

Tone Made in Japan Blaring Out to the World

Interviewer: Takamasu Kanji

NODA kakuseisha's "kakusei" literally means "the voice of the crane," and the expression "*tsuru no hitokoe*" (the one voice of a crane) has a special meaning in Japanese: when opinions are divided and it is difficult to reach agreement, someone completely settles the situation with a word of authority.

Noda Kakuseisha has sought to develop only international export markets since the founder started production of harmonicas primarily for the US market. The company started production of whistles in 1968, and extended its market to Europe. In time, whistles became the company's main product. Despite its long history, the small enterprise was virtually unknown in Japan until soccer gained its present popularity. After Noda's whistles were used in the 2002 FIFA World Cup Korea/Japan, various media competed to introduce the company.

We asked the company's second generation president, Noda Kazuhiro, to tell us about the eventful history of this small manufacturing firm, which currently has six employees.



Being an Export Specialist

What did the company first produce?

Noda: Noda Kakuseisha was established by my father, Noda Yoshisada, in 1919. At the time, he was a plant manager at the harmonica manufacturer named Oseisha (The "osei" in Oseisha means the voice of the bush warbler). It produced low-end harmonicas for children, primarily for the domestic market, that were modeled on the products of the famous German musical instrument manufacturer Hohner.

One day, an American buyer, who could not purchase harmonicas from Germany because of World War I, came to ask the company to trade harmonicas for children's musical education in the United States. Oseisha's president viewed the offer as too risky business venture, and turned it down. However, the buyer did not give up, and he visited my father at the factory. He is said to have persuaded him with words to the effect: "I am sure that at some point you will want to establish your own independent business. If that's the case, why don't you start up as an export specialist now?" My father took up the invitation. Not wanting to compete with Oseisha, he established a



company that specialized only in exporting harmonicas.

The company only targeted the foreign market right from the beginning. My father's business went very well. Relying entirely on that American buyer, he exported huge amounts to the North American market. When I entered elementary school in 1936, there were about 100 employees, in four workshops. The family had two Datsuns. My father also owned racehorses. A union was formed and there was even a strike.

The workshops were located in old downtown Tokyo, and were completely burned down in the fire caused by the Great Kanto Earthquake in 1923. In spite of this, the business quickly got back on its feet as the company was assisted by its trading partner and good sales. Later, the war came. The supply of raw materials for musical instruments ceased, and the company was mandated to serve as an arsenal to survive. It produced a variety of things, such as aircraft parts, vehicle parts and resistors for radios. Then on March 10, 1945, the workshops were caught up in the air raids. Everything was burned down again.

During the war, my father moved twice to continue his business, but both times he was bombed out by air raids. Finally, he returned to the original place, and constructed a temporary workshop. Using machinery that he salvaged from the fires, he started to produce spoons, forks and the like.

The US occupation forces entered Tokyo in late August 1945, and the following year, the American buyer who we had known from years ago revisited Japan as an economic advisor to the GHQ (General Headquarters of the Allied Forces). He urged us to start making low-end harmonicas, and production was re-established. Until Japan regained its independence in 1952, all the manufactured goods were labeled "Made in Occupied Japan." Later, we

moved the office to the current location, and a factory was built in Saitama Prefecture.

Your father must have had a strong will, having rebuilt four times from the ashes. When did you start to help him in the business?

Noda: It was in 1953, after I graduated from university. My older brother was a musician, who played in a military band as a petit bass player, so he was in charge of production, while I was in charge of sales. From 1961 onwards we managed the business on our own.

How large was your market then?

Noda: We concentrated on exports alone even after the war, focusing mainly on the United States. We did not sell in the domestic market at all. Buyers visited us and placed orders twice a year, in spring and fall, so we never needed to develop the market by ourselves. We made small quantities of other musical instruments, but the harmonica was by far our mainstay product.

Replacing Harmonicas with Whistles

How did you come to produce whistles?

Noda: That goes back to 1968. A young American buyer visited us from New York. He was looking for a new firm that could make whistles at low cost, but he could not find a business partner, even until the day before he was due to fly home. He showed us an Acme whistle of the British maker J. Hudson and Co. (Whistles) Ltd. as a sample, and asked for a quotation for 1,000 dozen.

He required us to ship them by the following spring, so we tried whistle

production in tandem with harmonicas. With my brother's great knowledge in the field of sound, we managed to create the required shape and size based on the harmonica reed: the shorter the reed, the higher the pitch.

Acme was the world's leading whistle brand, and it offered very high standards. Ever since then it became our good model.

What caused you to replace harmonicas with whistles as a main product?

Noda: Japan's export-oriented production industry was constantly affected by exchange rate fluctuations. For 26 years after the war the rate was fixed at ¥360 to the US\$1, but the flexible exchange rate system was introduced in 1971 and the yen value began to rise. The Plaza Accord of 1985 revalued the yen from ¥240 to ¥120 against the US dollar. Combined with the rising Asian industrial powers such as Taiwan, it made Japan's industries unable to compete in export markets. That led Noda Kakuseisha to make big changes in both its products and target markets in order to survive.

How did you change your management strategies?

Noda: Prior to 1971 we had buyers visiting us every spring and fall, from all the major US cities, such as San Francisco, Los Angeles, Atlanta and New York, and Canada as well. However, as a result of the "Nixon Shock" of July 1971, US buyers sought to locate suppliers in Taiwan and other Asian countries in stead of Japan. That trend eventually hollowed out Japanese manufacturing industry at home. We lost the US market for whistles, following the harmonica market.

Even so, it was extremely fortunate that we had already commenced the production of whistles shortly before the Nixon Shock. If we had only been making harmonicas, we might have not sur-

vived. During the peak of our whistle production, Sports Craft, a New Jersey based company that supplies whistles to schools, to the armed forces and to the police across the United States, was introduced to us by a Japanese trading company. The firm placed orders for 25,000 whistles a month. Our business with that company lasted for around six years. We had other orders, and we were not initially confident that we could produce 600,000 whistles per year, but we did it. Until then we had been buying brass plate in units of hundreds of kilograms, and that eventually became tons.

Amid the yen appreciation against US dollar, we turned our attention to the European market, and I went to the International Trade Fair for Sports held in Cologne. What particularly attracted my attention was a French-made whistle. To me, there was nothing attractive about it – from the quality of the pressing, the chrome finish to the tonal quality. I quickly reached an order agreement of 1,000 dozen whistles for the French National Police, when I showed our samples.

Becoming No. 1 in the Football World

How did you come to manufacture whistles for soccer referees?

Noda: In 1977, we were invited to Paris. I knew nothing about soccer at all, but I was asked if we could produce a whistle with a high pitch, and sent a sample. Sampic, our French trading partner, supplied our whistles to Bundesliga, the German soccer league, and it seems that this is how Noda whistle began to be used in European soccer scene.

The 1982 FIFA World Cup in Spain was the first time our whistles were used in a major tournament. I still keep a sample of that whistle model, inscribed "Mundial 82."

Photo: J LEAGUE PHOTOS



Okada Masayoshi loves Noda whistles

Until then, European soccer exclusively used Acme and Italian whistles. We were asked to produce even higher pitched whistles for the next World Cup in Mexico, in 1986. We succeeded in

producing a model with a pitch higher than any whistles available in Europe at the time, and sales took off dramatically.

Is that how the Noda brand spread in the global market?

Noda: No. Almost none of our products were sold under our own brand name. At the time we had an agency agreement with Sampic, which shipped our whistles under various brand names, so users thought that they were made in France.

Here is a story I will never forget. We received a request from the British firm Hudson, the world's leading whistle manufacture, for a direct transaction of 1,000 whistles. When I asked later how they identified that we were the actual manufacturer of the European soccer whistles, I was told that they had received a complaint from a customer that the high-pitched whistles sold in France were not on the products list of the Acme brand. They bought some Sampic whistles and straight away found out that those were indeed not made in France, but were of Japanese origin. They contacted us through the British Foreign Ministry and the British

Embassy in Japan. We had a contract with Sampic at the time so we were unable to meet Hudson's request, but I was so happy because it seemed our whistles had been accepted by Hudson, the company we had been trying to match in terms of quality.

Since the establishment of the Japan Professional Football League (J. League) in 1993, the popularity of soccer has grown dramatically. Are your whistles used in the J. League?

Noda: Some referees use, but we are not an official supplier. As I mentioned earlier, since our establishment, we had no sales distribution channels in Japan at all, and we only sold small volumes to individual customers. It was in 1990 that we finally started supplying domestic sports goods manufacturers.

What let to the Noda whistle brand becoming widely known?

Noda: In 1996, shortly before the decision to co-host the 2002 FIFA World Cup by Japan and South Korea, the *Asahi Shimbun* published a long article



Prefecture de Police (Paris police) model, Chrome



Original model, Chrome



1986 FIFA World Cup Mexico model, Chrome



1998 FIFA World Cup France model, Chrome

about us. The article was headed “Reverberate around the world – whistles from a small workshop.” Since then, we have been interviewed by many Japanese media.

Then, at the 1998 FIFA World Cup France, Okada Masayoshi, the first Japanese chief referee in a World Cup match, was greatly impressed by our whistles. Not only did he use it in the matches he refereed – he also gave us valuable publicity by telling people everywhere how great its performance is.

The Challenge of Being the World’s Best

How would you describe the characteristics of the Noda whistle?

Noda: The quality of the whistle tone is determined by how the air from one’s out-breath flows around inside the whistle chamber. The shape is finalized only after a long process of trial and error. Then we must bear in mind the usability.

For example, for a soccer whistle, we make the mouthpiece big enough to ensure that the whistle will not accidentally fall from a referee’s mouth. Then we draw up the blueprints and produce the mold. The two halves of the brass plate are soldered, and after ensuring that there are no air leaks, the surface is carefully polished. We give two under-coats of plating – the first of copper and the second of nickel – before the final chrome mirror finish. High-class whistles are finished not with chrome but with gold plating. This gives a more rounded, milder tone.

For the cork ball used in the resonator, we only use Portuguese cork that has no cracks in it, and coat it to protect it from saliva. In this way, we make sure that the tone color does not alter during use. A Noda whistle can be blown three times continuously on the same breath when a soccer referee gives a red card. We are sometimes chided for too much money into production, but we are confident that our product quality is second to none.

The tone of the whistle varies depending on the type of sport. For example, a deeper, heavier tone than that required

for soccer is preferred in rugby. Our whistles are also used for volleyball and speed skating. I can tell by the tone if our whistles are being used even on TV.

You have been making whistles for more than 30 years. What kind of business policies have been of greatest importance to you?

Noda: We have made more than 15 million whistles in all, and during all that time we have never stopped our research. Because we were dealing in international markets, we were able to obtain various samples of whistles produced by other makers around the world. We could actually blow those whistles to examine their performance characteristics and produce whistles that sound better and are easier to use than those made by our competitors.

My son helped me to create the company’s website. Thanks to him the website has been well received, and it has generated inquiries and orders. I am very grateful for that. **JS**

Takamasu Kanji is an editor and biographer. He is also a senior advisor to the foreign editor of the New York Times.



1998 FIFA World Cup France model, Pure Gold

adidas model, ABS plastic

2002 FIFA World Cup Korea/Japan model, Pure Gold

NATO model, burned painting

Compared with other companies’ products, Noda’s corks are perfectly spherical, and have no cracks (right)