

Interview with Yuichiro Miura, a Skier & Alpinist

Elderly People Will Enjoy Life More & Live Longer by Setting a Goal

By Japan SPOTLIGHT

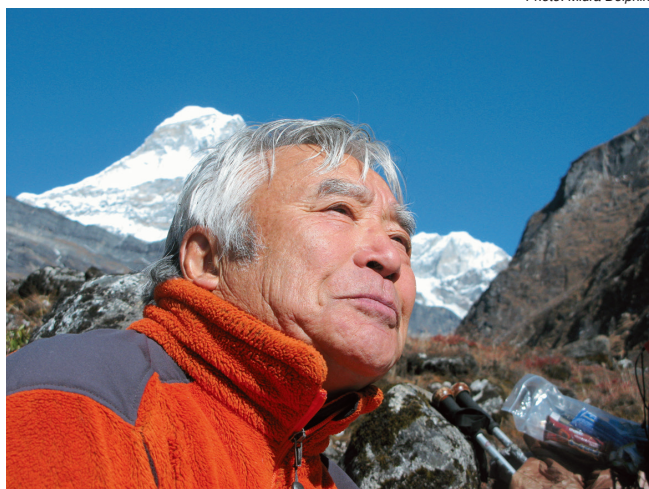
With advanced medical treatment prolonging human life, larger numbers of elderly people can now enjoy life in better health and for much longer than in the past. Many can enjoy life in their 80s or even 90s in good health. Today we can live for 20-30 years on average even after retirement, taking retirement age in general to be 60. How can we enjoy it or what contribution can we make to our country or society during this time? How can we make this part of our life as productive as possible? Japan SPOTLIGHT had an interview on March 2, 2017 with Yuichiro Miura, an 84-year-old distinguished Japanese skier and alpinist who famously climbed Mt. Everest at the age of 80, for his views.

Introduction

JS: You have been skiing and mountaineering for a long time. Could you tell us about your history with these sports?

Miura: I was born in Aomori on the northern tip of Honshu Island. When I was a kid, there was no way to clear the snow out of the streets, so the whole city would be buried under snow when it snowed. We could create a small snow mountain in front of our house, as we cleared the snow from the roof and it dropped and piled up there. In my childhood, I played on the slope of this small mountain with skis or a sled. My father, Keizo Miura, was a pioneer of Japanese professional skiing and he skied until the age of 101. He mastered skiing when he was a student at the University of Hokkaido. He got a job at the Office of Forest Service right after graduation and often skied and did research on the forests of Mt. Hakkoda, a mountain range in Aomori. I was then a 3-year-old boy and often joined his tours of the mountain.

In my junior high school days I once lived in Tokyo, but even during those days I was going to the Japan Alps and the Shiga Kogen highlands with him for skiing or mountaineering. In those days sports like football or baseball were not as popular as now, and I enjoyed being with nature outdoors. There was no other way to enjoy your life.



Yuichiro Miura, Skier & Alpinist

Photo: Miura Dolphins

Sports' Positive Impact

JS: Sports are good for physical health but do you think they have a positive mental impact as well?

Miura: Yes. If you continue to do any sport you will find it entertaining and above all you will find your skills improving little by little. In any sports exercise, you will get to a stage where you feel a sense of achievement in advancing your

skills and eventually find that further improvement of your skills is dependent upon your own physical and mental powers. That is the point at which you can strengthen your overall physical and mental capacity to expand by continuing with the sport.

JS: So even as we get older, we can strengthen our mentality by doing sports?

Miura: Yes. As in the old Japanese saying that what was developed in a 3-year-old child's spirit can be kept by the same person until he or she is 100, any sports you did in youth can still influence your mentality in old age. I have been doing sports professionally and what I continued as a professional sportsman seems to have provided me, now that I am elderly, with enormous benefits in keeping me positive and active. The essential benefit of any sport, I believe, is to make us feel good and positive by going through

hardships to advance our skills and continuing to do so without giving up.

JS: What do you think about people taking up sports as they get older, even though they never practiced any sports seriously in their younger days?

Miura: I think people who have never done sports seriously in their youth will feel much more refreshed by taking up sports later than those who did sports seriously in their young days. There are many among the former who could restore their health and positive spirit by concentrating on a sport. In my case, although I was a professional skier after retirement in my 50s, I suffered quite a few lifestyle diseases such as metabolic syndrome or angina pectoris. My doctors even told me at one point that I would not live more than three more years. But I would like you to take note that such a man suffering from serious illness was able to restore his health and eventually managed to climb Mt. Everest. So I believe that nothing is impossible for a human being, even if you only start sports after you get older or if you suffer from metabolic syndrome after your retirement.

JS: That means if you change your mindset, you can start practicing any sport no matter how old you may be. I think today many people believe in this and the need to stay in good health during their life. Doing sports is increasingly popular in Japan.

Miura: Yes. Of course, pursuing good health is an important element in the popularity of sports, but in addition people find sports are fun and such social activities can increase their network of friends. There are increasing numbers of societies for sports such as mountaineering clubs or tennis clubs in Japanese cities. We now have a good environment for people to start any sport.

Experience of Climbing Mt. Everest

JS: What about your world records in climbing Mt. Everest as the oldest climber to have reached the summit? You have been there three times at the age of 70, 75 and 80.

Miura: Yes. When I climbed to the summit of Mt. Everest at the age of 75, a Nepalese who was 76 years old at the time claimed to be the oldest. Then, when I was 80 years old, I did it again in 2013.

JS: What is your secret in being in such good health at this age? Do you have any particular way of

maintaining good health with a daily routine, such as through meals, exercise, or philosophy of life?

Miura: That depends upon the person. In my case, what prompted me to preserve good health was the fact that I lost my goal of life in my 60s after retirement. I was living in Sapporo then and indulging in the pleasures of eating cheap and delicious food and drinking tasty beer. Walking, skiing, playing golf or just light exercise were not enough to maintain my good health. Within a short period I developed metabolic syndrome and suffered from high blood pressure, diabetes, and kidney disease that obliged me to undergo artificial dialysis within year or so. Furthermore, I got serious irregular pulse arrhythmia. I was in a situation where I could die suddenly at any time. It was at that time that my father told me that when he turned 99 years old, he wanted to ski down the glacier of Mont Blanc in France. He had broken his bones three times in his 90s by skiing. A man who had such experiences would usually stop skiing and be kept in bed at such an age. But his passion for skiing worked well in curing those injuries. In the end, my father at the age of 99, my first son and myself, three generations of a family, skied down the glacier of Mont Blanc in 2003. This was widely reported to the public in France by the French press in a two-page article in a newspaper and a 15-minute TV program at prime time. That attracted much attention and French President Jacques Chirac then awarded us the French government's *Médaille d'Or de la Jeunesse et des Sports* in recognition of our special contribution to sports. This award is usually given to athletes who win gold medals at the Olympics. It was exceptional for an elderly Japanese man like my father to get this award. This was because aging had become a serious social issue in France as well. Family links had often been broken there and people in the young generation were reluctant to take care of their elderly parents. They did not go back to their homes to take care of them even during the summer holidays and the heat wave in 2004. More than 3,000 elderly people died of the heat then, and the issue became symbolic of the aging problem in France. Against this backdrop, the French media highlighted our adventure and link as a Japanese family, and a courageous 99-year-old man's respectable achievement.

Positive Thinking Works Well

JS: You mean once an aged person has a goal or dream, it could make their story different?

Miura: Yes, it makes a difference. My father truly wanted to ski all the time. He had a goal of skiing on Mont Blanc and went to Mt. Tateyama or the Japan Alps to ski every year even after he turned 90. He had been also all over the world with his skis. When he was asked

Photo: Miura Dolphins



Trekking on the way to Everest Base Camp, Spring 2013

to give a lecture on skiing or sports, he would get on a plane by himself and go anywhere in Japan.

JS: What do you think about the sports facilities in Japan, compared with Europe? I feel in France anyone can enjoy playing sports very easily.

Miura: In Europe certainly there are many sports clubs in cities. The residents can enjoy doing any sport and continuing it from their childhood. I do not think Japan is far behind European countries in this respect. There are now lots of sports facilities in Japan and if you truly want to, you can do any sport.

JS: Increasingly, older people are working as sports instructors. It would be excellent if we see a greater connection between elderly instructors and the kids they are teaching.

Miura: Yes, that would be fantastic. My father was an instructor even after he turned 100. Depending on which sports they teach, no matter how old they may be, they can teach beginners and children. Elderly instructors who obtained a qualification as a ski instructor when they were young are occasionally working at ski schools for elementary school students.

JS: Positive thinking is often referred to as a source of good health in elderly people. As in your father's case, a passion for skiing or going to Mont Blanc could create such positive thinking and keep them in good health. This shows that sports can give us not

only physical health but also a good incentive to live longer, doesn't it?

Miura: Yes. Not only sports but also walking or any other physical exercise can have a positive impact upon your physical health by achieving a smooth circulation of the blood. As your physical strength improves, so will your power to live.

I believe there are two ways of staying in good health. One is to protect your health by walking or any other relevant light exercise, as well as having well-balanced and nutritious meals, and the other is to set a high goal for sports achievement and practice physical training to achieve it. I got ill even after having tried the first method, so then I decided to do the second. My first goal was to climb Mt. Fuji. First, I tried to climb a 531-meter mountain called Mt. Moiwa near my house in Sapporo that kindergarten children climb on their excursions. But I could not reach the peak and went back. It was then that I decided to restore my health and try to conquer Mt. Everest, the highest mountain in the world. I thought it would be fun to set such an ambitious goal rather than simply restoring my health.

However, since I had very little time to go to a gym for physical training, I occasionally walked with a 1-kilogram weight on each leg or went out with a 10-kg weight on my back. I then increased those weights by 1 kg for each leg in the first year, 3 kg for each in the second year and 5 kg for each leg and 20 kg on my back in the third year. Eventually, the weight for one leg reached 10 kg and the weight for my back reached 30 kg. With such exercise, I found my metabolic syndrome was somehow gone and the pains in my back and knees also disappeared. I also suffered at that time from a meniscus injury in my knees, and that was cured as well. I learned then even after turning 70 years old that a human being could have regenerative power.

Old People Be Ambitious

JS: We do not have to think it is too late to start doing sports, however old we may be. Is it important for any elderly person not to give up pursuing an ambitious goal because of their age?

Miura: Yes. I am 84 years old now, but I still have several goals to pursue. Once you have a goal, you must feel you can achieve it. The family members of aged people may tell them not to try to do something so ambitious for an elderly person because of their concern about their physical condition. But that would not help them in getting well in their life. Well, certainly, my ambitious goal might be considered reckless. But on further consideration, we old men have lots of free time and can do things little by little. What you might have done in one year in your younger days can now be done

in five years.

In climbing Mt. Everest as well, if you were 70 or 80 years old, you could be passed by younger people or even other older people of your generation. You should never mind that. You can climb at your own pace to your destination without giving up. You do your job at your own pace without being disturbed by anybody else. You may even catch up with those who passed you on the way or pass them at a certain point. I was also passing people who had once passed me on the way to the summit of Mt. Everest.

You do not have to feel obliged to do anything but just find pleasure in doing it. If you are passed by any other people, you should not be disappointed. You should just enjoy pursuing your goal in your own way. This is the secret to success in any sport, I think.

JS: In achieving your own high goals, did you have strong support from your family?

Miura: I was so lucky since all of my family strongly supported me in achieving my project. My second son, Gota, got a Ph.D. from Juntendo University for his research on anti-aging. He has been studying me and also his grandfather, Keizo, in his research. I am also getting my physical data from physical tests done by Prof. Masayoshi Yamamoto at the National Institute of Fitness and Sports in Kanoya, a specialist in exercise physiology and sports science.

I think we can achieve what we truly want to do, however old we may be, with the help of medical science, which has made remarkable progress today.

Taking It Easy

JS: In addition, perhaps, a positive and optimistic mindset helps in recovering from an injury or illness?

Miura: Yes, indeed. I broke my pelvis and thighbone in a failed ski jump when I was 76 years old. My doctor told me it was a serious injury and I would have to be in a wheelchair for the rest of my life even when I recovered from it. However, my passion for becoming the oldest person to climb Mt. Everest gave me a positive attitude and eventually enabled me to do it at the age of 80. My physical exercises, as I mentioned, created much stronger bones than the ones of an average 76-year-old man. If my bone strength was average, I would have been killed by this accident. Instead, thanks to the strengthened bones and muscles developed by these exercises, I could completely recover from this serious injury in a few months. I think bones, muscles and joints are the keys to health for aged people. You need to do exercise to strengthen them, and in addition you would have to do aerobic exercise such as mountaineering. It is

not true that if you are in good health you do sports, but it is true that by doing sports you will be in good health.

Another key to continuing sports for an aged person is not to work so hard, as elderly people do not have the physical power that young people have. During my Everest expedition, I completely changed my climbing logistics compared with those of younger people. My walking distance per day was around half that of a young person's. That made me feel easy and eventually brought me the world record. It does not necessarily mean that it took much longer for me to reach the top than younger climbers. It took the same number of days to reach the top as the other younger members. They walked long distances one day but on the following day they were so tired that they could not walk so long. I walked steadily a shorter distance every day and eventually we were on the same time schedule to reach the summit. I believe this lesson of slower pace for aged people can also be applied to their jobs, like agriculture or stock farming. The more slowly you work, the better you work. In physical training as well, if you find it too hard you should stop it, but on the following day you can try it again. "Take it easy" is the right attitude for aged people in doing anything.

Tokyo Olympics 2020 & Sports for the Elderly

JS: A large number of athletes are coming to Japan for the Tokyo Olympics 2020 from all over the world. Do you think this will encourage elderly people doing sports?

Miura: Yes. Young athletes who have made incredible efforts to improve their abilities will come to participate and give their best, no matter whether they may fail or get injured in the games. The Olympics is always a display of human vitality. Elderly people will be encouraged by these young athletes. Even my father Keizo loved watching the games on TV until late at night in his late years.

JS: Finally, could you tell us about your future plans, if you have any?

Miura: There is an 8,201-meter mountain named Cho Oyu, the world's sixth-highest summit, on the border between China and Nepal. I have a plan to climb this mountain and also ski down it from the top next year. With this as a goal, I went to the Himalayas last year and will go there again this spring and autumn for training, and plan to go to Cho Oyu in May 2018.

JS

Written with the cooperation of Naoko Sakai who is a freelance writer.