

U.S. Sambo Open

World Championships

By Stephen Keopfer
photos by Chris Diaz

What do sambo, Walt Disney World, emergency surgery, and the Russian-Chechnya war have in common? The answer is Dr. Khassan Baiev.

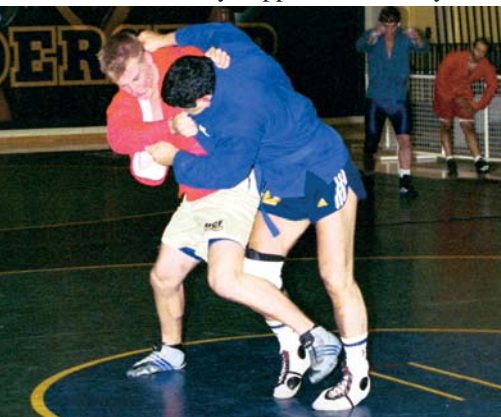


Caption

ORLANDO, FL – Among the group of impressive athletes representing Bulgaria, Canada, the Virgin Islands, and the United States at this year's United States Sambo Association (USSA) Open World Championship was one man who stood above the rest. Dr. Baiev, a 28-year sambo veteran and 2001 World Cup gold medalist, arrived at the Wide World of Sports Complex at Walt Disney World ready to throw down with the best of the rapidly growing American sambo community. His shy smile and understated demeanor hid skill that brought this 41-year-old surgeon yet another gold medal in his long sambo career.

The Chechnya Connection

Dr. Baiev resides in Boston with his wife and six children since relocating to the U.S. as political refugees from their war-torn homeland in 2000. Dr. Baiev was born and raised in a small town near Grozny, the capital of Chechnya – where martial arts are more than just casual pastimes. According to Baiev, “Most men in Chechnya go for judo, sambo, boxing, or wrestling.” He began his judo/sambo career at the age of 13 under Vakha Chapaev and quickly gained a reputation as a skilled competitor. Baiev began training with an old buttonless blazer and piece of rope that he used for a kurtka and belt. He kept his training secret as he was supposed to be watching the family cow pasture. The young Baiev abandoned the cows daily so he could train with coach Chapaev. After just one year, Baiev won the All-Russian Junior Championship. His judo/sambo career blossomed as he won tournaments all through his high school years, including the All-Soviet Junior Championship. By the time he began preparing for college, he received 18 invitations from colleges all across the Soviet Union. In those days, athletics were widely supported as a way of demonstrating Soviet superiority on the international stage.



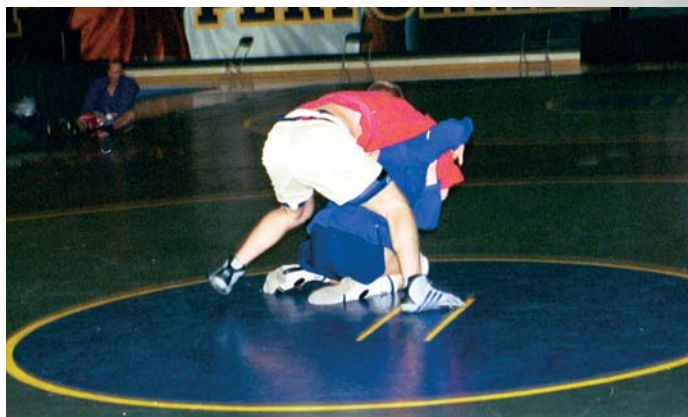
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well as the regional sambo championships. If he won both, he could attend the institute. Aside from a test, this was also an attempt to weed Baiev out, as Chechens were generally not welcome at top-level Russian institutes. Needless to say, Dr. Baiev won both tournaments, was admitted to the institute, and eventually made several Soviet national teams, raising the institute's sambo ranking from number 18 to number 1 in the region.

Gold Medal Fury

Now, nearly 25 years later, Baiev prepared to lock grips with 21-year-old James Meyers at the Magic Kingdom in the finals of the 84KG division. Meyers, a young powerful sambist with Team Palay of Tarpon Springs, Florida, is just beginning to make a name for himself in the sport. The two men fought impressive matches on their way to the finals, which was to be refereed by Marin Slavov, honored Bulgarian Greco-Roman and sambo coach. In fact, Meyers' 37-second achilles lock against David Johnson of New Jersey's Southern Mountain Martial Arts edged out Baiev's 45-second win for the fastest submission of the tournament.

The two locked grips for what would be a strategic match. At 1:22, the first takedown was scored as Baiev dropped Meyers



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hard to the mat with a single leg pick-up. They subsequently landed out-of-bounds and were re-started at center mat. Now down by two points, Meyers attempted a single leg of his own, but they again went out-of-bounds. Baiev's calm and tactical demeanor was in contrast to Meyers' aggressive energy. As the



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clock wound down to the six-minute time limit, each man continued to avoid attacks. With one minute remaining, Baiev entered for a podvhat, or uchimata, which Meyers evaded. Baiev immediately locked a grapevine on Meyers' leg and flowed into a clean odbiv, or turning grapevine throw, for another two points. Now down by four, Meyers would need a total victory (sambo's version of ippon) to win. But Baiev fluidly evaded Meyers' entries and earned the gold medal.



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**U.S. SAMBO OPEN
WORLD
CHAMPIONSHIPS
RESULTS**

74KG

- 1) **Shaun Holmstrom**
(Edmonton, Canada)
- 2) **Jerry Li**
(Florida, USA)
- 3) **David Bonner**
(Florida, USA)

84KG

- 1) **Khassan Baiev**
(Massachusetts, USA)
- 2) **James Meyers**
(Florida, USA)
- 3) **David Johnson**
(New Jersey, USA)

96KG

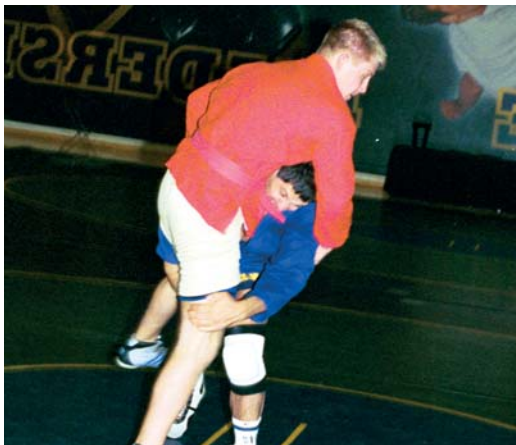
- 1) **Shaun Scott**
(US Virgin Islands)
- 2) **Ignat Ignatov**
(Varna, Bulgaria)
- 3) **Eric Campbell**
(California, USA)

+96KG

- 1) **Thomas Lawler**
(Florida, USA)
- 2) **Justin Higgins**
(Florida, USA)
- 3) **Donald Hunnell**
(California, USA)

A Surgeon Under Fire

In his autobiography, *The Oath: A Surgeon Under Fire*, Dr. Baiev describes life as a migrating trauma surgeon caught in the middle of a war that would leave him labeled a traitor by both sides. Kidnapped, imprisoned, hunted, and marked for death on several occasions by Russians for treating Chechen soldiers and



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Chechens for treating Russian soldiers, Baiev defiantly treated all wounded – primarily civilians – as he struggled to live up to the Hippocratic Oath. Long after the destruction of his hospital, Dr. Baiev lived amid the horror of war to serve the victims around him. So astounding was his dedication, that he received the Human Rights Watch Monitor of the Year Award in 2000.



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In his book, Dr. Baiev explains how his training in sambo and judo gave him the life saving ability to stay calm in the most difficult war situations. After leaving Chechnya in exile and moving to the U.S., Baiev began judo training at the Tohoku Club in Somerville, Massachusetts, which aided his post-war healing: “Once again I

turned to athletics to help me. Thirteen years had passed since I had set foot on the tatami mat, and I worried that the war might have impaired my agility and reflexes. To my surprise, I found that in some ways it may have even improved them. My balance and control on the mat were as good as ever, even better. All those times at Russian military checkpoints when the soldiers hurled insults at me, I had practiced control and patience. Their jibes taught me to swallow humiliation, which for a Chechen is hard, but during the war self-control became a survival mechanism; reacting to insults invited execution.”

When I first met Dr. Baiev at the tournament registration desk, I had no idea who this soft-spoken man was. We sat and talked for a while about sambo, posed for pictures, and enjoyed casual conversation. Just before leaving for the locker room, he reached into his bag and handed



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me a copy of his book. As I began to glance through the pages of *The Oath*, I realized that this remarkable story must be shared.

A Man’s Character

My teacher always spoke of how a man’s character makes his sambo, not the other way around. Dr. Baiev reminded me of this truth. In the end, martial arts training is not for medals or glory; it is for self improvement and the betterment of our communities. If there is one person who exemplifies this simple truth, it is Dr. Khassan Baiev.

Stephen Koepfer is Chief Instructor at New York Combat Sambo and President of the American Sambo Association (www.americansamboassociation.com). To learn more about Khassan Baiev read The Oath: A Surgeon Under Fire, Walker & Company, New York. 2003.