

# Japanese Swimming and Its Revival

By Suzuki Daichi

The Japanese swimming team has been maintaining good performances since the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games. This summer, Japanese swimmers achieved astonishing results at the world championships in Barcelona.

Swimming has been a popular sport from the old days in Japan. It is a traditional competitive sport along with gymnastics, both of which are referred to as Japan's "specialty."

Japan's first Olympic gold medal in the field of swimming was won by Tsuruta Yoshiyuki in the 1928 games in Amsterdam. He won again in the 1932 Los Angeles Olympic Games. Tsuruta is the only Japanese swimmer to achieve two straight individual victories. In the 1932 Olympics, Japan monopolized most of the swimming categories. Even in the Berlin Games

Photo: THE YOMIURI SHIMBUN



Suzuki won a gold medal in the Seoul Olympic Games in 1988

of 1936, Japan took the world by storm. Japanese people became widely known for their high level of swimming abilities.

However, World War II completely changed the picture. After the war, Japan was not allowed to return to the international stage and could not participate in the 1948 Olympic Games in London. Such world class swimmers as Furuhashi Hironoshin and Hashizume Shiro had no choice but to demonstrate their skills in competitions at home.

In the Helsinki Olympic Games in 1952, Japan was finally allowed to compete again on an international level. But Furuhashi had unfortunately passed his peak and suffered a disastrous defeat coming in 8<sup>th</sup> in the 400-meter freestyle. Many Japanese swimmers were ashamed, as they were affected by the chaos of the war and its aftermath.

However, in the 1956 Melbourne Olympics, which was the first to be held in the southern hemisphere, Furukawa Masaru won the gold medal in the 200-meter breaststroke with sub-aqua swimming. This was Japan's first postwar gold medal for swimming. No gold medals were obtained in the subsequent games in Rome, Tokyo and Mexico, but in 1972 in Munich, Taguchi Nobutaka and Aoki Mayumi raised the Japanese national flag for the first time in 16 years from the main pole.

Following that, women from East Germany and men from the United States displayed their skills for a while and Japan was not given much chance to compete. The tough times continued and in the 1976 Montreal Olympics, Japan had its record low performance with just one swimmer remaining among the finalists.

In 1980 in Moscow, Japan and the United States did not participate in the games, losing their precious opportunity

of taking part in the Olympics. Swimmers who were anticipated to become medalists made a strong protest to the government. The disappointment of the swimmers who were not allowed to participate in this precious opportunity is immeasurable.

In the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics, the Eastern block had in turn boycotted the games. Although that should have tipped the balance in the Japanese team's favor, the Japanese swimmers were overwhelmed by the spectators rather than their opponents, and failed to win without displaying their abilities. They were not used to competing among the audiences that filled the grandstands. The cause of defeat was said to be their lack of experience on the international stage.

The Los Angeles Olympics Japanese national team coach said: "The fact that no one had experienced the Olympics was our weak point." This meant that the adverse legacy of boycotting the Moscow Olympics was casting its dark shadow here. The whole team became anxious as the games approached and the level of their anxiety increased with the pressure. Although swimming is an individual sport, encouraging and helping one another in the team is also very important.

The Japanese swimming team that ended up with no medals in the three consecutive games that followed Montreal and Moscow, had also committed pass violations in three out of five relay categories. The officials of the Japan Swimming Federation exploded into angry words: "This is unheard of. We have never seen such shameful results." The mass media wrote up stories with such headlines as "The Japanese swimming team failed to emerge!" or "Japan's humiliating defeat." The uproar did not end there and more scandals hit the Japanese

Photo: Suzuki Daichi

swimming world.

“Olympic swimmer smokes hash!” This headline made the front page of many newspapers. We had no record of a scandal of such magnitude in the past. The chairman of the Japan Swimming Federation and the coaching staff of the team all resigned. It was decided that the records of the swimmers involved were to be erased.

After this event, the Japanese swimming world was reincarnated as a new organization. Albeit slowly, it gradually became a democratic organization. An instructor with experience of having trained swimmers accompanied the team as the coach for the Japanese national team, and the swimmers were allowed to express their own opinions.

In the 1988 Olympic Games in Seoul, the first one that the Japanese swimming team participated in with its new organization, Suzuki Daichi won a gold medal. The Japanese swimming world achieved a result for the first time in 16 years. Perhaps this event had provided a spark and four years later in Barcelona, Iwasaki Kyoko won a gold medal. Since then, Japan has been constantly producing finalists in the international games.

When we observe the progress of the Japanese swimming world, we could say that the current state was a result of the occurrence of a catalytic incident that served as a watershed to drastically change the organization.

I was one of the swimmers who had spent a career as a competitor during the violent shake-up and revival of the Japan Swimming Federation. I participated in the Los Angeles games as a backstroke swimmer. Although I was a finalist in the relay, I finished 11<sup>th</sup> in the 100-meter and 15<sup>th</sup> in the 200-meter in the individual categories. However, I was able to learn a lot by experiencing the world's top games, such as the true appeal of the competition and the pleasure of performing on the big stage. After all, competitors grow through experience.

I changed dramatically as a competitor as I experienced the big stage. I used to dislike training, but after this precious experience, I came to take the

lead and devote myself to it. I realized that I must have confidence in myself if I wanted to display my ability under pressure. Since then I became obsessed with training as if I had taken on a new personality and became an Olympic gold medalist after four years.

Nonetheless, the true challenge for competitors begins after their retirement. In most cases, swimmers can compete on the world-class stage until the age of 30. Our life after retirement is far longer. Therefore, it is important that we win gold medals not only in competitions but also in social activities. Someone said that many Japanese gold medalists live recklessly after retiring from competitions, but it is certainly true that there are many who have not been able to try hard in life after retirement, as they have suffered from burn-out.

So what kind of life are the top athletes abroad living after retirement? I remember an article in the *Sports Nippon* newspaper about Debbie Thomas who had won first place with Katarina Witt in the women's figure skating in 1988. It said that she was training to become a doctor at the distinguished Feinberg School of Medicine at Northwestern University after graduating from the Stanford University, School of Engineering. After reading the article carefully, I discovered that her goal was not to become a doctor but to become an astronaut. What a huge dream... Speaking of doctors, Eric Heiden and Johann Koss are former medalists as well. It seems that it is not surprising for an athlete to become a doctor.

Bill Bradley was a gold medalist in the Tokyo Olympic Games and a National Basketball Association player. Bradley subsequently became a politician and then an American presidential candidate a few years ago. I hear he is



Suzuki instructs the younger generation after his retirement

now a board member of an investment company in New York. Although he could not become the party's nominee after being defeated by the former Vice President Al Gore, he is leading a very impressive life. Of course, it is hardly surprising for an athlete to become a candidate, as the United States is a country where an actor can become a president.

On reflection in Japan, I think it has been almost predetermined in most cases for our top athletes to instruct the younger generation after retirement. But it should also be acceptable for them to start-up venture businesses or become doctors, attorneys, actors or actresses. Compared to other countries, I think our island nation tends to promote narrow-minded people by placing customs and restrictions on everything.

Japan lacks vigor in contrast to its swimming world. The key to its emergence depends on how the nation can rebuild itself by shedding its past experience of success; otherwise, it would hit rock bottom. The whole of Japan must change more, while the world of sports does its best in the world. As for myself, I am intent on constantly aiming forward. **JTI**

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