

Sword and Spirit

The Journal of Itten Dojo

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— Why Budo? —

Regardless of the times in which you live, or the circumstances of your life, success largely depends on things you can control:

- **Building a foundation of strong relationships in a community of mutual support and achievement.**
- **Forging a disciplined and positive mindset.**
- **Enhancing your physical health and capabilities.**

These are exactly the benefits membership in an authentic dojo provides.

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Tatami Tales

At this point, longtime member Jevin Orcutt is two-for-two in making offhand remarks that have resulted in sweeping transformations of the dojo. The first time was in 2020, when an organizational fiasco put us in the position of having to find another way to continue training in iaido. One former instructor had told me, “You already know everything you need to know about iaido. Just take what you have and run with it.” I’ve never been much of a “make-do” kind of guy, and that suggestion did not sit well with me.

Discussing options with Jevin, he said, “Aren’t you friends with Suino Sensei? Can’t you ask him?” My response was, “Duh. I never thought of that.” So, I asked. Here we are three years later, and our iaido class under the direction of Suino Sensei is the largest component of the dojo. The relationship with Suino Sensei has grown to Itten Dojo being increasingly closely affiliated with his Japanese Martial Arts Center in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and has expanded to include an ongoing transition of our (primarily) unarmed practice to Nihon Jujutsu, also under his direction.

And then, more recently, Jevin comes up to me and says, “I think our mats are worn out and need to be replaced.”

I was like, “Oh, hell no. You have any idea how much that would cost?”

But, Jevin was correct. Some of the mats were as much as 25 or more years old and had been in constant use. Supposedly, these kinds of foam and vinyl, tatami-style mats have a 15-year life expectancy.

Initially, I contacted Zebra Mats for an estimate, but the more I thought about it I decided on a different course. Most of the old mats were from Zebra, but given that we’re moving into Nihon Jujutsu, an art that incorporates a lot of judo-style throws, I realized that new, stiffer mats directly on the concrete floor of the dojo would not be comfortable. Or safe. We had enough experience already being thrown on the mats and spring subfloor at JMAC to know the spring floor is an absolute requirement. JMAC has constructed their own spring subfloors, a herculean effort.

But JMAC has sufficient membership and experience to pull-off construction of a spring subfloor and installation of mats over the course of a



weekend. If we took that approach, Itten Dojo would be shut down for several weeks to accomplish all that would need to be done.

The best course for us would be purchasing an integrated mat and subfloor system, an option not possible through Zebra Mats. So, next, I contacted Fuji Mats.

I was exceptionally fortunate to be helped at Fuji by A.J. Pedro, the son of former Olympic judoka Jimmy Pedro. A.J. proved to be the consummate professional, providing consistently expert advice and dealing patiently with my unending stream of questions. At the end of a process extending over a couple of months, we'd agreed on the details of the system to be purchased and the cost: more than \$25,000.

I was aware that when JMAC was forced to move from their second to third (and current) location, Suino Sensei needed to raise about \$50,000 fast, in order to fund the build-out and move. With a letter to members and friends, the needed funds were raised in a matter of days. More than the needed amount, in fact.

Taking that as inspiration, I wrote a fund-raising email and gave it to Suino Sensei to review. In the email, I said that I hoped to be able to raise enough money to reduce the amount of the loan I expected to have to take on. I hoped, ideally, that I wouldn't have to borrow any more than \$15,000.

Suino Sensei immediately told me that I was "thinking too small," and that rather than hoping to reduce the amount of a loan I should be expecting to eliminate any need for a loan, and I should form my request accordingly. My initial reaction to that was, "Well, I know Sensei's a pretty optimistic guy, but that's dreaming." I should have known better. First rule: Sensei is always right.

I revised the fund-raising request email per Suino Sensei's recommendations and hit send. I also posted similar requests on social media. To my utter astonishment, in barely 10 days there was more than \$25,000 in the dojo savings account. And because I was able to pay cash via a wire transfer, A.J. Pedro gave us an additional 1.5% discount on the purchase.

The following photos detail the delivery and installation of the integrated mat system, consisting of the spring subfloor sections, mats, and oak frame pieces.

One more important point about A.J. Pedro: Four of the mats delivered to us were damaged, evidently at the warehouse during packaging. Needing only an email and some photographs, A.J. instantly had no-cost replacements on the way to us.

If you are in the market for mats, by all means talk to A.J. He can be reached at aj@fujimats.com.



The first delivery was made on Wednesday, February 22. Several of us had to be on-hand to meet the truck and unload everything. Fortunately, the driver had a pallet-lift.



The initial shipment consisted of 48 full-size and three half-size mats, and the oak frame pieces. Based on our exterior inspection, everything appeared to be fine.



As we unstacked the material on the pallets, it became evident that there was damage not visible during exterior inspection of the load. The first problem we discovered was a mat that appeared to have been folded in half, deeply creasing it. I was willing to let it go, until we found this mat, with a nail in it. The mat packed adjacent to it was also pierced by the head of the nail. A fourth mat, on the bottom of the stack, had the edge of the mat crushed by a forklift. So, at that point, I notified A.J. and he took immediate action to ship replacements.



Fuji ships the oak frame pieces unfinished, so that customers have choices in matching the frame to existing decor. We finished our frame with tung oil to preserve the natural beauty of the wood.



The second delivery of materials was made on Friday, February 24, and consisted of the subfloor components. Assembled, the subfloor is two layers of 1/2-inch birch plywood. The bottom layer comes with six-inch, steel springs attached— pieces to be placed on the outside edges of the subfloor have double the number of springs along the edge(s). In total, our system has almost 1,500 springs.

The top layer is laid in a staggered pattern such that no junctions of plywood sheets are directly above another junction. The layers attach with velcro, without any need for tools.



That same Friday, later in the afternoon, I met with Dr. Mark Olivetti, an exceptional chiropractor seen by many members of the dojo. Dr. Olivetti is an expert woodworker and, for fun, builds high-quality furniture. The oak frame pieces are delivered in 6½-foot sections. While we had the tools and skill to cut pieces to length, we did not have the equipment or ability to cut 45-degree angles on the pieces that would form the corners of the frame.

Luckily, Dr. Olivetti has professional-grade saws and skills, and graciously agreed to help. Given the shape of the frame pieces, this was not an easy task.



Installation commenced the morning of Saturday, February 25. As the old tatami were pulled up, cleaned, and stacked out of the way, the subfloor components were separated into the different sizes of sheets and arrangements of springs, and the concrete floor was scrubbed. The old mats were sold.

Fuji has a really great method for designing mat systems and provides crystal-clear instructions to guide construction of the subfloor. There are also a wealth of video references on the Fuji website.



Happily, the instructions specified starting placement of the subfloor at the corner I already wanted to use for that purpose. Nothing in the room that contains our mat is actually square, so figuring out exactly how to place the first few sections of plywood was complicated. We needed to leave space between the subfloor and walls to allow attachment of the frame pieces, and we needed to keep the subfloor square as it was laid down. In this photo, you can see the velcro attachment pads and how junctions were staggered.



The final, top-layer section of subfloor being laid at the opposite corner from where we started.



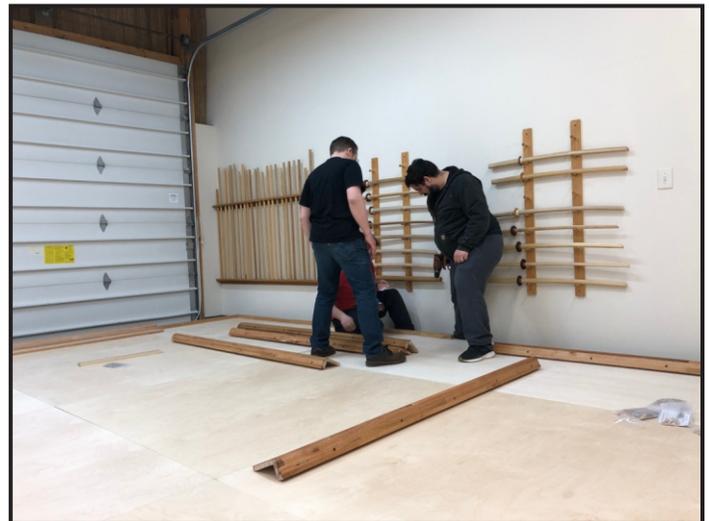
The finished subfloor. Instigator Jevin is on the left.



Next came attachment of the frame pieces, the only portion of the project requiring power tools. We used a miter-saw to clamp frame pieces in place to make clean, square cuts. The pattern of piece-lengths is identical on opposite sides of the subfloor.

Frame pieces are affixed to the subfloor with wood screws. The oak pieces are pre-drilled, so only holes through the plywood needed to be drilled.

Oak plugs were supplied to cover the screws.



With the first tatami placed within the frame, we paused work to have everyone sign the subfloor. Some of the crew had already left by that point—the further we got into the process, fewer workers were needed, so some of the crew had been released. For those individuals, we (carefully) pulled up the mat over the signatures so they could add their names the next time they were in the dojo.



Working diagonally across the dojo, as had been done to place the subfloor, the final mat is laid.



Appropriately, the first practice on the new mat was the iaido class on Monday, February 27. The “bounce” in the new mat takes a little getting used to, but within about a half-hour most people don’t notice it.

When you’re thrown on the new mats, though, you really notice it every time. It’s wonderful. Even in hard, judo-style throws there’s no stress. The “landing” is solid, but there’s almost no sense of impact, the forces are so well distributed.

Just moving around on the mats is much easier than was the case with the old, worn-out, spongy tatami.





There are only a few minor, cosmetic touches to be completed for this project to be finished. We've filled the spaces between the frame and walls on the right side and along the rear wall, leaving just a few inches of bare concrete on the front and left side. I found that I still have a roll of leftover vinyl from the floor in the entrance and

visitors' area, and could use that to complete the perimeter. Another option would be simply painting the exposed concrete a brown that would go well with the frame.

I'm overwhelmingly grateful to everyone that played a part in making this happen. This dojo obviously means a lot to me. I now know just how much it means to others. 🙏

Robert Wolfe, chief instructor of Itten Dojo, began martial arts training in 1975 while attending Bucknell University, where he earned a degree in Japanese Studies. Mr. Wolfe has taught since 1985, and founded Itten Dojo in 1992. His articles on martial arts have been featured in publications such as *The Bujin*, *Budo Shinbun*, the *Journal of Asian Martial Arts*, *Bugeisha*, *Aikido Today Magazine*, *Inside Karate*, *Martial Arts Training*, and *Martial Arts Professional*.

