

An interview with David Bickle, head of the British Chamber of Commerce in Japan and former lock of the Japanese National Rugby team

A Sentimental Journey to the Rugby World Cup 2019 in Japan

By Richard P. Greenfield & *Japan SPOTLIGHT* Editorial Section

David Bickle is the current president of the British Chamber of Commerce in Japan. During his tenure he has seen two significant decisions made, namely Japan being chosen to host the first ever Rugby World Cup to be held in Asia, in 2019, and the selection of Tokyo as the venue for the 2020 Olympics. Mr. Bickle has something very few of those involved in these types of events have: in his first job in Japan with Kobe Steel he played for that company's rugby team (then rated one of the best in Japan), and later for the Japanese national team. *Japan SPOTLIGHT* interviewed him to get a sense of how these events appear to someone who has been a participant, not just an onlooker.

Beginnings

JS: Why don't we roll the clock back to when you first came here. How did that happen?

Bickle: That came about in an interesting way. There was a long association between Kobe Steel and Oxford University. A few people had graduated and gone out there to work and I was coming up towards graduation from Cambridge University and was very fortunate because Kobe Steel's rugby team needed a player. I was also studying in an area that the company itself was very interested in. So I went out to Japan to work for Kobe Steel but on the assumption that I was going to play rugby as well.

JS: What year was this?

Bickle: 1993. It was originally a two-year contract, and out of university I suppose I was like most people who are going overseas in that you think "It's only two years, I can stick it out if I do not like it" — but I absolutely loved it and the two years became six years. That is probably not that unusual a story. I think it is very rare that people come here with their career totally mapped out and on a track. Many of the people who are long stayers or LTRs (Long-Term Residents) seem to come here for one thing, and then find that they are pulled in a different direction. In my own case, as an undergraduate, I studied geography and urban planning.

It just happened to be a very good match with Kobe Steel, which owned a significant amount of urban land, mostly their former



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factory sites. As they modernized, these were moved further and further from the city, which left these enormous tracts of land open. In fact, this was very close to the time when Kansai International Airport was opening and there was one proposal for a large mixed-use complex which would have been linked by high-speed boat over to the airport.

Of course, all this was happening just as the Japanese bubble economy was collapsing so almost all those imaginative plans remained on paper. And then came the Hanshin Earthquake after which there was a great need to be able to relocate people to have temporary and eventually permanent housing in place, so residential development really took priority over everything.

JS: Did you have any sense of personal danger or wanting to leave in the aftermath?

Bickle: No. In the immediate aftermath everyone was really pulling together. In fact, I lived quite close to the area of one of those iconic pictures of the highway tilting over. What was amazing to me, at the time and remembering it now, was seeing the work crews going 24/7. Whether it was clearing debris or getting new tarmac laid, that part got done very quickly. But Kobe has changed a lot now.

It is hard for people to realize, because a lot of the physical scars or at least debris removal was dealt with amazingly quickly. But on the other side, the port, I do not have the exact figures but it had taken a huge hit and that was something that clearly was not going

Photo 1



The Hanshin Expressway in Kobe's Higashinada Ward collapsed on January 17, 1995 during the Great Hanshin Earthquake, which struck at 5:46 a.m. that day. The 7.3 magnitude quake that hit the city of Kobe and nearby areas in Hyogo Prefecture left 6,434 people dead and 43,792 injured.

Photo 2



The collapsed expressway near Fukaebonmachi in Kobe's Higashinada Ward was completely cleared up within a month of the earthquake.

Photo 3



Photos: JJI PRESS

Disaster relief work on the expressway in the same area continues a year after the quake.

to be easy to fix.

That is just an impact you cannot see. When you think of the city itself, like the whole country it was experiencing a massive downturn, and then comes a natural event which reshapes whole parts of the city. Some people in temporary housing never did move back to their old neighborhoods, and if they had, might not have found it much as they remembered it.

For a visitor, you might only notice here or there an empty plot, but the city really was reeling from this kind of double punch: the end of the bubble and the quake, and their consequences. For example, quite a few multi-nationals had offices in Kobe, but a number of those left or downsized, with the expat staff moved off to Singapore or Hong Kong. On the shipping side I do not have the numbers but the port was decimated, and clearly fixing that kind of damage takes longer than a road, or a building. With a port city the danger always is, are you a necessary and desirable stop in the logistics chain, and if operations cease for a time, will that business return?

Kobe has been tremendously resilient though in bouncing back, and for me, it was humbling to have seen the city's response to the disaster and recovery, and to have lived in the midst of it.

Next Steps

JS: When did you come to Tokyo?

Bickle: In 2004, but let me fill in the interim. I stayed at Kobe Steel until 1999 and then decided to change career. I went back to London and joined Andersen, one of the big accounting firms, and trained up as a chartered accountant before moving to Deloitte. I was very lucky at that time that the Deloitte Japan member firm had an opening in Tokyo and I was able to return to Japan in 2004.

JS: When you were playing rugby with Kobe Steel do you have any particular memories of games against rival teams because Kobe Steel was very strong, as I remember.

Bickle: It was, it was a golden era that way. Two of the most enduring memories I have though were from games we lost, which fortunately did not happen very often. The first game was against a local rival team called World in the Kansai League, and the second was to Sanyo in the semi-final of the All-Japan Championship. After the quake, though, there was another game, a charitable event where we played the Barbarians, which is an invitation side comprised primarily of top international players. It was amazing to play against greats whom I had grown up admiring. That was a game we won, which was quite a moment and hopefully a morale boost for the local fans at an otherwise very tough time for the city.

JS: In your playing time was Kamaishi still one of your great rivals?

Bickle: No, actually the baton had been passed. They had won seven championships, but Kobe Steel went on to win seven championships as well.

JS: One reason I asked, and a reason why we want to do this story, is that Kamaishi is a city which suffered very badly in the 3.11 disaster and now being picked as one of the venues for the Rugby World Cup in 2019 that could be something quite special.

Bickle: No question there is a lot of sympathy and empathy between



Photos from Bickle's career as a Kobe Steel player: (left) contesting a line-out against Honda in Kyoto, 1997, and (right) in action against Tokyo Gas in April 1996 at Chichibunomiya Rugby Stadium.



Photos: David Bickle

Kobe and Kamaishi. Both were steel towns and both suffered very badly from two different earthquakes. We even had as a charity event an old boys match between Kamaishi and Kobe Steel. And Kamaishi being picked as a Rugby World Cup venue is a good example of what the Rugby World Cup can do. I believe they are going to have a brand new stadium and that is additional spending in that part of the country that would not have happened without the Rugby World Cup being there. So that's going to be a positive thing for the local community economically. And I hope it will raise interest and awareness generally up there in post-quake recovery efforts.

JS: I know the approximate numbers they are expecting for the 2020 Olympics but are there any for the Rugby World Cup? I know there is an MOU (Memorandum of Understanding).

Bickle: I know that the organizers of the 2015 England Rugby World Cup commissioned a report about the economic impact, and I remember reading in it that the anticipated number of visitors is between 420,000 and 460,000. However, I think you need to qualify those figures when thinking about a Japan Rugby World Cup. England, after all, is in Europe, in the rugby-playing heartland, surrounded by other countries that play the game like Ireland, Wales, Scotland and France from which it is easy to reach England.

I think when we look at the numbers expected here for the Japan Rugby World Cup, and I do not know what the organizers have estimated, they would probably be significantly less because it is one thing to jump on a train or take the Channel tunnel to match venues, but it is a 12-hour flight from Europe to Japan. But I think one thing Japan is doing very well is targeting the other Asia-Pacific nations in this region.

JS: So we'll have two or three classes of visitors to the Rugby World Cup games: the Japanese themselves whether coming from Tokyo or other

parts of Japan, people from the Asia-Pacific region, and some Europeans who may make that 12-hour flight?

Bickle: It is just too hard this far out to realistically forecast how many Europeans would make the trip, but there is also another group, very enthusiastic rugby players in North and South America, and of course some of these South American countries have especially close ties to Japan. Australia and New Zealand fall in Asia-Pacific, so you'll get fans coming from all over the world, but in terms of overall numbers probably not in numbers comparable to the World Cup in England because travel cost is likely to be an issue for many European fans.

JS: Even half the number you gave for 2015 seems like quite a large number for 2019.

Bickle: I think in terms of the vision, they may aspire to hit those numbers, and in order to do so they are clearly looking at bringing in people from around Asia. The Hong Kong Sevens always fills a stadium of 30,000-40,000 — and it is just one three-day rugby jamboree. Just one event in one city. In Japan there are going to be many events in many cities over six weeks. And we should not underestimate the desire to be part of this, the first one in the Asia-Pacific region. There may be a lot of similarities to the fans who came in 2002 for the football World Cup. For fans maybe even those who would never have thought about coming to Japan, suddenly it's the Rugby World Cup and Japan, and that may hold a kind of attraction for people from these places that are further away who would never have come otherwise. There are many different angles Japan can tap into on this.

JS: In particular this could be a great opportunity for the Tohoku region to welcome fans who come there for the Rugby World Cup.

Interview 2



Bickle: I think so. Also you have to remember this is a six-week event. At the beginning there will be matches every day but as you go forward into the knockout stages you will have a game and then a certain number of days to let the teams recover. Now some people will drift back to their home countries in these fallow periods because their team did not make it through, but others will stay on. But beyond the games it is a real chance for the regions to appeal to people during that time, and for Tohoku maybe it means having some tours for the media pack that will be here for the event who may have time on their hands, or for the tourists who do have discretionary spending. And this would be in addition to the people coming for the actual games at Kamaishi. It is a great opportunity. After all, just a year later is the Olympics, so within this group that comes for the Rugby World Cup and has a good time, some may want to come back for another major event just a year later.

Two in a Year

JS: When we talk about those two weeks in 2020 or the six weeks in 2019, we leave out the fact that all these national teams have to come here earlier and have to have places to stay and to train. Even if we take all of Kanto, there probably are not enough places for each team.

Bickle: Through the British Chamber of Commerce in Japan, we know that Team GB already has teams coming out and scouting suitable locations and venues for Olympic preparation, and I am sure other countries, even five years ahead, are doing the very same thing. Where can they host the teams? Think about the equestrian events including modern pentathlon where they need stabling etc. — the requirements are substantial.

JS: One of my sources told me that the shooting teams, competing in marksmanship, will wind up

using part of a Self-Defense Forces base that will be set aside because there are very few shooting ranges in Japan. They are just not there and, of course, these people are using very precise equipment.

Bickle: On the rugby front there are many places with great pitches for a team to practice but a lot of the teams will be looking for a bolthole to give their players a chance to relax out of the media spotlight, especially in this day and age where everyone is a reporter because they have a smartphone. It's very easy if you are using a place in Hokkaido for instance, which is where many Japanese corporate and university rugby teams go to escape the summer heat, as you are only an hour or two by air from most of the places the games will be played.

The real challenge will be on the hotel side because a lot of these places may have *ryokan*-style hotels, which is fine for the Japanese company teams and varsity teams when they are travelling, but there will be a different set of expectations for international rugby teams. They travel with a large entourage — management, physios and equipment handlers — and with a lot of kit, so you will need places where maybe they are holding a block of 50 hotel rooms and the place of course will have to have or be near a pitch. And then they will need large function rooms for things like weight training, physiotherapy treatment, and so on. In a hotel with large conference-style rooms, they may be able to lay down mats and work that way, but I wonder if there are enough of those facilities in the various regional areas. Of course, they are never going to build something just for the tournament unless they see a use beyond it.

JS: There is scheduled to be a sale of hotels by Japan Post and some of them do have conference-style facilities. However, the timeline for building anything of the international five-star variety has already passed. So what we are talking about are renovations and refurbishments.

Bickle: Another big draw for the teams would be access to a swimming pool for recovery sessions. The day after a game or the night after the game they want to get in the water to exercise and help the body recover for the next game, so those hotels that can offer a pool facility may be snapped up earlier. Those that don't should be looking around them at municipal facilities and schools to see how they can package all that up and work together. They are not going to build a swimming pool just for this either, so they need to look at what is available and how it can be packaged.

In talking about some of these infrastructure requirements I am thinking about the top teams, which will have those large entourages and be bringing a lot of equipment. But there are also teams that do not have those facilities even back home, so I think there will be a range of requirements. And that gives some of the regions that do not have the big conference centers with pool facilities the possibility

of attracting some of these other teams.

The Good, the Bad and ...

JS: These are all good. But let's flip the coin over. What should we be watching out for? After all, it is a first, and anytime you have a first anywhere in the world you have the possibility of some type of chaos. If you were sitting in the seat of the Japanese government guy who is tasked with dealing with any major problems, should they arise, or the International Rugby Federation, what would you be most concerned about?

Bickle: The large number of foreigners coming in means you want to be as well prepared as possible in terms of guides and volunteers. The last thing you want in today's hyper-connected world is anyone saying they had a disappointing visit to Japan. Rather you want to make it stress free, in terms of communication and signage. Food is a good example: what is going to be available at the venues, which are not places people may want to try anything unfamiliar, and have the hotels thought about it or the possibility of providing some sort of *bento* option for their guests? All of the range of considerations you have with a large and very diverse group of foreigners coming into Japan — I don't think there has been a precedent for that in quite a few years.

I think everyone wants it to be a roaring success particularly because it is, as we've discussed, a kind of lead in to 2020 and it would be a missed opportunity if people left one large tournament unhappy with their experience and that would put a damper on the expectations for 2020.

Security and management, given the large numbers of people, are issues, of course. None of us know what the world is going to be like in five years' time. It could be more unstable than it is now, and while most of the people coming in will want everything to go well, I'm sure there are some groups that might see it as a chance to get their message across by creating some incident. When you think about it, security may be even more of a challenge for the Rugby World Cup where you are dealing with multiple stadium venues than for the Olympics, where the venues will be primarily concentrated in Tokyo.

JS: An obvious question that should be asked is simply has it ever happened before that a Rugby World Cup and an Olympics have been back to back, year on year?

Bickle: I think the nearest recent parallel would be Brazil with the football World Cup in 2014 and the Olympics coming up next year.

JS: Still, that is a two-year lag.

Bickle: I think the key — and it cannot be overstated — is raising

and maintaining that level of enthusiasm that we have touched on today.

JS: You know I really like the rugby motto. Do you think that will be part of the legacy here in Japan?

Bickle: You mean the "One for all and all for one"?

JS: Yes.

Bickle: Well it certainly is a line that resonates. It did not come from rugby but it has become synonymous with the sport now in Japan. It is a bit swashbuckling, I suppose, but this does not sound like a contradiction, given the way the sport is played.

Coda

Our interview took place just a few weeks before the news broke that the design for the new national stadium, which was scheduled to be ready for the Rugby World Cup and the Olympics, had been shelved as too costly. The decision prompted an inquiry from the International Rugby Federation to the Japanese government.

JS: What was your first reaction when you heard the news about the stadium project being cancelled?

Bickle: Honestly it was a surprise. It is not that uncommon for these huge venues to have some amount of overrun, but the numbers that were mentioned in the media were quite a bit more than one might have expected and given that there were allegedly objections to the project on other grounds it seems the government may have just decided they were better off starting anew.

In terms of the Rugby World Cup, I think the overall impact can be minimized, and hopefully any new procurement process will be open and transparent. People are coming to see rugby, not a stadium, and since these games are spread out across the country, the venues where the games will be played will be quite varied. Some will be brand new, others will not be. The challenge for Japan is to create a tournament that is going to be good for Japan, good internationally and good for rugby. Once the stadium issues are resolved, attention can hopefully be focused on getting people enthused domestically.

JS

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