mayneview Street,
Milton, QLD 4064

www.solucio.com.au