

Interview with David Bickle, President, the British Chamber of Commerce in Japan

The Legacy of the Rugby World Cup 2019 in Japan Will Be Good for the Olympic & Paralympic Games Tokyo 2020

By Japan SPOTLIGHT

The Rugby World Cup 2019 in Japan turned many Japanese who had never seen the game and knew nothing about the basic rules into rugby fans, thanks largely to the Japanese national team's achievement in qualifying for the quarterfinals for the first time. But will the legacy of the tournament prove to be even greater than the national team's performance? Could it provide some useful lessons for the coming Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games in 2020?

We interviewed David Bickle, president of the British Chamber of Commerce in Japan and former member of the Japanese national rugby team. This is his second interview with *Japan SPOTLIGHT*, following his first in the September-October 2015 issue.

(Interviewed on Nov. 5, 2019)

Self-Introduction

JS: Could you briefly tell us again about your connection with Japan and your experience as a former lock with the Japanese national rugby team?

Bickle: I'm currently the president of the British Chamber of Commerce in Japan (BCCJ). In total, this will be my 22nd year in Japan, and I've been based here on two occasions. My first time was after graduating from university, when I joined Kobe Steel, where I had a chance to play with the Kobe Steel rugby team for six years from 1993 to 1999. I was very fortunate that in 1996, I was also selected to play for the Japan national team, and in that year I played six times for Japan.



David Bickle

think the record top five viewing figures for television audiences of rugby matches are now all involving the Japan team, with nearly 55 million people in Japan tuning in to watch them play Scotland. More than 400,000 foreign visitors arrived in Japan to watch the tournament in person, and I think there were more than 1 million visits to the official fan zones. On social media, according to figures published by World Rugby, there were 1.7 billion views of videos and content, so the social media engagement was incredible – at unsurpassed levels. And I think the economic impact was huge as well – World Rugby estimates it to be 437 billion yen.

Importantly, beyond the economic impact was the engagement of people in Japan and the development of the game, and the

number of children in Japan who for the first time were introduced to rugby – not just through the tournament but with the community engagement exercises that took place around the tournament. The impact has been huge. That was during the tournament and before the tournament, but I think we all hope now that as a legacy of the tournament we'll see continued engagement, impact, and follow through.

Assessment of Rugby World Cup 2019

JS: How do you assess the Rugby World Cup 2019 in Japan overall? Everybody speaks about it as a great success.

Bickle: I think however you measure it, it's been a huge success, both in terms of the experience the fans have had and the quality of the rugby. It was historic that Japan won all of their group matches and were able to make it through to the last eight, their first time in history to reach the knockout tournament. If you look at the metrics, the television audience for all of Japan's games was incredible. I

JS: I recently came across the term “sports hospitality” for the first time. What are your thoughts on sports hospitality, and about that aspect of the legacy here?

Bickle: I think sports hospitality is clearly a new opportunity for

Japan. Particularly around the World Cup, it was the same company which delivered hospitality at the last three or four Rugby World Cups. They had a bespoke facility built in Yokohama, and the professionalism of the delivery really created a focus around corporate hospitality, a chance for companies and organizations to bring guests to a quality facility and enjoy themselves and network before and after a game. It's another way for companies and organizations to entertain their clients and guests in a very exclusive, unusual, and unique networking environment. There is a huge multiplier effect as well for the economy, so anything to do with the delivery of services – food, drink, entertainment – has a positive impact on the economy here.

If you look at sports hospitality in the United Kingdom, a lot of it is focused around the stadiums. A number of those are used not just on match day, but also throughout the year for conferences and entertainment. I think that's another angle to look at – whether sports hospitality offers a way to get better utilization of the infrastructure that there is already here in Japan.

JS: Travel agents and the hospitality industry in Japan seem to be looking forward to more tourists from all over the world.

Bickle: I think so, and tourists are increasingly looking for an experiential time, for experiences rather than just things. Certainly, around an event like the Rugby World Cup, I think being able to package a match ticket and travel to the game within a hospitality package makes it a more appealing offering to tourists.

British Chamber of Commerce's Involvement

JS: Would you please tell us a bit more about the British Chamber of Commerce's involvement in supporting the Rugby World Cup?

Bickle: Certainly. One thing we realized a couple of years ago was that the Rugby World Cup 2019 Organising Committee was very keen to speak to the foreign business community with one voice, so what the BCCJ did was to get together with seven other foreign chambers of commerce to form the Rugby Alliance. The original mission of the Rugby Alliance was two-fold: it was to support the delivery of a 2019 Rugby World Cup that all stakeholders here in Japan can be proud of, and secondly to foster a legacy that features more inclusive communities which embrace opportunities for international business and exchange. Working together with the other chambers of commerce, we collaborated closely with the organizing committee.

The BCCJ also hosted a think tank event in July on responsible tourism, where we had representatives from some of the regional economies in Japan, and people from the tourism, hospitality, and hotel industries. We talked about opportunities for tourism here, including those connected with the Rugby World Cup. And about some of the challenges Japan is facing. Particularly where the

hospitality industry is rapidly scaling up and also the number of visitors is rapidly increasing, and the challenges of being able to cater to those visitors. Not just to cater to them, but to cater to them in a sustainable way.

JS: Do you think Japan will be successful in keeping these great numbers of tourists, just like China was successful in having done so after the Beijing Olympics?

Bickle: I think so. What the Rugby World Cup has done is to open up the whole of Japan to a new audience. Tourism from Europe and the United States has traditionally been focused on the large metropolitan and cultural centers – Tokyo going down to Osaka, Kyoto, Nara, Hiroshima, and places like that – but the Rugby World Cup has been nationwide, from Sapporo in the north in Hokkaido down to Kyushu in the west. That's given overseas tourists a chance to see what Japan has to offer. I think a number of tourists still have the image of Japan being a highly urbanized country, and they are pleasantly surprised when they see that much of the country is beautiful mountains and forests as well. The key will be finding ways to enable foreign tourists to discover the rest of Japan. I think that is where the Rugby World Cup was so powerful, as a catalyst to get people to move beyond the traditional tourism centers to places where perhaps, were it not for the rugby, they would not have seen.

The Japanese National Team

JS: As a former lock, what is your opinion of the Japanese national team?

Bickle: The Japanese national team has been absolutely tremendous in this tournament. They played a brand of rugby which has thrilled the world. Everyone has been amazed, I think, about the way Japan played in this tournament. What we saw was a new level of skill and accuracy. Japan has moved on and improved to another level, and their skill and accuracy have enabled them to move on to play a very attractive brand of running rugby. The statistics bear this out, with 55 million people watching them on TV against Scotland. Most of the games were played in front of capacity crowds. We saw people who have never had an interest in rugby as a sport being excited and enthused to follow the national team during this tournament. I think that's because Japan's skill level has improved markedly, together with their competitiveness in all facets of the game. At the end of a couple of their matches, after 70 or 80 minutes when the players would have been exhausted, their forwards still had the reserves of strength, desire, conditioning, and also the skills, to challenge and win crucial penalties at the scrum.

Another Aspect of the Legacy of Rugby

JS: Going back to the question of the legacy of rugby, the sport has become very popular in Japan now

thanks to this World Cup. How can we maintain the popularity of rugby?

Bickle: It's going to be a challenge, because when you host a tournament there is going to be interest before and during the tournament because of the media coverage. There have been a lot of initiatives around the tournament, for example the Impact Beyond initiative, where there have been outreaches to schools. Hundreds of schools have been introduced to tag rugby, providing thousands of schoolchildren with access to try these sports. Seven-a-side rugby is an Olympic sport, obviously a different game from the 15-a-side code that we saw in the World Cup, but that's another very high-profile event and I think it's important to try and link the two, to maintain the momentum. Beyond the Summer Olympics, we've got the Paralympics as well, where wheelchair rugby will be a very key sport. We're also seeing some of the regions in Japan looking to promote themselves through rugby as well. One place is Kitakyushu, which hosted Wales during this World Cup, and is also working very closely with Team GB, the Great Britain Paralympics team. They'll be hosting the Great Britain wheelchair rugby squad in Kitakyushu before the Paralympics.

So first of all, I think it's about linking rugby – in its various forms – to these mega sporting events, and secondly it's about creating opportunities for youngsters to continue to enjoy the game. It's going to be key as well to find ways to involve the Japan national team into better quality competition. It's important to give fans the opportunity to see top-quality competition here in Japan and ensure that they stay enthused.

JS: I'm interested in what you said about local-to-local cooperation, such as Kitakyushu and Wales. Do you think that kind of cooperation will grow?

Bickle: I think so. It's a win-win process for both sides. A number of rugby unions worked very hard in the build-up to the Rugby World Cup, years in advance with the towns and the cities where the teams were going to be based, and they've been running rugby programs to promote interest in the sport, but also interest in their own country. We've seen the great work being done in Kitakyushu, and I think there's been tremendous work done up in Kamaishi too with the new stadium being built there. They hosted one game during the tournament but unfortunately because of the terrible Typhoon Hagibis, the second game was cancelled. But you saw the Canadian team working with the amazing local community afterwards in the cleanup. They were building relationships there, and hopefully these relationships will continue to endure over the years to come.

JS: Do you think Japanese schools should have classes on rugby?

Bickle: I would certainly love to see Japanese schools have classes on rugby, because the values of integrity, respect, solidarity, passion, and discipline are displayed. I think the "fun" aspect of it is also

hugely important. People ask why countries like New Zealand produce so many fabulous players. I think it's because kids from a very young age pick up a rugby ball and are just playing, they're throwing the ball around, and through doing that they are developing the awareness of the game, spatial awareness, subconscious things which are the key to decision-making. These are things that develop over time and cannot necessarily be coached, so I think it's about giving kids in Japan the opportunity to enjoy the game.

JS: Some have said that leadership might also be a good thing to be developed through rugby. What do you think?

Bickle: I agree, because if you look on the rugby field, there are many leaders. Someone is obviously designated the captain, but you see a lot of communication. There are people in a number of positions who have senior roles, and it's not just the captain. I think rugby and all team sports are a chance for an individual to develop leadership skills. You don't have to be labeled as the leader to show leadership, and I think kids can learn that through sport. They don't have to be loud and vocal, they can learn and show leadership by demonstrating their commitment, their drive and determination that all of their teammates can see, so that's leading by example. Leadership is beyond just being the captain; actually showing leadership is much, much broader – showing your commitment to the team and learning how to inspire and motivate other people as well.

What We Can Expect from the Tokyo Games

JS: OK, let's move on to the Tokyo Olympics and Paralympics. That will be another opportunity to promote sports and have people visit the host country. What do you expect?

Bickle: The Summer Olympics and Paralympics is a huge opportunity for Japan, as a catalyst and a magnet for foreign tourists. The Olympics itself is a shorter tournament and geographically is broadly limited to the Tokyo area, but I think it's still a tremendous opportunity to promote the country and to bring in tourists. Hopefully, Japan and Japanese regions will build on what they've done for the Rugby World Cup, and will continue to market themselves and appeal to the tourists who come specifically to watch the Games. I sincerely hope as well that beyond the Summer Olympics, we're going to see a fantastic Paralympic Games here in Japan, certainly in terms of the legacy after London 2012. That's one of the things the London organizers are very proud of, the success of the Paralympic Games. I hope that we see that here in Japan as well, with fans wanting to come to soak up the atmosphere and see the very high quality of competition that there is around Para sports as well.

JS: You said something interesting about the Rugby

World Cup, that athletes, coaches, and tourists stay longer, because rugby is a very exhausting game, so you need about a week between matches, and that will prolong your stay in the country. In the case of the Olympics, will the time be too short to attract a lot of attention to the Games and also to the country?

Bickle: Obviously the period of the Games is much shorter, but I think there are opportunities for Japan to market itself and appeal in advance to foreign tourists who are coming to the Games to come early, in advance of the Games, or to stay on afterwards and explore the rest of the country. Japan is blessed with a remarkably efficient and extensive transportation network. It's safe and it's easy to get around to all parts of the country, and I think more and more foreigners are waking up to that realization and understanding that there is much, much more to see in Japan. But in order for Japan to maximize the opportunity, and for the regions to maximize the opportunity, they will have to actively market themselves and get creative as well.

I think tourism is a great potential source of economic benefit for local regions, and can really be a source of economic vitality for the residents of those areas. Once again, hopefully it's a win-win situation. I think that the way Japan will be able to maximize the opportunity that tourism has to offer for the Japanese economy and the Japanese people is to ensure that it is spread throughout the country. In that way, hopefully, all the regions can benefit by participating in this tourism boom.

British Chamber of Commerce's Involvement in the Games

JS: I'm curious about your chamber of commerce's involvement in promoting the legacy of the Tokyo Olympics.

Bickle: What we will try to do in terms of the legacy is to develop tourism and other opportunities for internationalization. There is interest around global sporting events, but that is just one subsector of the tourism industry, one of the offerings. In our event earlier this year based around sustainable tourism, we were looking at what we can do to help the sector. We might be able to share some things from the UK experience, where the UK government has announced comprehensive plans to promote tourism, and then hopefully Japan will be able to refer to those in developing its own best practices. The UK is focusing on things like accessibility, making many parts of the UK more accessible for people with mobility issues. There is certainly a lot for Japan to work on in that area, and hosting the Paralympics is a great opportunity to shine a light on these issues, to open up Japan to a much bigger pool of visitors.

Expected Legacy of the Games

JS: Sports is expected to play a key role in

maintaining good health among older people, which is very important in an aging society. In terms of your experience or the UK experience, what do you think about this?

Bickle: Definitely, I agree. As society ages and people's lifespans are getting longer, the key challenge now is to give people high-quality lifestyles as they age. Helping to keep people healthy and active contributes to that. There are physical health benefits from regular exercise, so sport has a role to play there. I think an important point too is to enable people to feel fulfilled, so participating in sports activities, going out to watch high-quality sporting events, all these things can help. If such activities can be offered, or made more accessible to the senior members of our society, I think they can contribute to enabling a more stimulating and rewarding life for people in retirement. To create opportunities though, there will need to be additional investment in infrastructure, and also in organization.

JS: Sports hospitality, volunteer activities, and similar "software" are a key legacy of the Olympics and Paralympics. How can Japan further promote those activities?

Bickle: I think it's about reinforcing those strengths and successes; in sports, it would be great to see continued involvement and engagement from national team players, also continued support from companies. I think collaboration is the key here. There are areas where NGOs can work together in pursuit of their goals. In terms of opportunities to create healthy lifestyles for children, hopefully there's a chance for NGOs to work together with schools, with local authorities, and maybe with their local sports teams, to involve the top-quality sports players in the community, contributing, participating, and helping out. In Japan, we're seeing more investment now in all-weather pitches, and it will be great if we can see more of those. Obviously, the cost is an issue, but hopefully there will be more investment in facilities which will enable children to more actively participate in sport.

JS: Perhaps we can take advantage of information technology and other new technologies for networking?

Bickle: Certainly. These days, with social media and technology, it's much, much easier to collaborate and promote. Many of these organizations have a social media presence to enable them to share their goals and their activities with other people. That's an important aspect of helping to create and maintain these alliances. **JS**

Written with the cooperation of David S. Spengler, who is a translator and consultant specializing in corporate communications.