

# THE FIGHTER

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THE THIRD ROUND



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## Editor's Notes

Well - what a break it's a been.

After a three-year sojourn of dabbling in articles at *Beyond Kick*, postponed/cancelled interviews and the unfortunate reality of having to focus on my 'real' job to pay rent, I'm glad to say I'm back again with an exciting interview before we bid farewell to 2024.

During my brief visit to Tokyo this December, I had the great opportunity to interview "Saku Jr.", Taisei Sakuraba who makes his MMA debut in RIZIN this NYE. If you haven't made the connection already, he is the son of *the* Kazushi Sakuraba - who you would (or *should*) all know. It was an honour to interview the legend's son and hear about his thoughts.

Unfortunately there is no footage from the interview this time, but I hope my readers can get a sense of Taisei's happy character from my writings.

May 2025 be just as bright and exciting for everyone.

Yours in fighting,

LJ

"I WILL LOVE THE LIGHT FOR IT SHOWS ME THE WAY, YET I WILL ENDURE THE  
DARKNESS BECAUSE IT SHOWS ME THE STARS."

- OG MANDINO





## Taisei Sakuraba: Brand New Chaos

By LJ

*We speak to the latest MMA debutant Taisei Sakuraba on what motivated him to fight; his current practices; and his thoughts on his upcoming bout against veteran Yusuke Yachi on NYE.*

**“And I wondered ... would I be asking myself then, could things have been different?”**

The taxi comes to a halt at the corner of a quiet street in Roppongi.

I am surprised to see the RIZIN office inconspicuously tucked away in a hushed neighbourhood – it is a quaint, four-storey building nestled amongst neatly trimmed shrubs of greenery.

One could never guess that the engine rooms of the arguably most dramatic and brutal productions of combat sports take place in this peaceful, sunny neighbourhood – yet as I make my way inside, the building entrance greets me with an unmistakeable, shiny plaque that plasters RIZIN’s name.

As the elevator comes to a ding at level four, the ‘lobby’ of RIZIN’s office is covered in walls top to toe in black, adorned with glass cases containing RIZIN belts and other memorabilia.

It is a sight most RIZIN aficionados would be familiar with, where fighters usually pose for a photo with the CEO Nobuyuki Sakakibara.

A moment later, a RIZIN staff member comes in and takes me to one of the office meeting rooms, where Taisei Sakuraba is already seated and ready to be interviewed.

Taisei, the 26-year-old son of the esteemed Kazushi Sakuraba, is cheerful, with the same sunny disposition that he had displayed in the various press conferences. As his upcoming opponent, Yusuke Yachi puts it, he “seems like a nice guy. He’s a ‘good, young man’.”

“That’s a cute phone case,” I comment, when Taisei is reorganising his belongings on the table. “Do you like Dragon Ball?”

“I do, but this is a sticker,” Taisei notes, with a smile, as he lifts up the phone, as if easier for me to see: an image of a child Goku, boisterous and ready to conquer the world.

As I interview Taisei, he comes across as a ‘regular’ lad of his age, in the good sense. He is charming and talkative; enjoys manga and anime; describes going out with his friends as a way to unwind.

He also loves to drink – when asked what his favourite alcoholic beverage is, after some hesitation, Taisei answers, “a whiskey highball”. Consistent with all his other interviews and press conferences, there’s no exaggeration in saying there’s not a bad bone to his body.

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For hardcore JMMA fans, Kazushi Sakuraba is a revered figure. The Gracie Hunter, the IQ Wrestler, SAKU, the legend, the pioneer – whatever you want to call him, he is one of the greatest, one of the best fighters of all time. In 2017, Sakuraba was inducted into the UFC Hall of Fame for his contribution to the sport.

It’s not hard to imagine the thrill of the fans when “SPEED TK RE-MIX” by Tetsuya Komuro started blasting through the speakers of Saitama Super Arena at SUPER RIZIN 3 on 28 July 2024.

As I watched the PPV, I was at the edge of my seat as I excitedly watched not only one, but two masked men walk out against a backdrop of vivid animations featuring the Saku Machine Mask, fluttering cherry blossoms and the number 39.

Once the two stepped into the ring, Kazushi Sakuraba took off his mask, smiling as the crowd cheered on.

**“Hi, it’s Sakuraba. It’s been a while. Apologies but I’ve been quite busy with QUINTET so I haven’t been able to show face in MMA recently but I’m currently making my special weapon practice. I came here today to introduce [him].”**

“Come on, introduce yourself!” he shouts, and his comrade takes off his mask.

“Nice to meet you all. I’m his son, Taisei Sakuraba.” Loud cheers reverberate throughout the arena.

“I’m working really hard practicing at the moment so I would be grateful for your support,” he ends, with a bow.

As Taisei brings his microphone to his lips again, as if to say something, his father cuts him off, “You talk too long! Greetings and skirts are both better off being short – I will make him work very hard so that he can fight on New Year’s Eve so I would be grateful all for your support!”





Taisei began judo at an early age.

In old photos, he still has the same bright smile but is considerably shier-looking, sporting a buzz cut with glasses – a stark difference to his current, trendier look.



Taisei initially put an end to his judo career once he decided to take on a role in sales at a real estate company. Before things came to a close, he competed for the last time under his father's grappling organisation, QUINTET, in an exhibition match in March 2021, under the pseudonym "Saku Jr.", before commencing full-time work a month later. But unbeknownst to him at the time, this would not be the last time he would step on a mat, before the audience.

**"I decided I wanted to go professional in MMA at about spring last year," Taisei notes.**

"I had been working full-time for two years ... I was just about to enter my third year and I was thinking of whether I continue my current line of work," he recalls.

"In interviews, I always say I began MMA because I wanted to be popular with women. But I had a lot of ambitions."

He discusses candidly, his desire to earn more money, becoming famous. When there is a route for that to be possible, it is natural for anyone to consider taking that plunge, to see what it is like to get a glimpse of fame, and what it is like to live as the rich.

**"It was about April last year. I was just drinking with friends and talking ... if I was drinking like this, with my friends, as an old man – would I be asking myself then, could things have been different? Should I have done [MMA]? I didn't want to be having those conversations in an izakaya as an old man," he explains.**

"So I quit my job and commenced MMA."

It is the perennial question for all of us humans - our regrets are often not the things we did, but the choices we didn't make; the dreams we had wished to chase.

"There is a time limit to when I can start a sport but a salaryman – I can do that later in life," says Taisei.

"Not to say, it's not difficult to re-enter the workforce later in life," he continues politely, almost as if to correct himself and not offend anyone.

"But in terms of physical performance, there's a time limit to being an athlete."

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Things moved quickly from then.

In September 2023, Taisei made his pro grappling debut in QUINTET against the controversial Masato Uchishiba, winning against the two-time Olympic judo gold medallist by a kneebar in splendid fashion. In January 2024, he competed in his first kickboxing bout by KO at the K-1 Amateur Challenge.

“[Judo and striking] is a completely different sport. They’re both the same genre of kakutogi but I had never done it before. It’s a completely different way of using your body, so it was a really good experience for me.”

“I’m not very good at fast stuff, but it was a lot of fun” he adds, with a laugh.

“If you live your life normally, in no way would you be entering a scenario where you would be punching someone. It’s an odd situation where you are able to legally punch someone with your full power. I thought it was interesting.”

On whether Taisei has particularly focused on improving his striking technique since beginning MMA, he answers that he has the done the same amount of practice in grappling and striking.

“For striking, I’ve started on a blank slate though, so there’s a lot of things I need to remember and learn.”

On 19 October 2024, Taisei also faced Kazuma Kuramoto in a group grappling match via QUINTET rules at the Japan Martial Arts Expo Prologue. The fight ended in a draw. When asked about the fight, he responds instantly, “it was frustrating.”

**“There was quite a weight difference so from Kuramoto’s perspective, a draw is basically a win. So I really wanted to win this and make everyone go, ‘wow’! But unfortunately, it was a draw. It was disappointing,” he says, a little dejectedly.**

Unbeknownst to most fight fans, Taisei had been building his experiences in a stoic fashion. Yet on paper, it is almost ridiculous for someone to be making a pro MMA debut against a 41-fight veteran, who also happened to be on the opposing QUINTET team at the October grappling event.

“Yachi went home without being even tired, so I want to tire him this time round,” he laughs. “I don’t have much experience so I intend to go in hell bent. For a veteran, I think that’s the toughest kind of opponent to handle.”

**“I want to make people who were fans of my dad, to become my fan too. From their perspective, my dad’s beaten a number of opponents when everyone thought he would lose. So I want to have fights like that too. The more I win, I think it would make me a superstar fighter. I don’t want to be like any other fighter.”**

“The one and only?” I ask.

“The one and only, that’s right.” Taisei responds.

In Taisei’s RIZIN profile, his motives to become an MMA fighter had been attributed to wanting to become more popular with women. I joke, whether that was untrue. “Oh, that is actually true,” he confirms.

“I know you haven’t debuted yet but has the MMA practice made you popular since?”

“No, not at all,” he laughs.



For most RIZIN fans, we thought the first time we saw Taisei was at SUPER RIZIN 3. However, forgotten to most of us, we had actually caught a glimpse of Taisei in RIZIN in his father's VTR in 2015 when he faced Aoki Shinya.

Camera-shy, he's done the interview with his back facing the camera and we only get a shot of the back of his head with a buzz cut, in his school uniform. Taisei leans against a bridge with his father, as they speak.

"The one where you came out as Mario," Taisei says, recalling his father's entrance at the PRIDE GP 2003 Final Conflict.

"I remember watching that and laughing with my younger brother."

"...and the one where you're dressed like a mad scientist. And the one where you came out with my brother's bicycle."

Rewatching the footage, the memory of this VTR suddenly comes back to me. In the latest RIZIN confessions video, director Sato adds an additional footage from the behind-the-scenes of the original VTR.

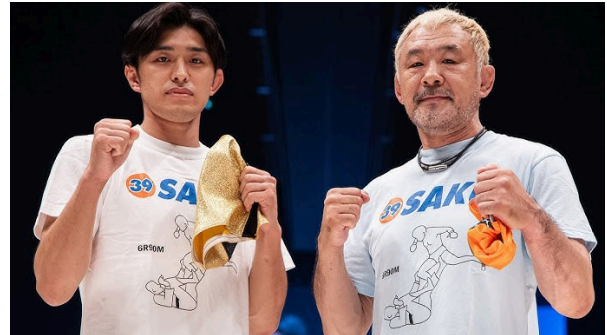
"What about kakutogi? Don't you want to try it out as well?" Sato asks.

The sounds of the streams of water under the bridge gently echoes in the footage.

"Well, if it's just a little bit I think it's ok," mumbles the 17-year-old Taisei.

**"But an opponent that you're not even in conflict with...I can't punch them with all my might," the young boy says, sounding uncertain.**

What is your favourite bout of your father? Did you look up to him growing up? What kind of father was he like? They are all questions any Saku fan would be curious to know but I put all those aside, as you should. I wonder how many times he's been asked throughout his life, at school, at work, in interviews. I do slip in a question on whether he would emulate any of his father's style in his walk-out, which he confirms that "we will have to find out" on the day.



But I put in one more question I had been meaning to ask.

"How do you feel about being called Sakuraba Jr.? Do you have any negative feelings," I ask Taisei.

"I don't have any positive or negative feelings about it," he responds.

**"Sakuraba Jr. I am Sakuraba Jr.," Taisei says cheerfully, and the meeting room is filled with laughter.**

There really is nothing beyond that. For those who take in the nostalgia of PRIDE and the days Saku fought, it is natural to want to find a connection or a trace of his father.

The way he smiles, his love of alcohol, his proficiency in armlocks, the list goes on. But as I speak to him and watch his interviews, it feels wrong to trace the shadows of 'someone' else.

There is a video you can find online of Taisei after his QUINTET bout against Uchishiba, responding to the flurry of questions from media outlets. At the end of the media session in an unusual turn of the tables, Taisei stands up and asks a question to the outlets.

**“Who thought I would lose to Uchishiba?” he asks, raising one hand, as if to urge the reporters who had disregarded the underdog, to make themselves known.**

The camera stays on Taisei, without showing the crowd, but it is clear that most have put their hands up. Taisei brings up his fists with an excited “Yes!”, knowing he’s pulled off the upset.



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I wonder what the 17-year-old Taisei would think, knowing that he is about to make his debut in RIZIN’s biggest event of the year in Saitama Super Arena, facing a crowd of 37,000 people.

The young boy, who had sat in the park, speaking to his father in the tender darkness of the night, considering nervously, on how one can strike an opponent who had not wronged him. Years apart, he enjoys his striking practice, even earning a KO win in a K-1 bout.

This is no easy fight for Taisei to take on, facing a veteran with no professional MMA experience. Yet it is the nature of *kakutogi* that we are at the edge of our seats, anticipating what kind of surprises Sakuraba Jr. can bring and how he will transform in the arena. It is the beauty of the sport that we can look forward to what miracles a debutant can create on the last day of 2024.

With bated breath, we await what *brand new chaos* he brings into the ring.

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*Follow Taisei Sakuraba on X and instagram at @taiseisakuraba and @taisei3939 respectively.*

*Don't miss the RIZIN NYE card by purchasing the PPV at rizin.tv.*



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**TAISEI SAKURABA**