



Guidelines for divisioning of Special Needs Judo tournaments

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2. About this document

2.1. Conditions of Use

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2.2. Document history

Datum	Auteur/Redacteur	Commentaar
10/2017 DOC-SNJF-002	Tycho van der Werff Bob Lefevere	Original based on Dutch version v01.03NL
2025-02	Bob Lefevere	Removal of SNJU references

2.3. Intended audience

2.3.1. Coaches and supervisors of SN-judoka

This document intends to help coaches and supervisors of SN-judoka to make a proper choice when signing up for a Special Needs Judo tournament and choosing the correct division.

2.3.2. Organisers of SN-Judo tournaments

The document will aid the organisation with the arrangement of the divisioning workshop.

2.4. Correspondence

Questions and remarks about this document may be directed to SNJF:
technicaldirector@specialneedsjudo.nl



3. Introduction

3.1. Why divisioning?

The foremost reason for divisioning can be described in one word: SAFETY. Judo is a safe sport, as long as the opponents are more or less equivalent. In SN-Judo this is a problem: An autistic judoka, able to perform each and every technique correctly but from a static position can be completely helpless against a playful judoka with Down's Syndrome who enters the match with only a vague idea of how to perform a leg throw.. or what a match actually is. And this is just one of the many factors that can influence the outcome of a match.

Correct divisioning is an art- but an art that can be learnt. This document discusses the methods and procedures to obtain correct divisioning.

3.2. What is a successful match?

Let us start from this premise: *All Special Needs judoka are amateurs*. In other words: None of them will have any financial gain through his¹ Judo or enjoys an Olympic status². This may be undesirable and not in line with the strife for inclusion, but at this moment in 2025, this is the world we live in. Simply said: Every judoka must go back to school, work or daycare the Monday after a tournament, and preferably without any injury. Therefore, the organiser of a tournament, supported by regulations, is responsible to minimise the risk of injury as much as possible.

A successful shiai is therefore one where both judoka perform at the top of their abilities, have about the same chance to win or lose, and afterwards leave the tatami without injury.

3.3. History

This is the history of Special Needs Judo in The Netherlands. It is included in the English version of the document because we like the reader to understand how the 5-class system came about.

By far the largest group of participants in Special Needs Judo tournaments have a mental disability. The group with physical or sensory disabilities is considerably smaller.

Judo for people with a disability started when a Judo teacher from The Hague (mr. Loek van Hal) took care of a group of mentally disabled judoka. The Judo was then only limited by training and an incidental shiai. It would take until the '90s before a serious competition developed.

Ati de Coo and Aad Wijntjes were the first to set up a small tournament with physically disabled judoka. During the nineties this was expanded by Ben van der Eng who pushed for an annual tournament for all disabled judoka. In the beginning the regulations of those times were followed, people divided by disability. It was thought that people with Down's Syndrome had to perform against other people with Down's Syndrome, even though there is a great diversity inside the group.

It also became clear that the amount of physical- and sensory-disabled judoka was too small to set up a proper independent competition. This group was therefore absorbed into the much larger group of mentally disabled judoka. Around the turn of the century, from the old 3-level system a new 5-level system was developed which was unique in its kind, because nowhere in the world athletes are classified on their *judo ability*. This is the now widely used **Functional Classification System**.

¹ Where the male form is mentioned, the female form is meant implicitly.

² Indeed, all that can be gained is personal growth, as Jigoro Kano intended when he invented Judo.



Around the year 2010, more and more social-emotionally disabled judoka could be spotted in the competitions and even they could be easily incorporated in the tournament circuit using the Functional Classification System.

The FCS consists of 5 levels and classifies judoka based on insight, power, speed, will to win and Judo capability, but empathically *not* on handicap or disability.



Fig. 1: Pooling



4. Classification

The levels are determined by comparing the skill level of the SN-judoka with a mainstream competitive judoka (for level 1) or a mainstream recreative judoka (levels 2-5)

Level 1 is a judoka who can perform and win in a *shiai* with a **mainstream competitive judoka**. This judoka is fast and powerful and has an excellent responsiveness. He has a strong feeling for Judo and an excellent strategic view. This type of judoka has a minimal disability and therefore usually attends regular education. In general, these are judoka with a social or light physical disability, VI and deaf judokas and a player that has grown beyond level 2.

Level 2 is a judoka who can perform *randori* with a **mainstream recreative judoka**. This judoka is fast and powerful and is sometimes slightly late responding to Judo situations. He has a good Judo feeling, but usually no strategy.

Level 3 is a judoka who can perform a playful *randori* with a **mainstream recreative judoka**. This judoka is reasonably fast and powerful and has a reasonably developed responsiveness, but is almost always late responding to situational judo. Strategy for this type of judoka consists of repeating the same technique over and over. There is no discernible strategy.

Level 4 is a judoka who can grapple and play with another judoka of the same level. Responsiveness is suboptimal. Usually the only judo technique consists of takedown and *osae-komi*.

Level 5 is a judoka who can grapple and play with other judoka of the same level. These judoka are very passive, or respond very slowly. Constant coaching to take action is necessary. When they end up in *osae-komi*, the action to break free can take a very long time.



Fig. 2: Divisionering workshop in progress



5. Divisioning

5.1. Coach

Looking at the rules in the previous chapter, every coach should be able to place his judoka in the correct division. Important in doing this is a pure, impassive, detached and honest analysis of the capabilities of that judoka where not only those capabilities and safety are looked at, but also that of the judoka's potential adversaries.

5.2. Organiser

One of the main priorities of a tournament's organiser must be to end the tournament without serious injuries to the participants. Information on the judoka's classification is retrieved in a number of ways:

5.2.1. Application forms

This is the primary source of classification information. There are however a number of reasons why this source is not completely reliable. For example, it is extremely tempting to put a judoka in too low a class, to increase his chances to win, and unfortunately this happens now and then. On the other hand, most coaches understand these days that these childish practices do not help anyone.

Another reason is that some coaches are simply not experienced enough with applications for SN-tournaments. Although the descriptions in the rules are pretty clear, actually applying for a tournament is an entirely different matter. Often, a judoka is put on the "safe" side and is classified in a too low division. Understandable, but it may be obvious that this can have adverse effects on the opponent too.

Finally, it happens quite often that a judoka is classified based on tournament experience, or lack thereof. This is absolutely incorrect and can lead to dangerous situations. Important: *Tournament experience is no criteria for divisioning!*

5.2.2. Divisioning workshop

A tournament that includes all the "usual suspects", the judokas taking part in all the tournaments will not be too difficult with respect to divisioning. Diversions will be spotted and usually corrected quickly. There is a form of social control at work here too.

But, tournaments featuring debutante judoka, or judoka who take part irregularly and for whom the judo capabilities are doubtful or variable can greatly benefit from a divisioning workshop prior to the actual tournament. This pertains mainly the levels 3, 4 and 5.

In Special Olympics Judo tournaments, the divisioning workshop is a fixed and mandatory part of the tournament procedure.

Chapter 7 describes the content and the procedures of such a workshop.



6. Divisioning procedure

The divisioning procedure is meant to validate the data from the application forms. Judoka who are classified incorrectly can be corrected by this procedure.

In smaller tournaments, the classification workshop can be disguised as a warming-up. Larger tournaments often require an extra day for the workshop.

6.1. Functions

6.1.1. Divisioning head (DH):

The DH makes the preliminary poules, and is ultimately responsible for the final poules.

- The DH is experienced in making poules, and completed several divisionings successfully.

6.1.2. Divisioning leader (DL)

DL watch and discuss the proceedings with DT, help the coaches with the poules on the tatami, and watch for necessary changes. This is then discussed with the DH and if necessary, applied. Only when an extreme difference in poule participant level is observed will a judoka be transferred to a more appropriate poule. If the difference is not extreme, the divisioning procedure will be completed on the same tatami and the change in poule for that particular judoka can be made afterwards.

- DL must be experienced Judo teachers and must have a good overview of the various disabilities and the associated behaviour on the tatami.

6.1.3. Divisioning Teachers (DT) and their assistants

These are the teachers executing the randori lessons, see if the poules are correct and if necessary, as assistance of the DL. The judoka's coaches can be very helpful as an assistant in this matter due to their closer relation to the judoka. Some additional remarks on this can be found in 7.4.

- *DTs* are experienced Judo teachers who must be very aware of the safety and procedures on their tatami.



6.2. Procedure

- Judoka are being assigned a preliminary poule and tatami. This is the group that will perform the divisioning exercises together.
- Classification sessions take between 45 and 60 minutes. Important is not to exceed the attention span of the judoka otherwise the session may be perceived as dull. Do not forget: The judoka still have a tournament ahead!
- Every 15-20 minutes the DTs rotate to another tatami.
- There can be a maximum of 4-5 poules per tatami, per session.
- The DT calls every judoka to the assigned tatami and makes groups per poule. Preferably, every group is accompanied by an assistant.
Note that this is an important part of the divisioning. As this is the first contact, it allows the DT to visually observe and compare a judoka to his pool in the following areas:
 - Playful/Serious
 - Alert/Distant/Dreamy/Nervous
 - Small/Large
 - Quick/Slow
 - ..etc.
- Practical: This can also serve as a roll call.
- After this, the divisioning sessions can proceed (See chapter 7)
- After a final check, the DH will finalise the poules for the tournament.



7. Divisioning workshop

7.1. Constraints

It is of great importance to understand that the judo level can only be determined by *actual Judo*. For example: balance should be tested during actual Judo situations because although a judoka may have trouble with his balance in daily life, often they have learnt to compensate for this during Judo and may even have learnt to take advantage of it. Testing of actual situations in randori is therefore the best test for judo skill³.

However, an actual randori could be somewhat problematic: It is tiring for judoka who may have to perform in shiai later, and the concept of randori is not always understood very well and may end up in shiai.

The various skills therefore have to be tested in a playful way, by doing simple exercises: the randori forms.

7.2. Eight skills principle

In the nineties, SNJF have defined eight skills that are important for a judoka, and with which we can test a tournament participant. The *eight skills* principle is used since the first induction of Judo in the Special Olympics in 1996.

Observation of the execution of these eight skills can be used to determine the things that *really* matter in shiai: power, responsiveness, balance, will to win, tactics:

1. Various forms of ukemi-waza (autonomous)
2. Various forms of ukemi-waza (when thrown)
3. Execution of osae-komi-waza
4. Liberation from osae-komi-waza (toketa-waza)
5. Tilting technique
6. Throws (nage-waza)
7. Combinations (renraku-waza)
8. Takeovers (kaeshi-waza)

7.3. Examples of games

The main purpose of a divisioning workshop is to work the above 8 skills in a randori-lesson that takes about 15-20 minutes. A number of examples is listed below, but the number of possibilities is unlimited.

7.3.1. Skill 1

For the lower levels or as warming-up?: a tag game whereby uke can be release through an ukemi technique. This allows to observe who has insight, and who is faster or maybe slower than the others.

7.3.2. Skills 2, 6 and 7

A relay game with a proposed poule. 1 judoka is on the other side of the tatami, the 2nd judoka runs there and throws number one, number one runs back to number three and highfives,

³ *There is scientific support for this:* McNevin, N.; Wulf, G. (2002). "Attentional focus on supra-postural tasks affects postural control". Human Movement Science. 21: 187–202. doi:10.1016/s0167-9457(02)00095-7. See Appendix B for an abstract.



number three runs to number two and throw him, etc. Through this it becomes visible who is surefooted, who can throw correctly, who can fall correctly, remember instructions, etc.

7.3.3. Skills 3 and 4

These skills can be tested together very well. Demonstrate an osae-komi technique and tell uke to escape within 15 seconds. Demonstrate the proper escape technique and do the game again. Through this, it becomes visible how comfortable a judoka is in ne-waza, his available power and how fast he picks up new techniques.

7.3.4. Skill 5

This can be combined with the previous example: Do the "shearing sheep" game and demonstrate a tilting technique and then practice that technique and let it end in a short randori. This should show the fanaticism of the judoka and it should become clear if all judoka in that poule are a proper match for each other.

7.3.5. Skills 7 and 8

These can be tested by a small game of osoto gari without actually throwing or the uki goshi game whereby judoka try to teach each others' upper leg. Balance and responsiveness will become visible.

7.4. Remarks

7.4.1. The importance of the game form

The above are of course examples, and there are numerous other randori forms that can be utilised to gather the necessary information. Important is, not to show a dry lesson: "please show me a forward roll" but to offer a playful but competitive exercise which allows the judoka to show his best side. The game form is to make sure that the randori we want does not end up in shiai.

7.4.2. Make the judoka show his best

Of course it is very important to make sure that the various properties of the judoka will become visible during the workshop so as to make sure that either the judoka is in the correct poule, or should be moved to another poule. If judoka will have to encouraged to perform then that should be no problem- after all, this also happens during the tournament.



7.4.3. The importance of rotation and the comfort zone

Another important point is to rotate the partners that the judoka does the workshop with. By rotating, the mutual differences of the various judoka become clear. A judoka must therefore not be allowed to perform the workshop with his regular partner. The routine that such a pair has will distort correct observations. Therefore: pull the judoka from his comfort zone- after all, in the shiai he will not perform against his regular partner either!

Incidentally, some judoka are very adept at "accidentally" ending up with the same partner every time a rotation takes place. This should be monitored closely.

For the same reason, it is better not to have the coach of the judoka take part in the randori games. The coach can assist and advise, but a direct interaction with the judoka is not advisable.



8. Making the poules

8.1. Basic rules

1. In SN-Judo, the level is leading and the weight categories that apply to regular Judo are secondary. Exceptions are official championships for levels 1 and 2, and of course if the tournament organiser wishes to adhere to the weight divisions. It is advisable to mention this policy in the invitation to avoid disappointments. An example: A judoka weighing 72 kilos of level 3 would end up in the -73 category in regular Judo. A judoka weighing 74 kilo of the same category would end up in -81. In SN-Judo, it is possible to put these two judoka in the same poule. Rule of thumb: the mutual weight difference cannot be more than 15%. Appendix A shows the bandwidth for weight comparison.
2. A tournament organiser must always strive *not* to put levels 1 and 2 together due to the large differences between a good level 1 and a lower level 2. If it is necessary to do this anyway this should only happen in coordination with and approval of the coaches. Responsibility is then with the coaches⁴.
3. Diminished judo abilities in level 4 can be compensated by putting the judoka in a match against a lighter level 3. It is possible to combine levels in this way (level 2 against 3, 3 against 4, etc. But not 3 against 5. It is not possible to have three levels inside a poule)

8.1.1. Level 5

Preferably, poules in level 5 should be maximal 5 persons because of the often limited endurance of these judoka.

8.2. Below 16

Age is very important. Ideally, there should be no more than 3 years of age difference. If the difference is larger then it is possible to shift to another level, i.e. a younger but lighter judoka level 2, against an older but heavier level 3.

8.3. Special situations

Make sure to explain in the invitation how special situations will be addressed to avoid disappointments during the pooling. Even better is to discuss special situations with the coach.

8.3.1. Females above 12

Sometimes there are simply not enough females to create a correct poule. In consultation with the coach it can then be decided to place such a female in a male poule, but one level lower. A female level 3 then ends up in a men's poule level 4.

8.3.2. Judoka above 16 for whom no proper poule can be made

These are often the lighter judoka from level 3, 4 and 5. In consultation with the coaches it can then be decided whether the judoka can compete in an under-16 poule. Again, compensation for weight and/or level may be necessary.

Example: Judoka of 26 years, 45kg, level 4 against 13 years, 50kg, level 4.

It is always possible to combine levels 5 as long as the weight is comparable (+/- 15%)

⁴ Note: Stating beforehand that taking part is "at your own risk" is unacceptable. Putting levels 1 and 2 together is inherently risky and only the coach of the judoka in question can decide if taking part is safe.



8.3.3. Heavy judoka below 16 for which no correct poule can be made

Heavy judoka below 16 can be put in a above-16 poule only in consultation with the coach. Often a compensation in weight and/or level must be made.

Example: judoka 5 years, 75kg, level 3 against 27 year, 70kg, level 3 or 75kg, level 4.

8.3.4. Females level 5

It is often possible to merge a level-5 female poule with a level-5 male poule. Age is of minor importance as long as the weights are comparable. Rule: Above 16 not with 11 years or younger. Again, everything happens in consultation with the coaches.



9. Appendix A - Weight bandwidth

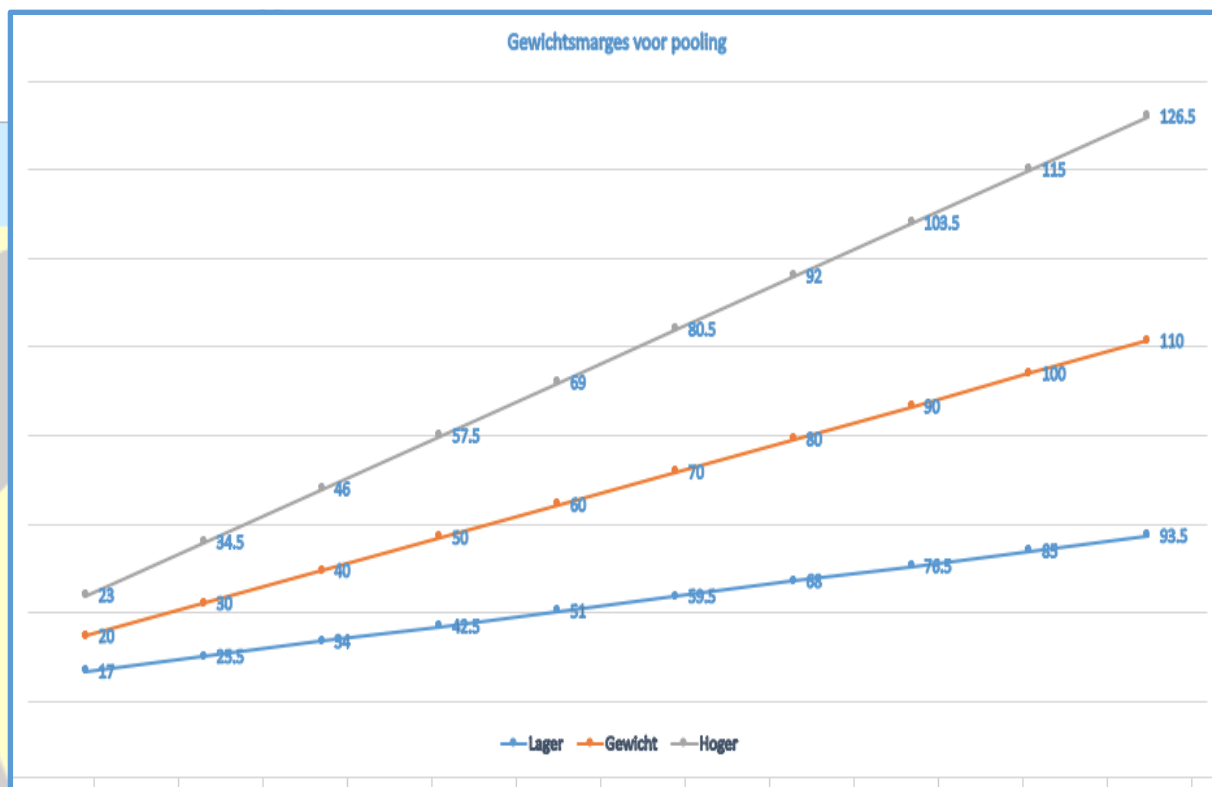


Fig. 3: Weight bandwidth

The above graph shows between which ranges weight merging can take place when judoka are assigned to a different poule. The orange line is the judoka's weight. The upper line shows the maximum weight that the judoka can be up against when placed in a *lower* level.

The lower line shows the minimum weight that a judoka can be put against when placed in a *higher* level poule.

Note: A *higher* category is a category with a *lower* number.



10. Appendix B: References

10.1. Attentional focus on supra-postural tasks affects postural control

10.1.1. Abstract

We examined whether the attentional focus adopted on a supra-postural task has an influence on postural control. Similar to Riley, Stoffregen, Grocki, and Turvey (Human Movement Science 18 (1999) 795), participants were instructed to stand still while lightly touching a loosely hanging sheet with their fingertips. However, instructions varied slightly under two conditions: Participants were either asked to minimize movements of the finger (internal focus) or to minimize movements of the sheet (external focus). In contrast to Riley et al.'s findings, both touch conditions resulted in increased postural sway, compared to a baseline condition (no touch). However, in line with previous findings (e.g., Wulf, McNevin, & Shea, Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology 54A (2001) 1143), frequency of responding (fast Fourier transformation) was greater under the external focus condition, compared to both internal focus and baseline conditions. The findings indicate improved static balance responses under external focus conditions and compromised static balance response under internal focus conditions.

10.1.2. Hyperlink

<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0167945702000957?via=ihub>