

## Soccer in Japan: Community-Based Club Teams and Their Accomplishment

By *Hachuda Masashi*

SINCE the establishment of the J.League in 1993, Japanese soccer has undergone dramatic changes and progressed impressively. The prime example of this is the great success of the national team, a symbol of Japanese soccer. Starting with the 1988 FIFA World Cup in France, Japan has entered three consecutive World Cup tournaments. As a host country of the 2002 World Cup Korea/Japan, Japan took first place in the group league. Although Japan regrettably suffered in the first game of the tournament itself, it made a strong impression on the field. Despite the bitter defeat, the players did come away with the firm conviction that they could have done better. Japanese soccer players are continuously motivated and are still fighting.

Personally I have great expectations for Japan in the 2006 World Cup in Germany. Twenty-three highly competitive players have been selected for the national team and a system has been established to maximize their potential. Mutual understanding has solidified their defensive formation. The tactics of where the ball can be taken away from the opponent have to permeate through the entire team. Offense requires the most efficient and effective movement after the ball is stripped from the opponent. In other words, it is essential to make a direct play before the opponent can regain its balance in defense. It is difficult to play well in soccer on the world stage, but if Japan puts up a fight single-mindedly focusing on victory, it is not mere wishful thinking that Japan may improve on its previous performance in the Top 16.

Ten years ago, even mentioning the possibility of the national team reaching the Top 8 would have made one appear deluded, but not anymore.

Why has the Japanese national team been improved so much since the establishment of the J.League? Let us take a look at what has been happening behind the scenes. A wide variety of factors come to mind, but a key one is the increasing number of players at the fundamental level.

First, we can point to the expansion of community-based club teams and their accomplishments.

The J.League implemented a two-division system from FY 1999. Last season, Ventforet Kofu, the professional club in my home town of Yamanashi Prefecture, was promoted to Division One (J1) for the first time. Having just barely reached third place in Division Two, or J2, the team defeated Kashiwa Reysol, which was in 16th place in the J1. Kofu's home and away total was 8 and 3. Its over-

whelming offensive strength astonished people throughout the country. As I am from Kofu, I was extremely proud of them. For some time after Ventforet Kofu was promoted, everyone I talked to congratulated me on their achievement. Every email and letter I received began with a similar expression of elation at their promotion. Ventforet Kofu has now become more popular all over Yamanashi.

However, the path to their achievement was certainly not an easy one for Ventforet.

"I never thought that Ventforet would be promoted to the J1 so quickly," confessed the club's president Umino Kazuyuki. From his comment, one can surmise how greatly they struggled to reach the top.

With the introduction of the two-division system, Ventforet joined the professional world in 1999. But life in the J2 was still tough, and for three years they floundered at the bottom of the league. On the management side, the club also accumulated a large deficit and there were fears for the future of the club. Some people argued that "There is no way that a prefecture with a small population of 880,000 can support a professional club, and it should quit now before things get worse."

However, the club was able to surmount these severe difficulties with the official support of the town and the cooperation of the sponsors, supporters and volunteer staff members. Ventforet simply did not give up. The players energetically participated in gatherings where they signed autographs and shook hands with supporters. The events were organized by local governments and corporations in the prefecture. They managed to get people at the local level interested in them by steadily strengthening their local roots. Through such means, the region as a whole gradually responded to them. At the same time, cooperation via sponsor advertising billboards increased. Nowadays, the pitch inside the stadium is filled to overflowing with such billboards. One restaurant which could not offer financial support held a special dinner to encourage the team. They also donated foods such as *natto* (fermented soybeans) and *tofu*. A fitness club offered its facilities for training, someone offered free uniform laundering services and the circle of support included an ever-increasing variety of goods and services. Ventforet joined together with the people of the area to play professional games. As a result, a small club with an annual operating budget of ¥600 million was able to ascend to the J1 where the average budgets exceed ¥2 billion.

As one of the team's biggest fans, I am proud that our

local club team has been able to demonstrate its potential to the nation. I hear that the number of clubs which want to join the J.League is increasing every year. Such information is astounding, and it is my fervent hope that cheers like those in Yamanashi will be heard one day in some other cities.

Next, I would like to mention the undertaking sponsored by the Japan Football Association (JFA) for the education of coaches because I believe that this also makes a valuable contribution to the expansion of soccer.

In this enterprise which aims at raising the overall standards of Japanese soccer, efforts are being made to get coaches to join in a common course of action and to direct their efforts in the same direction. It seeks to introduce scientific knowledge and the latest information, and to improve their skills. In other words, the JFA is actively trying to educate their leadership. With S-class coaches established as the top qualification, there are over 30,000 certified instructors active throughout the nation.

Actually, I am currently attempting to obtain certification as an S-class coach. The three-month-long intensive course of study that began last August was one of considerable depth and breadth. In fact, it was so tough at the beginning I hesitated and thought I would collapse. The lectures started early in the morning and continued until 9:30 at night. The curriculum was basically divided into three parts: coaching skills, communication skills and management skills. In the near future, there will be on-site training with overseas professional clubs and J1 clubs, and after completion of the curriculum, we will submit a report and the program will be over. I will have to keep pushing a bit longer.

I used to be a soccer player, but 20 years ago as the result of a motorcycle accident, I was compelled to use a wheelchair. Japanese soccer has opened the way for me to become a professional coach. With gratitude and a desire to contribute to the development of Japanese soccer, I want to cooperate in broadening its foundations. I intend to increase the number of soccer players who can say, "I cannot help but love soccer!"

Another effect that has to be mentioned is the impact of the increase in TV broadcasts of games. This was

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Ventforet Kofu share the joy of promotion to the J1 league with their supporters

unthinkable when I was a child, and even in the days before the launch of the J.League. Nowadays, one can enjoy watching innumerable soccer games on TV, including, of course, all of the J1 and the J2 games as well as those of overseas leagues, including the European Champions League. On the pay-channel Sky Perfect TV!, for which I provide game commentaries, we air over 1,400 games a year.

Fans around Japan can now see superb soccer players in action, and many players also watch and learn from watching professional games. Children are geniuses when it comes to imitation.

Another feature of Japanese soccer is the special characteristics of the supporters. Supporters of the Japanese national team are famous for cleaning up after themselves once a game is over. Even in the J.League games, this is a general occurrence. Supporters have also begun to make requests of coaches and players at the stadium. It particularly pleases me to see an increasing number of women, children and older people coming to the stadiums. One often sees people with their families among the supporters at Ventforet Kofu games. That may be one of the reasons why the atmosphere at the stadium is so peaceful and homey.

The world of Japanese soccer has been changed dramatically. If we continue our efforts in this vein, its future will be even brighter. **JS**

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