

RUGBY IN JAPAN

BY

STEVE JOHNSON.

Steve Johnson has been involved in Japanese rugby for thirty years, first as a player for the Kobe Regatta and Athletic Club, then as a guest coach for Fushimi Technical High School, full coach of The Yamaha Rugby Club and since 1997 as PE teacher and coach at Hamamatsu Technical High School. Steve was possibly the first foreign coach to be involved in high school rugby and was certainly the first full-time high school coach. His mantra of "Enjoy Rugby" attracted a lot of media attention, because until recently the concept of sport being enjoyable was alien to people in Japanese sports circles. He has been featured on Japan's "News Station", which is rather like the former "News at Ten" in England and other local television programmes. From April this year, Steve will be working at Hamamatsu University.

Within Japanese rugby circles, there was great disappointment that the 2011 Rugby World Cup was lost to New Zealand. Sadly, the news of the failure of the Japan RFU was hardly noticed by the rest of Japanese society. Unlike New Zealand's Prime Minister Helen Clark, who flew half way around the world to support New Zealand's bid, Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi did not.

At the risk of upsetting my Japanese rugby friends and colleagues, I think that this application was probably one World Cup too soon. Japan could, as we saw so clearly in the 2002 soccer World Cup, efficiently host the tournament. The infrastructure here is more than adequate, teams and supporters would be warmly welcomed by the Japanese rugby community and, within the framework of the rugby society, the tournament would be hugely successful.

On the other hand, however, a Japanese RWC would not achieve the incredible atmosphere of the 2003 Australian RWC, because there is limited awareness about the game among the greater public. RWC 2003 gripped the Australian public imagination and this in turn attracted an incredible amount of attention overseas. I personally don't think that the grounds and the home spectators in Japan would have generated the same amount of excitement.

So, on balance, it probably was a good thing that Japan did not get this one, but they should pursue the dream for 2015. By then professional rugby will have been in place here for over a decade, the structure of the game should be more attractive to overseas people and there will be



no reasons for the "gentlemen" among the IRB board members to keep the game locked up in their own cabinet.

Japanese rugby people are "rugger buggers" from beginning to end and there are good reasons for that. In order to make this clear, I need to explain the school system here. The Japanese education system is 6-3-3, by which I mean six years of elementary school (6 to 12 years of age), three years of middle school (13-15 years of age) (these two phases are compulsory) and three years of high school (16-18 years of age - which is optional, but over 95% of students go through to high school). The school year runs from April to the following March. As in England, there is a six week summer holiday period, about a three week break at the end of the year and three weeks at the end of every academic year.

In most countries, sports in schools are played on a seasonal basis; the Japanese system is very different. The Japanese students who elect to become members of a sports club do so on the understanding that the sport will be a full-time - twelve month-a-year - commitment. In fact, the sports teams in schools are not called "clubs" but "bukatsu", which translates as "extra-curricular activity". Players usually practise five days a week and play on the sixth day; until the recent past, a three hundred and sixty five day per year for bukatsu would not be considered unusual, so it is certainly "extra curricular". The idea of an "off season" for recovery is still considered an oddity dreamed up by effete westerners.

Private schools (and some state schools in some parts of the country) offer rugby as an after school activity at the start of Middle School (12 years of age), and these students then have the option to continue until they leave high school at the age of eighteen. Most students outside the private sector start to play rugby at the start of high school, often choosing the sport not because they know and like it, but because they have had enough of the sport they did in middle school and want a change.

One of the reasons why students like to change sports is that the length of traditional practices is almost beyond belief. When I started coaching in 1997, I planned and stuck to a ninety minute session and when I finished and told the players it was over, they were stunned. After several moments of silence, the captain asked if they could do some free practice and I was pleased to agree to that. I offered to stay to help out, thinking that the "free time" would go on for about ten – fifteen minutes. They continued for another hour! The other teachers were shocked at my "short" training session, yet I have tried to keep sessions to a sensible length ever since. However, Japanese players simply don't feel that they have practised if the practice time has been less than two hours.



Mothers often have to be persuaded that rugby is a good option for their darling children. There is a popular expression in Japanese that says that rugby is a "3K" game. The three Ks are "kitanai" (dirty from the excessive laundry demands from a rugby culture which is usually played on sandy soil - definitely grassless pitches), "kiken" (which means dangerous - it is after all a contact sport) and "kitsui" (unbearably hard).

A typical calendar year in school rugby in Japan is as follows, but do remember that new students to the school will arrive at the beginning of April. In January we start with the "shin jin sen", which literally means "new person tournament". This indicates that the previous year's seniors have retired from the team and it is the turn of the new players. Games are played between teams within the prefecture (which is rather like a county in England). This tournament continues until the end of February. In our part of Japan, the prefectural champions, runners up, third and fourth teams then go through to a regional tournament, held in the third week of March. The top two teams then go through to a national 16 team tournament lasting six days. Those schools who do not achieve that exalted status will be spending the spring holiday period playing as many practice games as possible, so that the players who are not regulars in the A Team/1st XV get as much game experience as we can give them.

New students arrive at the school at the beginning of April and we fiercely compete with the other sports clubs in the school to attract as many good sporting prospects as we can. At the same time, we will be in the midst of preparing the team for the next tournament, which starts in mid-April. The Spring Tournament continues through until the beginning of June, followed by another regional mini-tournament in mid-June.

Japan is unbearably - and dangerously - hot for rugby players in the summer months of July and August. Practice is still held, though. At my school we start at seven o'clock in the morning, when it is still reasonably warm, and try to finish by about ten o'clock before the mercury soars. We then arrange pool time for the players to swim, relax and cool down. Some schools still train remarkably hard, even in the midday sun, and there have been some tragic deaths from dehydration.

In the summer break, most school teams go to resort centres in the mountains for a few days. Here the weather is reasonable for rugby and practice games are organized. The most well-known Japanese summer rugby centre is Sugadaira in Nagano Prefecture and at any one time in August there are literally hundreds of middle school, high school, university and club teams playing and practising in the morning, afternoon and evening.



At the end of August/beginning of September, the first stage of an inter-prefectural tournament is held, the final stages being held the middle of October. At the national competition, sixteen regional prefectural teams gather in one centre and they stay as long as they win. My team reached the semi-finals in 2001 and we stayed for a week in a tiny hamlet in the north of Japan, in which there was *nothing*! The boredom factor was potentially very fractious, but we managed to retain a hold on our sanity. This tournament features the best players from each school team, and selection to the prefecture team can aid a student's application to university.

The main event of the high school rugby player's career begins at the end of October – the All-Japan High School rugby tournament. Every rugby-playing school enters and, like the Daily Mail Cup, the first stage is within the prefecture. Newspapers cover the event from the beginning and all the prefectural finals are televised live. Victory at the prefecture level gives the school the prized "Hanazono ticket". Fifty-one schools (47 prefectural champions plus 2 extra from Osaka, which has a huge number of rugby schools, and 1 extra team each from Tokyo and Hokkaido) gather at the end of the year and the first day sees a parade of all the teams onto the hallowed ground at Hanazono in south east Osaka. This parade is quite boring unless your team is there, in which case it becomes rivetingly exciting.



Teams play every other day, with seeded teams coming in the second round. All the games are televised live on Sky and, in addition to that, the semi finals and final are televised on terrestrial television. Dozens of buses transport supporters from the competing teams and it is an enormous rugby festival.





With transportation and hotel costs for all the players in the rugby club included (we took 75 players and staff when we qualified), the cost to the schools is enormous (on the two occasions we qualified, we lost in the first round, yet we still spent over twenty thousand pounds each time), but the prestige makes the cost worth it. Top teams can use the publicity to attract good young players and private schools can enhance their scholarship offers with a real chance of glory if they do well.

The next step for the polished player is university rugby. There are many teams, from the local friendly team who will accept anyone, to the top, almost professional, university teams like Waseda and Kanto Gakuen. Study requirements are extremely relaxed, but commitment to the cause is expected. The university competitive season starts in September and finishes in January, with each team playing about ten games or so. The top university teams historically have been Meiji, Keio and Waseda, and in the past their matches regularly attracted crowds of 50,000 to 60,000. There are few close games, however, and attendance has usually been thanks to the

efforts of Old Boys Associations. These numbers have dropped in recent years, especially since the formation of the Japan Top league; people now realise that the adult game is far more interesting.

Outstanding university players are recruited for Japan's Top League teams. As in England, there are twelve teams in the top division. The teams are company teams, basically because nobody else can afford to pay for the land needed for pitches, training facilities and so on. The players in these teams are usually contracted on an annual basis, but there are some who are hired as regular employees, who are then released from their day jobs to play rugby. The difference is that contracted players will be released when they are no longer able to represent the team, whereas



employees are hired for their whole working lifetime.

The Japan Top League has been going for three years now and the level continues to rise every year. The influence of imported players (usually from New Zealand or Australia) continues to be immense, both from a results point of view and from the quality of rugby they bring to the game. The accusation that the foreign players were simply looking for a final payoff before retiring can no longer be levelled at these sportsmen. Whilst it is true that the level is lower than that at which they played before in their own countries, the tackles and contact hits in Japan are still pretty fierce.

Although it is a long way behind baseball and soccer, rugby is quite popular in Japan. There are two things that hinder its continued progress. Firstly, baseball is so established, with some of its superstars making the grade in the major American leagues. Secondly, soccer was the Japanese development sport of the 90s and the soccer administrators did a great job – the sport here is high profile and decidedly sexy. As with baseball, some soccer stars are doing very well overseas (e.g. Hidetoshi Nakata at Bolton). No Japanese rugby player has made a significant impact overseas, so the game is not yet sufficiently media-friendly. The top people in the JRFU are still old-fashioned in their thinking yet there is a desperate need to take the game to the people. Until this thinking changes, it is difficult to see Japan breaking into the world top ten or twelve. When they overcome these obstacles, RWC Japan will become a viable prospect.