

Kendo Uni Taikai Memories

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Edited by Edward Lam and Zhe Xue

Honors and Awards Achieved in Uni Taikai:

Open Team Silver

Daishi Aiura: Open Male Bronze

Xinyi Chen: Open Female Bronze

Zucheng Gao: Open Male Fighting Spirits



Winning Team Photo.

Personal Memoires:

Edward Lam

Institutional memory of university clubs is often rather transient, owing to the ebb and flow of students. As the only remaining member from the successful 2020 Uni taikai team, I was determined as Captain to revive the memories of past glory and once again challenge some of the best kendoka in the country.

For context, our 2020 team had only one Dan grade kendoka, yet we came second, defeating many teams that outclassed us on paper. Kojin, the captain at the time, had emphasised the importance of preparation, strategising and close observation; lessons from mitori geiko that would once again prove invaluable. In the build-up to this competition, we ran additional squad training sessions and with Aiura san and Zucheng's experience, we focused our limited training on maximising the effectiveness of our individual strengths, as well as optimising our strategy as a team to partially mitigate our individual weaknesses.

With the ground work laid down, we made our long way up north to Edinburgh and were greeted by the lovely Spring sunshine. After a night of rest and a cooked breakfast, courtesy of our resident professional chef Zhe, we headed into the individuals Dan grade open.

I was up first and as the shinpan exclaimed hajime, the day's proceedings began immediately with a clean straight men that I landed against a kendoka from Reading: a good omen indeed. I attempted to assert pressure and to capitalise on the momentum; my opponent regained composure and drew with an ai-men. Into my second match, tragedy befell me I was paired against Zhe, who dispatched me 2-0. All was not lost, as I spent the rest of the morning watching the excellent performances by the rest of the team, especially that of Aiura-san who seemingly did not break a sweat until the semi-finals.

The team match is definitely not a sequence of 5 disparate shiai's: with such a strong team, the overall outcome of matches was often foretold, lifting the pressure off my shoulders as taisho (last).

Match 1:

With the win under our belts against Imperial C, I entered the shaijo aiming to conserve my energies. It was evident from my first clash with my opponent that she was inexperienced, as I easily pushed her out of bounds and dealt her a hansoku. I therefore spent the remaining of the match practicing (and attempting to varying degrees of success) ki ken tai ichi. From subsequent post-match analysis, my small mens often landed but lacked zanshin: a point for improvement highlighted by Aiura-san.

Match 2:

Within seconds, my opponent from Glasgow landed a kote as I took seme. His rapid and confident kote led me to adopt a defensive approach holding a strong kamae. This evidently frustrated him resulting in a tsuki to the chest. Done in haste and off-target, he winded me

and drew blood. After recommencing, I was quickly dispatched by a men. It is customary to thank your opponent after a match and he did not even come to apologise: poor manners.

Match 3:

Against an aggressive and spirited opponent, I once again opted for my signature defensive approach. With 30 seconds to go, my opponent landed what I thought was a weak men, but with strong zanshin with Jodan no Kamae, the shinpan ruled in his favour: a good lesson especially for me.

Match 4 (Semi Finals):

We had the undivided attention of the crowd as our semi-finals immediately preceded the finals. By my match, our path to the finals was guaranteed: my opponent nor I had anything to gain from the outcome of this match so we gave it our all in an aggressive and fast-paced flurry. Instead of relying on the safety of toi mai, my offense formed part of my defence as I attempted ai-men and harai-men. Sometimes I forget how physically strong I am and (accidentally) pummelled my opponent into the floor twice as we both went for men. The crowd were riled up and had thrown their lot behind my opponent. With seconds to go and in our final confrontation, he managed to land a rather satisfying big men.

Match 5 (Finals):

I steeled myself as I entered my final match against James, the recent EKC Under 18 silver medallist. We were drawn neck and neck against KCL and my chances were slim. Nevertheless, I gave it my all. Compared to the exhilarating matches that preceded mine, the affair was one-sided to say the least and anti-climatic, in a rather comical fashion. Upon reviewing the slow motion footage, by the time I raised my kensen 10cm or so, his was squarely on my men.

Xinyi Chen

The vast majority of the points were from *kaeshi-do*. I was being a conservative and quite hesitant during the *shiai*, especially in teams and did not strike men unless I was sure I could get ippon. In the match before Open Female Semi Final, I did score a *men* in the second round after securing a *do* already. By that time, I had enough confidence that the opponent won't reach me even though my speed and movement were impaired by the (subconscious) nervousness during *shiai*. I also managed to get a *debana-men* in Teams Semi Final (again after a *kaeshi-do*), against a much taller guy. Although he later told me he was only a *kyusha*, I was still proud of my rare *men* hit :3 For team matches this time, I think the pressure for me was to win my match in the short two minutes.

That being said, I still have to hone my *kaeshi-do*, as the movements were a too exaggerated during the *shiai*, much larger than I would do in regular practices or *keiko*. I also want to reduce the hit-score ratio.

My *kiai* and posture could be quite intimidating for inexperienced players. I almost made a girl back off all the way outside the *shiai-jo*, but there were too many bystanders on the boundary, and I wasn't in a mood to deliberately knock her out just for a *hansoku*. Even though I was not as nervous as I used to be—I didn't even feel my heart pounding. While I am still looking for the fine balance between tranquility and agility, my preliminary hypothesis is that maybe if I force myself to initiate more attacks, I will get more adrenaline and actually move faster.

Another takeaway was to engage more with the shinpan. Regrettably, I lost a crucial point in the Teams Final when my shinai was stuck between the opponent's *do* and elbow. I didn't raise my hand immediately and was scored a *men* on spot. In the split second I was expecting us to separate or perhaps the shinpan would call *wakare* as usual. It was in final so I couldn't blame my opponent for being merciless :< Hard lesson learned.

In Female Semi-Final I lost to the champion. Her *kote* strikes were too fast, so I didn't "suffer" much, although I would really like to have more time and learn from her. The current superficial observation was that she holds her *kamae* quite low (below belly button and almost below *do*) so that she could leverage the shinai for a fast strike from below. I tried imitating the movements during warm up and it did increase accuracy and speed.

To sum up, it was great to have higher aspirations and particular points to improve. I will have to move forward, while bearing in mind that the achievement I achieved during the weekend was already so far my best record. And the one and only Team Cambridge was awesome! Imagine all five of us went up for the award ceremony, leaving an empty spot and almost complete silence behind us.



This is the fastest nuki-do in Cambridge!

Zucheng Gao

I myself have been playing the role of Senpo for a long time, and I am aware of the responsibility of this position very well. I am the one to lead the whole spirit of team. Not only should I fight fiercely against my enemies, but I need to win the first match to give confidence to my teammates. I am grateful that my teammates trusted me on this important role, and fortunately, I finished my job perfectly this time, by winning all the five matches.

Match 1&2:

Before these two pool matches, I was extremely nervous, because I did not have the confidence of winning, since we are not sure about the strength of our opponents. If my opponent is also a very skillful one, then my match will be a tough one to win. If my opponent is a rookie, there still might be a chance to lose accidentally. So I kept telling myself to remain calm during the matches, and not to rush in getting ippon, which is a lesson I learned from my Saturday's individual matches. I need to do the same, judge my enemy's fighting style, observe and analyze him\her carefully, and grab the chance to win.

We got lucky to observe our rivals in the pool first. I found that the senpo of Imperial C would like to strike recklessly during the match, so I knew that kaishi waza will be an effective way of winning him, and I could take my time to slowly warm up in the match with him, since he could not score on me. For the senpo of Glasgow team, her style was standing there waiting, which is a perfect target for me to strike men directly. Although I thought the judges were also warming up by not giving me ippon for my first strike in both matches, the analysis has helped me win the match easily as planned.

Match 3:

Still, we got lucky. We could observe our opponent prior to the match. Bro He, the rival senpo, was even more reckless, but with a fast speed. I thought debana kote and kaishi do would also be good choices of winning him. I tried debana kote for the first two strikes, but it

did not work, because he was moving constantly and his arm was too close to me. So I changed the waza, and scored on do for the first point. After that, I observed that he might be frightened by my kaishi waza, and increased his moving speed. This means his movement will be unstable. Although it will not be easy to score on do again, I knew that try to win an aimen will be the alternative. I try to strike several debana men on him, and won the second point.

Match 4:

Now we are assured with a bronze medal, and we are facing KCL F, the second strongest team of KCL. This time, we did not observe our opponent prior to the match, and I have to think of a strategy during the combat. I was facing a girl. And I prejudged that it will be easy to strike a men directly on her. So I did, but the judges did not give me ippon for some reason, and I was confused. I felt some pressure from her, even I knew that it would not be easy for her to score on me. 'I have to win this match, a draw cannot be tolerate, because there will be a lot pressure on xinyi', I thought during the match. But she kept moving around, trying to dodge and block my men strikes. Because of the height, it was hard for me to deliver a kote or do strike, so I constrained myself to men, which is safe for me at least. I attacked several times, but it did not work, and I got panicked. Then I thought, maybe I could lure her to strike me, and I counter her. So at the end period of the game, I stopped my attacking trend, got prepared for her striking. I started to press my sword to her sword a little bit, try to make her feel that she got a chance to strike kote, and she grabbed the chance, while I scored on her with a strike of kote sureyage men.

Match 5:

We made it to the final. Under the spot light of all the people, I felt both nervous and excited. I wanted to win the match. Although KCL A was an extremely strong team, if I managed to win, we still have a chance to grab the championship. So I need to be more focus, more calm, and constrain my movements are small as I could. I planned doing kaishi do before I got on the field, because the opponent was very likely to be very fast on striking men. I

indeed delivered a successful kaishi do for the first strike, but maybe because of the distance was to close or the do was lower than I expected, the judges did not give me ippon. So I started to analyze my opponents style. He was very confident about his men striking speed, but always struck from a far distance. If I try to strike a aimen with him when I observed his motion, there will be a 50-50 chance of winning. But I tried one aimen anyway. From the video afterwards, I actually got his men before he struck me, and more straight than him. However, maybe because of zenshin, the judge gave him ippon. The audience burst out a loud cheering when he scored, and my spirit got shaken. But I knew I still have the chance, I have figured out the fighting style of him. 'He was fast, and clearly the judges were on his side, so aimen will not be an option, nor attacking first', I told myself on the field. But he always strikes from a long distance, which allow me to dodge the strike easily by stepping backwards a little bit. So I stepped back once he struck, and my body instinct noticed that his sword got below me and his men was open. Then a nuki men was delivered. Our match was in a draw. There was still time remaining, so I noticed that he got nervous, and the frequency

of his attacks increased. 'He tried to beat me with his speed, so I can do the same trick on him.' Then, for the second time, he struck, I moved backwards, scored on his unprotected men while I tried to do zenshin as fast as I could. A clear and firm strike was made, all the judges rose their flag immediately, while the KCL audience was muted.



The 'Muting Hit'.

Zhe Xue

Before the Taikai

University Taikai 2022 is special for me: it was held by Edinburgh University Kendo Club, the dojo where I became a kendoka. I have been a nostalgic person, and in this special case I

returned, but being a guest playing for my current team, and the feeling was a complicated mixture of happiness, excitement, and a little bit of guilty.

But for our team, we were more driven by the thirst for battle and glory. As a team with 3 strong San-Dan kendoka, we stood a pretty good chance, and for amplifying that chance we have been training hard in the past 2 months. Before our departure, we even held a short zoom meeting, hosted by Aiura San, to discuss our order and other traveling details. His adept and professionalism made this meeting an extremely helpful one, and we were able to identify every detail we need to pay attention to.

Trip itself was a great fun. I used to feel the train journey between Edinburgh and Cambridge was unbearably long, but this departing one was surprisingly satisfying. We had a hard time finding 4 connected seats, so we were separated into two pairs, and Edward's medical textbook gave me a fruitful half an hour. Once we gathered, we started to watch past Unitaikai players' videos, and imagine what it will be like tomorrow.

After settling down, I naturally became team's guide since I studied in Edinburgh before. We walked in old city, from castle to prince street and then back to our hotel near Holyrood.

First match day: Individual matches

Excitement and nervous woke me up at 4am and prevented me from falling asleep again. In 6am, I decided to cook some meatless English breakfast for my teammates, so that I can contribute at least something despite my lack of sleep.

Match 1: Pool: VS Mr. Perry from St Andrews

As I had no expectations of my place in individual matches, I was really relaxed at the beginning. Even when my fight started I was chill enough to study his move, and soon find out that he was too nervous, which drove his movements slow, and made him susceptible to fake movements. 10 seconds after beginning, one of my men was faster and more accurate than his, which earned my first point. 10 seconds later after the second point started, I pretended to hit his kote – and he thought I was about to do that so he tried to defend his hand, leaving his center guardless. A small men instead, and another point down.



A clear men cut.

Match 2: Pool: VS Edward

Edward is always a strong opponent: very strong, has a firm center that not easy to break, and can hit very fast men. I have to admit that I did not have much confidence facing him, and that was revealed in our movements in the first 1min: both of us try to hit stiff men which never worked. After several attacks like that, both of us became tired and could actually spend some time to think. I decided to change my attack: when he aimed my men, I hit his kote, and luckily it worked. But when shinpans raised white flag, I still thought I was on red side, so I congratulated Edward in my mind: nice men. Just after the second point started, we hit an aimen and I was slightly faster, resulting in shinpans raising white flag again. When shinpans said ShobuAri, I did not react because I thought there still remain a point, and shinpans had to remind me that I need to step down! I was a bit disappointed thinking I lost, but when I checked the board I finally realized: I was the white side!

Match 3: Eliminate – vs Mr. Mann from UCL

This was the match I got eliminated with nothing to complain. Mr. Mann was definitely a seed candidate – fast, experienced, and sensitive about chances. As I was slower than him, my attacks were easily blocked by him, while I could barely stop his threats. Soon I made a mistake, letting my kote exposed, and he did not miss.

But even after being defeated, I still felt pure satisfaction for stepping into eliminates for the first time in my life.

Day 1. After Matches:

At the end of day 1, we already secured 2 bronze medals for both open male and female competitions. When we left the dojo, the weather was extremely good, a rare occasion in

Edinburgh. After a KFC takeaway feast and short break, us four quickly decided to go for a hike on beautiful Arthur Seat, and that was one of the best hiking memories in my life.

Day2. Team Match

In Day2, team matches are also divided into pools and elimination. Having witnessed the strong candidates from different University, we all began to feel nervous and wondered if we could get kicked out in the pool, maybe by strong teams like Edinburgh A or UCL A. When we found that we were not in the same pool with them, it was indeed reassuring for us.

Sadly, for team match I had much less memory worth writing down here as in most of my matches I either drew or lost. Since I really hoped to win in this category, my desire turned into nervous, and restrained my movements.

The lucky part was that the matches in first activated my teammates, especially Zucheng, who was restricted by nervous in his first day. In second day he finally got his swordsman instincts back, and won every match he had. The same happened to Xinyi and Aiura san, with whom we won most of fights after fukusho fight.

The only fight I won was against a tall and strong guy. His attacks were extremely powerful but slow, make me hard to find chance to attack him without ojiwaza. But after a big men he did his zanshin and ran away, and even though I was very tired I forced myself to chase him. The moment he turned to me, my men attack went out and clearly fell on his men.

As we finished our matches quickly, we had the chance to watch the match between Edinburgh A and UCL A, 2 seed teams that were unfortunately put in the same pool. When watching their fights, I soon realized: if we face any of them, we would lose for sure! So we recorded all the matches to study afterwards. After a very close result, UCL A won, and we already took them as the team we will encounter in the final – if we could survive until then. We then had our lunch under the cloud of UCLA, hoping not to meet them too soon.

The plot for elimination was basically the same as morning: although I lost all my fights, but my mighty teammates always secured winning before taisho match, and we made into semi-finals, against KCL F. (they put their second strongest team to F to distract opponents) After winning them, I started to realize that we made into finals, and secured at least a silver medal! We all started to think about our incoming fight against UCL A.

But we were wrong – it was KCL A who made into the final. As the announcement for finals being stated, all audiences gathered around the shiai-jo. As we approached our positions, I recalled my past taikai, back then I was also one of them, watching the others fighting in the center of the stadium. This time, we became the one who fight in the center. The feeling even expanded when I went towards my opponent, hearing the applauses for us two.

The match itself was not as encouraging as my feelings though. My opponent, Mr. Zhangyan Gao, the current captain of KCL team, and the gold medalist of kyu level matches, just started kendo for one year and bogu training for 3 months. Nevertheless, I immediately realized underestimating him was a fatal mistake: despite being 1.9 meters tall, Mr. Gao was incredibly fast and flexible, especially in his decisive attack: when I tried to attack his men,

he lowered his body, aimed my kote, then landed on it like a whiplash before I could react. Later from his teammates, I learned that Gao trains 5 days a week in different dojo in London, together with national team members like James Wright.

After all the ceremonies, jikeikos and farewells, we bought snacks and bubble tea and headed to Waverley. An old friend of mine came to see us off. On the way to the train station, she asked me: how was your trip this time? I told her, it can't be better.

Zhe Xue

Kendo Varsity Reports

Written By Edward Lam and Zhe Xue

Honors and Awards Achieved in Varsity:

Team Gold

Daishi Aiura: Dan Gold

Zucheng Gao: Dan Silver

Xinyi Chen: Dan Bronze

Edward Lam: Kyu Gold

Mai Bui: Kyu Silver

Alex Warr: Kyu Bronze

Charles McLahan: Kyu Bronze

Alex Warr: Fighting Spirit Award



2022 Varsity Cambridge Team Photo.

Kyu Matches by Edward Lam

For as long as I have been practicing kendo at Cambridge, we have lost the Varsity match to Oxford. Buoyed by our recent success at Uni Taikai, we were going to change things this time around on home ground. Despite covid illness disruptions, we are grateful to the shinpans, Fujita, Kurokawa, Jackson and Wilson sensei's, who were able to make relatively short notice adjustments.

In true Cambridge fashion and oversight, we were unable to locate our shinpaki, resulting in a last minute trip to John Lewis and crafting a set of from fabric and knitting needles. Very inspired.

There was great turnout from both Cambridge and Oxford: we rarely see so many kyu-sha to make it a decent tournament! Especially from the away team with 8 kendoka!

Even for those not yet in bogu, we have the traditional beginner's competition comprising of basic kata. Sophie was awarded second place, having demonstrated some clean and straight kata. Alas, her opponent from Oxford exerted stronger ki, despite being less technically competent.

Things were off to a good start in the Kyusha Pools. For many, it was their first experience of a proper shiai, and despite this, they acquitted themselves finely. Of note was one of our new kendoka, Xu, who had only recently began wearing bogu and managed to score a well-deserved men on his oxford opponent after a protracted match. Having been paired with Alex regularly in practice sessions, I was not surprised by his confident and strong men's, for which he was awarded fighting spirit for.

In Pool B, Charlie came out on top of his match against Mai, with the former showing skill with kote. Mai demonstrated a degree of tenacity that would reward her later, as both proceeded to the semi-finals.

In Pool C, I was finally able to put my lessons from Uni Tai kai into action as I focused on both ki ken tai ichi and zanshin, delivering a straight set of big men's on both opponents from Oxford.

And now, the semi-finals. As previously alluded to, I recognised that Alex and I were of similar skill levels and in jigeiko, we would often clash indecisively and endlessly. In order to avoid the inevitable draw, I leveraged upon my greater experience in shiai, baiting and forcing Alex out of the shiaijo and winning by hansoku, which was a bit dirty of me.

In the Mai and Charlie rematch, Mai had a score to settle after losing in the pool. After clashing and showing zanshin, Mai was on Charlie's tail, catching him flat-footed as he was turning. Charlie had little breathing room and both times, Mai dealt kote's on a slightly bewildered Charlie.

In the finals, I was faced off against Mai. Mai's trademark tenacity caught me off-guard as she scored an early men: rather impressive given our substantial height difference. This partially shook me since I was not expecting a men. After regaining composure, I knew that I had to be much faster during zanshin and turning to quickly re-establish toi mai. With this in mind, I was able to land two very satisfying small men's on Mai.



Edward's master in woodworking allows us having these beautiful medals this year.

Team match by Zhe Xue

In the team match, we thrashed Oxford 4-0. Technically, it was not completely fair: Oxford only had 4 competitors so their senpo also had to serve as chukken. Most of the team members were still in kyu level – only their taisho holds a shodan.

In match 1, Zucheng was against Mr. Benjamin Tan. The match was surprisingly long considering how lethal Zucheng could be. Benjamin used big mens and that actually helped him defending Zucheng's small attacks. His rhythm was also uncommon, making it difficult for Zucheng to find correct time for attacking. Not long after the starting of match, Zucheng executed a perfect Nuki-Dou to get one point, and the point remained the same until the end of that match. But according to him later, he was trying to practise his kote, and that was the reason why he did not use his deadly dou again.

Match 2 was more smooth. After several trail attacks, Xinyi got her first point in a aimen. 5 seconds later, she secured winning with a quintessential nuki do.

Match 3 was me versus Mr. Tan again. Zucheng advised me to control the rhythm of match and I took his suggestions, which were soon proven to be correct. Benjamin was still aggressive, quick impressive considering that he had a full-length fight against Zucheng. After several rounds of attacks, I used my old trick from Unitaikai: pretend to attack his kote while aiming for his men. That worked again. Having secured a point, I also turned into defensive stance until time up.

Match 4: Aiura san got his first score from his first attack on his opponent. The match lasted longer after that, as his opponent became more defensive, before Aiura san scored another men following a fake move.

Match 5: Edward and Lu were both powerful competitors, and both held a strong chudan that were unbreakable. Lu was also a cautious kendoka who focus more on defending incoming attacks. Eventually, this match ended with a tie.