

University Taikai 2011 report

by Joy and Alex

University Taikai 2011: Queen Mary's University of London

On the evening of the 18th February 2011, five members of the Edinburgh University Kendo Club headed down to England on the overnight bus. They arrived at quarter to 7 in the morning and rain and made their way over to the dojo located at Queen Mary's University over on the east end of London near Mile End. Feeling a bit tired and with a couple of hours to burn, the gang settled into a coffee shop for breakfast.

They got to the venue just after ten o'clock and worked out the order of events. The matches were going to be split over two shiaijos in the main sports hall. After a brief introduction and welcome to the sensei (which included Honda sensei, Bishop sensei, Holt sensei, Will Wright sensei and Honga Wright sensei) and several shinpan, the first few competitors started warming up for the ladies individual tournament.

In her first ever taikai, Joy was pitted against Christina Ng and Ayano Kimura in her pool. Her first match versus Ng ended with no points being scored and hantei awarded to Joy (basically the judges vote on who had the best kendo). In her second match, after a hansoku by Kimura, Joy scored a men strike. With no further points scored in that match, Joy progressed to the next round.

Now in the knock-out stages, Joy was matched up against Emily Knight who is a member of the British Ladies Squad. Emily was a formidable opponent for Joy so she showed her best kendo against her, pushing forward whenever she could. Unfortunately, soon after a failed tsuki by Emily, Joy conceded a men and the fight ended after the allotted time of two minutes. All in all, Joy gave a fantastic effort for her first taikai and we hope she enjoyed every minute.

Next on the agenda was the kyu grade tournament. The pools started at around 1:30pm and Matthew, after a brief wait, was up against Lam Lia Chi. Matt managed to cut a sound men strike and, with one point scored, ended the match after the two minutes.

There was quite a bit of confusion after Matt's first match as some participants hadn't shown up. Matt had to wait another twenty minutes before his next bout while the organisers re-arranged the pools. Up next was Mui but the match went on without any points scored. Hantei was awarded to Matt which allowed him to proceed to the next round.

In Matt's next fight, which was a knock-out round, he was put against Max Frenzel. Both members were impressive as they had good form and seemed very evenly matched. It ended with a tie and Matt losing 2-1 on hantei, proving that it was a considerably close match. Congratulations go out to Matt for a brilliant effort.

Unfortunately, due to a few delays from some matches, the men's dan grade tournament got pushed to the next day prior to the University Team tournament.

The evening's sayonara party kicked off at 7pm at a place called R Bar not too far down the road from the dojo. Deciding against travelling to and from the hostel located at Earl's Court (which would take up at least an hour and a half), the team found themselves back at the Roastars coffee shop where they had been in the morning. Feeling tired after the day, another round of coffees were had and they ventured off to the pub feeling a little more awake. After a few hours of mingling and chatting to everyone (helped along with a couple of pints), they had to leave for the hostel.

The next day dawned bright as people queued up outside the sports hall of Queen Mary's University of London in the morning. Once everyone was ushered in, another brief welcome was made and the men's dan grade tournament went under way.

Koji went against Tun Myint and Ali Hammad in his pool but was knocked out of the first round by Hammad. Likewise, Wei was also bested at the first hurdle by Shintaro Aibara and Sijie Heng (Aibara going through to the next stage).

Ruairidh managed to beat David Parkes and Arnold Chui in his pool to go on to the quarter finals where he faced off against QMUL's taisho, Sarfraz Aziz. In a very heated match, both competitors only managed to score one men against each other but a couple of hansokus committed by Aziz meant that Ruairidh went through. In a personal interview after the match, Ruairidh was disappointed that he won by hansoku but he had to put it out of his mind for a while as his next opponent was Kasper Yearwood, ruthless taisho of the Glasgow team.

Yearwood had already fought his way out of his pool beating Wei Hao Yuen and Yuma Kurihara and then going on to dominate Shintaro Aibara, who had defeated Wei in his earlier pool. His illustrious career was on the up-and-up and fuelled by adrenaline from his victories before, looked primed to put out some punishment 'pon our placid Pooler.

Now into the semi-finals, the shinpan cried 'hajime' whilst Yearwood and Ruairidh tensely rose from sonkyo. The air was electric as they squared off against each other for a minute before Yearwood went in for the first vicious assault. With a flurry of blows that were set to test Ruairidh's defences, he went into taiatari and forced him back. Ruairidh, teetering on the edge of the shiaiyo, had to fight back now. He tried a few quick surgical strikes but couldn't move his opponent at all and had to go around him. Running out of options, he tried to move in to perform another cut, but Yearwood, too cunning by far, read his moves and flicked his shinai low. Before he knew it, the point was struck and Yearwood swaggered back to the starting line with a point for kote on the board.

Sweating now, Ruairidh was struggling to find a weakness in the opponent's barrage of attacks. After a successive series of attacks on both sides, Ruairidh spotted a quick dô cut and smacked it down with the satisfying sound of bamboo on armour. One all.

The final seconds of the match went by slowly. Few would have spotted Ruairidh's change amidst the relentless blows screaming down from Yearwood's shinai, but those gifted with extra-ordinary perception would have seen a sly smirk on his countenance. One who definitely did not see was Yearwood. So when he managed to swat away Ruairidh's sword, he went in for men. With the dying seconds of the match, Ruairidh had planned to take advantage of the Glaswegian's gargantuan swipes and stopped resisting so hard with his shinai. He feinted into revealing men and just as the fatal tip of Yearwood's sword came down, Ruairidh lifted his sword to deflect it, a hair's breadth from his head, and swung his shinai around and down for dô.

Tock.

The whistle blew in the stunned silence of the crowd. Three flags were up. He got the point.

With that win under his belt (or perhaps we should say 'obi') Ruairidh went on to the finals of the men's dan grade tournament. He now faced Hiroki Kurosu (notably a jodan practitioner) and, after a long three minutes of no points, went on to encho. Kurosu eventually managed to hit kote on Ruairidh, denying him the gold medal. Still, with the silver medal around his neck, he fought well and

proved how effective Edinburgh University kendo can be. Congratulations to Mr Pooler for besting some of universities' finest kendoka.

Now the group events came up and after two other teams being knocked out, Edinburgh faced off against Cambridge. Wei went first and fought bravely but lost 1 point. Joy, up second, put out a valiant effort and came away with a tie. Ruairidh, after getting silver in the men's individuals, claimed 2 points for a win. Matt came away losing a point and finally Koji who also conceded a point to Cambridge meant that the Edinburgh team got knocked out in the first stage. A big well done to Koji, Ruairidh, Wei, Matt and Joy for their team effort and wholehearted enthusiasm. One thing was noted: Edinburgh had the loudest kiai during warm-up!

The other sides went on battling till the final round which came between our hosts, Queen Mary's University of London and the Glasgow B team. Glasgow managed to win the first two fights with one men scored in each. On their back foot now, QMUL won the next two soundly with two men strikes scored in each meaning that the tournament was up for grabs in the last match. The taishos of each team fought it out, first point being scored by QMUL's Sarfraz Aziz. Glasgow retaliated immediately with an amazing dô cut and finally finishing the match with a men cut. It was a spectacular match and both teams pulled out all the stops to win, showing off some amazing kendo.

We congratulate Glasgow this year for the University Taikai 2011. Who knows, maybe they'll host next time and succeed in keeping the cup in Scotland for a further year!