

Japan's *Keirin* Going Global

Interviewer: Yoshihiro KATAOKA



Koichi Nakano

Wearing colorful jerseys and pedaling their beloved bicycles, all racers surge together at once into the finish line. It is not well known that *keirin*, publicly run cycle racing, originated as a professional sport in Japan. *Keirin* was adopted as an official event at the 2000 Summer Olympic Games in Sydney, becoming the second Olympic contest that developed in Japan after *judo*. Former cyclist Koichi Nakano, known for his magnificent accomplishment of winning the pro sprint event of the World Cycling Championships 10 consecutive times beginning from 1977, played a part in preparing the way for *keirin* to transform into an international sport. Retired but active as a commentator and critic, he spoke of the charms and prospects of *keirin*, which is going global, in an interview with Japan SPOTLIGHT.

● Powerful, Perfect Group Bicycle Racing

***Keirin* was accepted as a formal event at the World Cycling Championships in 1980. Active *keirin* cyclist Kiyofumi Nagai received a bronze medal at the Beijing Olympics in 2008, which marked the 60th anniversary of the birth of *keirin*. Why has it gained international recognition?**

Nakano: The style of competition like *keirin* was nonexistent in Europe, the home of cycling races. The main mode of competition in Europe was rivalry among individuals to vie for time. There were events such as a one-to-one sprint and a three-member team sprint, but there was no form of contest in which individuals pedaled their bikes in a group battle to determine the winner. I think such a new form of racing was accepted as very interesting.

When Japanese *keirin* riders held a demonstration race at the 1972 Munich Olympics, they received a very good reaction from spectators. The sound coming from a gong to announce that racers were on their last lap had a powerful and perfect effect, although the gong was smaller than a genuine one, and contributed to gathering much momentum. I was not scheduled

to take part in the demonstration run as I was due to be in the official sprint event, but I went so far as asking for permission to join for a workout and I rode my bike.

After turning around the last corner en route to the finish line, all players put on the final burst of breakneck speed at about 70 km per hour in fierce contention. It was impossible to tell who was first until the end of the race. It's difficult to find such a stunning, overwhelming performance in other competitions. I think if you saw it for yourself, you'd really feel what an impressive race it is.

All Olympic competitions are not necessarily retained just because they were formerly on the list of official events as seen in the removal of baseball and softball from the 2012 Olympic Games in London. The International Olympic Committee reviews events for the Games held every four years to introduce new contests or eliminate some. The cycling event is not likely to be an exception. In this sense, I think *keirin* has firmly ranked itself among formal Olympic events since it was adopted by the World Cycling Championships.

● Fix Rules in European Style

Cycling in Europe is as popular as soccer and riders are said to draw respect from people. *Keirin* is worth of special mention for gaining international fame amid such a situation, isn't it?

Nakano: The history of the cycling race in Europe is old. The World Cycling Championships event itself is longer in history than the modern Olympics. There are a stunningly great many racers in the cyclist population. Cycling track athlete Chris Hoy has received a knighthood and is now addressed as "Sir." The level of recognition given to cycling is as high as the honor accorded to him.

To be sure, *keirin* is a version originated in Japan, but what is interesting is that Europeans did not accept the Japanese style

of *keirin* and arranged for rules to be in a European fashion and gradually developed it into the present form of international *keirin*. Nine riders normally compete in a race in Japan, but the number is six in Europe where the bank of a velodrome is different from that of Japan. I think the variances represent Europeans' pride that Europe is home to cycling races.

Ordinary people in Western countries have been familiarizing themselves with bicycles since they were very young. They load their vehicles with bicycles when they go on vacation to various places. Unlike undulating, bad road conditions in Japan, Western nations have always had the environment that helps grow cycling races.



● Pedal Your Way to Impress Spectators

On the other hand, *keirin* is a publicly run betting event operated by public entities such as local governments. Does *keirin* as a sport have any difference in competition when compared with other cycling races?

Nakano: That is an important point. Japanese *keirin* is strictly public-operated races. *Keirin* racers should never forget it. For example, athletes in the Olympics can stop competing if they find they cannot win. They may choose to keep their strength intact, thinking that they cannot pass today's preliminaries and opt for victory in a consolation race.

However, this sort of choice is no good in *keirin* in Japan. Racers cannot let down their guard today because they feel

● Bring “Two *Keirin*” Races into One

In other words, do you mean to say there is a difference between Japan's *keirin* that is a publicly run betting sport and *keirin* as an international sport in the Olympics and the World Cycling Championships?

Nakano: That is the problem. Racers and the *keirin* industry in Japan have come to think there are two different types of *keirin*. It is because Japanese cycling athletes cannot win in international cycling competitions. Riders justify it by blaming “differences in the two types of *keirin*.” That is strange. Of course, the two types are not exactly the same, but there is fundamentally no difference. Riders in Japan and others in international contests do the same – strive to gain first place. There is no need to separate the two kinds of *keirin*.

they may lose and will instead try to go all out tomorrow. That is not the way to demonstrate themselves to spectators. They must do their best, putting forth their last spurt until the very end, even though a win may be out of reach.

Keirin is a race in which one never knows what happens in competition. An instance could happen when racers fall off bicycles one after another and a rider tracing them suddenly finds there is no cyclist in front. Racers ride their bicycles always gunning for top place. I'd say publicly run *keirin* cannot stand unless riders “show” a performance that makes spectators think they are treated to a good race although their betting tickets turn out to be losers, or an impressive contest that spectators may not bet on but are willing to pay admission fees to see.

Conversely, Japanese cyclists fail to win because they try to keep them apart.

Just like there are marathon and high-jump events in track-and-field competitions, there are sprint, road race and *keirin* events in cycling competitions. Publicly run *keirin* is one event of the cycling contest. Otherwise, it would follow that *keirin* racers are not recognized as professional athletes.

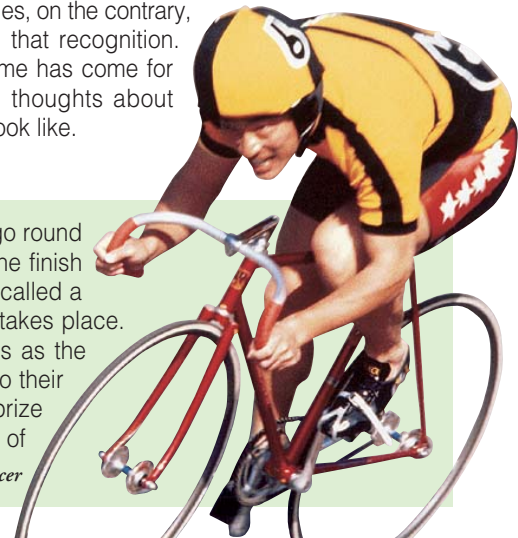
Keirin is recognized as an international sport.

Japanese *keirin* circles, on the contrary, must catch up with that recognition. In this sense, the time has come for us to have second thoughts about what *keirin* should look like.

(To be continued)

Keirin in Japan: Riding bicycles made to special specifications, nine racers normally go round the track of a conic velodrome, measuring 333 meters to 500 meters, to determine the finish order in a public-operated betting event. Some racers band together to form a team called a “line” among like-minded cyclists, including those living in a local area where racing takes place. *Keirin* is an exciting pro sport, with riders in the same line seeking to restrain others as the race unfolds. About 3,500 registered cyclists compete in groups graded according to their performance rankings at 47 velodromes across the country all year round. Leading prize money earners of the year take part in the yearend *Keirin* Grand Prix for a top award of 100 million yen.

Nakano in action while an active racer



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