

Strong Motivation Thrills Spectators

Interviewer: Yoshihiro KATAOKA

Former bicycle racing star Koichi Nakano won the pro sprint event of the World Cycling Championships a stunning 10 straight times starting from 1977. This magnificent accomplishment helped *keirin*, pioneered in Japan, become known in the rest of the world. During his active career, he always remained a top-class cyclist, running at high speed in the *keirin* world and establishing a great number of records in domestic events. Businesspeople and intellectuals as well as all relevant sports people may learn a lot from the unprecedented feats he performed. Was there any secret to winning? How to overcome a slump or pressure? The following is a second installment of the *Japan SPOTLIGHT* interview with Nakano.



Koichi Nakano

● Racers Need Ambitions

Your racing activity accelerated the internationalization of *keirin* and opened the way for the advent of a system in 2009 to enable outstanding foreign cyclists to participate in competition in Japan. Is there any difference between Japanese and foreign racers based on your experience in having been active on the international scene?

Nakano: The biggest difference is that Japanese racers have more advantages economically than their foreign competitors. They can make a decent living without achieving particularly high accomplishments. Gross prizes offered in Japan are probably the highest in the world and I think they top all others in professional sports in terms of economic treatment.

On the other hand, foreign competitors cannot survive in the world of cycling races unless they make a strong showing. In international competition, they are completely different from Japanese in the degree of their sentiment — to the extent of pinning hope on the outcome of their race because they cannot stay active unless they produce consistently good results.

● No Slump If You Hold Fast to Basics

Having said so, you too fell into a slump while you were active, didn't you? How did you beat it?

Nakano: I never thought I was ever in a slump. Even when I was not in good condition, I guessed I didn't have enough training and that I'd get back into shape if I went through proper training. You don't sink into a slump if you hold fast to the basics of training. Since I knew what to correct if I deviated from what I was doing, I was able to get back to my usual self immediately.

In baseball, for instance, a batter practices swinging to rectify his batting form. In golf, you cannot triumph over a player who hits many balls and knows how to strike them to the left or the right. That's because he can figure out the cause if the ball he

A steady income is something to be grateful for on the part of riders, but I don't feel racers nowadays harbor ambitions of simply gaining money. Older people use the cliché "young people nowadays..." in describing the behavior of younger men in all ages, but I think cyclists are surely in a trend toward becoming something more like white-collar workers.

Still, professional athletes must hunger for something, such as the desire to earn money, become famous, grow strong or whatever else to harbor a big ambition that gives them a driving force to sway a contest. Their strong motivation gives spectators excitement and sensation and I think that, in turn, leads to *keirin's* popularity.

When I was an active racer, I worried about the results of voting by cycling fans to pick riders for "all-star games." I also cared about the number of spectators coming to see me in races and about the sales of betting tickets. I wanted to set records in the World Cycling Championships because I thought the titles I obtained would certainly be useful after my retirement.

hits begins to veer only in the right direction.

Cyclists these days can efficiently develop muscles necessary for riding bicycles through weight training, but they should not forget the fundamental problem: they mount bicycles to compete in races. If so, they should ride on them plenty of times and undergo trial and error so the form that fits them best will emerge naturally.

A form disorder becomes a yardstick for self-inspection. When you are in good condition, your form remains unchanged regardless of whether you train until you are tired out. Your form is thrown into disarray if you are out of condition. Conversely, you may reach a judgment that your muscles have weakened when you find you don't do well even though you have regained your



previous form. I think this could be applied to any competition.

I thought of quitting only once. After winning the pro sprint event of the World Cycling Championships 10 times in succession, I was in a period when I felt reluctant to bring myself to training. Races were no fun. I couldn't win a competition when I was not enjoying it. I went to a camp for

training and I was flabbergasted to find I didn't have physical strength. I changed my training method by starting all over again from the basics. Then, I regained full energy and strength, and I became able to win. Sure enough, you are no good unless you have ambitions to do this and that. I think a slump comes from your mind, after all.

● Pressure Won't Disappear as Long as Desires Remain

You must have been under pressure beyond our imagination while you continued to challenge the records you established at the World Cycling Championships. How did you get over the pressure?

Nakano: I would rather want you to teach me how to overcome pressure. Of course, I had things like positive image training in which I pictured in my mind the development of a race I win. Still, pressure wouldn't disappear as long as I had a desire to win. Pressure was on me just as long as I had a strong desire to

win and leave my records in the history of racing.

One thing I can say to win is to keep training and have confidence in myself. Without a backup of repeated practicing, I'd lose confidence and be under increased pressure. If I was confident of always running within a certain time, I could stay in my usual frame of mind. As for putting myself into training, there was quite a difference between the way I worked out with confidence and the way I practiced regularly thinking that I was in bad condition. That's because I practiced with a sense of purpose on what I should do to win.

● Downside Economy Gives *Keirin* Chance to Thrive

You have been associated with *keirin* for many years since you made a debut as a professional cyclist in 1975 and also as a commentator since your retirement. How do you see *keirin's* future prospects?

Nakano: Participants in speedboat racing compete in boats and jockeys ride horses. But racers in *keirin* vie for victory using human power without relying on machines and horses. Unlike baseball players, whose chances to appear on a field hinge on the decision of their managers, *keirin* performers have equal opportunities to participate in races from the beginning as pro cyclists. They compete among themselves at velodromes where they are all equal and exert all their wisdom, power and skills. This is the real thrill for the players as well as the spectators.

Still, I feel races that overwhelmed spectators or outrageous rivalry that astonished them in the past seem to have declined.

There are a number of causes for this. Changes in rules meant to make racing more interesting have, in fact, produced quite a few different results. It is very difficult to alter the rules once they have found their way into the *keirin* world.

I think *keirin* nevertheless has a good chance now. Sales of betting tickets are on the decrease owing to the economic downturn. Still, the situation will not turn worse. In other words, racers can compete with an aggressive ambition. Now is perhaps the time for them to do something fundamentally, just as the Democratic Party of Japan crushed the Liberal Democratic Party, which had been in power continuously for many years. I'd like to make *keirin* become by all means a sport which excites and thrills spectators. **JS**



Nakano in action as an active racer

Keirin is a publicly run pro betting sport that came into being in Japan in 1948. It was adopted as an official event at the 2000 Summer Olympic Games in Sydney, becoming the second Olympic contest developed in Japan. *Judo* was the first. Proceeds from races go to finance local governments that host them and to nonprofit activities. The number of people betting on racing has been on the rise, totaling about 68 million, but sales have been on the decline, amounting to about 840 billion yen (both fiscal 2007 figures).

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