

Reviving Pride in Sports

**Interview with
Hironoshin Furuhashi,
president of the JOC,
by Takashi Suetsune**

Hironoshin Furuhashi, an ace swimmer whose dazzling world records lifted the spirits of a war-devastated country in the late 1940s, has taken the helm of Japan's sports world as president of the Japan Olympic Committee (JOC).

It was more than 40 years ago in a time without television that radio reports of Furuhashi's astounding feats gave Japan a new national hero. The 1948 London Olympics were being held that summer, but Japan had been barred from competing as one of the defeated Axis countries. And even had it been invited, the country was too poor to have even sent a delegation. Instead, the Japan Swimming Federation (JSF) sponsored its own events in Tokyo, timed to coincide with the Olympic races.

That day the records fell, not in London but in Tokyo. Furuhashi set a new world record of 18:37.00 in the 1,500-meter freestyle, easily besting the top London time of 19:18.05. Had he been at the Olympics, he would have reached the goal with a 70-meter lead.

In June the next year the JSF was readmitted to the International Swimming Federation, and Furuhashi was ready for the world arena. That August, the 20-year-old Nihon University stu-

dent set five world records at the All-American swimming championships, earning himself the nickname the "Flying Fish of Fujiyama."

Furuhashi's accomplishments set his nation afire. The country was still in the grip of hunger-like his countrymen, Furuhashi had only sweet potatoes to eat for his daily meals. The country was still occupied by American troops. His victories, together with the Nobel Prize won in those days by physicist Hideki Yukawa, were a spiritual boost for the whole country.

Today Japan is one of the richest countries in the world. Well-fed Japanese youths are so tall they sometimes appear to be from a different race than their fathers. Japanese athletes participate in virtually every international competition, while Japan itself has played host to the full spectrum of international sports events, beginning with the 1964 Tokyo Olympics.

Yet the Japanese amateur sports world is in trouble. Japanese athletes have been doing poorly in international competition. The JOC lost its bid to hold the 1988 Olympics in Nagoya. At the 1990 Winter Asian Games in Sapporo, officials hoisted the wrong flags and played the wrong national anthems in a comedy of errors that has fanned fears that the JOC will lose its bid to host the 1998 Winter Olympics in Nagano as well.

Today, sports leaders are trying to get their act together, and Furuhashi, newly appointed head of the JOC, is the man in the maelstrom. With the general meeting of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) coming up in Tokyo in September to discuss revising the Olympic Charter and other crucial questions, Furuhashi took time from a hectic schedule to tell the *Journal* about the challenges facing his organization.

Question: *Could you first tell us your aspirations as JOC president?*

Answer: Well, frankly, I never dreamed I would be appointed to this important post. It's embarrassing! At this point I am still planning what to do, in the midst of an incredibly busy schedule.

However, the IOC general meeting will convene in Tokyo this year. Some 3,000 people will be coming here in September to choose the site of the 1996 Olympics. Just organizing the meeting is a tough job, and an expensive one. And at the same time, the JOC itself has to be out there



Hironoshin Furuhashi



Photo: Kyodo News Service

Furuhashi setting his world record time in the 1,500-meter freestyle in Tokyo in 1948.

lobbying IOC members to back our bid for the 1998 Winter Games.

The IOC meeting will be closely followed by the Beijing Asian Games. The Japanese delegation to Beijing will be the biggest Japan has ever sent to an international sports meet. We are in the midst of choosing delegation members.

In March next year, Sapporo will host a Universiad with more than 1,000 athletes and officials from 35 to 40 countries participating. The Universiad will give us an opportunity to erase the disgrace of the procedural blunders we made during this year's Winter Asian Games in the same city.

Then comes the 97th IOC general meeting in Birmingham in June next year. This meeting will decide the site of the 1998 Winter Olympics from among six candidates, including Nagano. The JOC has a difficult task ahead of it in trying to win the bid. I won't rest easy until it's decided.

Q: *There seem to be various problems regarding Nagano hosting the 1998 Winter Games. Does the JOC want to hold the Nagano Games at any cost?*

A: It isn't easy to explain why we have to host Olympic Games. Certainly hosting an Olympiad does bring various benefits to Japan. For one thing, it helps build the physical strength of our youth—and the general public, too—through sports. It also helps vitalize society as a whole.

The Japanese government and the private sec-

tor have agreed to cooperate in trying to bring the 1998 Winter Games to Nagano. The year 1998 is still a long way off, but our success will hinge to a great extent on the IOC meeting in Tokyo. If we can't manage a successful IOC meeting, our plans to host the Games in Nagano could be adversely affected.

At the moment, there isn't any decisive factor in Nagano's favor. All we can do is to make the IOC sympathetic to a Nagano Olympiad.

Q: *Who do you think will host the 1996 Games?*

A: Six cities, including Athens, Toronto, Atlanta and Melbourne, are all bidding for the 1996 Games. Since 1996 is the centennial of the modern Olympics, Athens is a strong contender. After all, it hosted the first modern Olympics.

Q: *Japan is always eager to participate in the Olympics and other international games, but Japanese athletes are being outshone by their foreign counterparts.*

A: It's true Japan's performance in recent international competition has not been impressive. People often ask me why Japanese athletes do not perform better. I know that many people looked to the JOC and to me to improve the situation.

It is technically possible to nurture strong athletes. One way is to select and train talented youths. Swimmer Daichi Suzuki, who performed so impressively in the Seoul Olympics, is a good

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Furuhashi (right) with former JOC President Yoshiaki Tsutsumi

Photo: Kyodo News Service

example. We noted his talents and worked hard for several years to make him a good swimmer. Our efforts paid off.

It costs money to train good athletes. But money is not everything. We need an environment in which good athletes can be created. We need social conditions which allow officials and coaches to devote themselves to training.

It is impossible for coaches and trainers with other jobs to nurture good athletes in their spare time. If they devote themselves to training they risk losing their jobs. Today, those of us promoting amateur sports and training of athletes are doing so out of our love of sports and a sense of duty. But this system has its limits. We need full-time officials and coaches who can concentrate on sports without worrying about making a living.

Some people wonder why we make so much of a fuss about sports. But if we are to send strong athletes to the Olympics, we need the understanding of society and the whole nation. Hosting an Olympiad in Japan has meaning in that respect.

Q: *Japan does promote sports. We have an annual national athletic meet, and school curriculums include sports. And we have a broad base for finding good athletes among a wide strata of people.*

A: That is all true to a certain extent. However, you have to remember that first-rate athletes do not come naturally. We must find our talented athletes, train them and have them constantly compete with other strong athletes. In this respect, it is important to send athletes overseas. Even talented athletes cannot perform their best without strong competitors.

One reason there are so many strong athletes in America is that they have ample opportunity to compete with strong athletes from other countries. America also has good sports facilities, and it treats its sports officials and coaches well. Other countries eager to promote sports also produce strong athletes. But as I said before, while it costs money to train athletes, money alone is not enough.

Q: *Your world record in the 1,500-meter freestyle was 18:37.00. Now the current record is around 15 minutes. Do you think that records keep being better because the athletes themselves are better?*

A: I would have been no match for the swimmers of today. But remember, the sports environment and equipment today are not what they were in the old days, either. The quality of the equipment and facilities, from spikes to poles for vaulting, from swimming trunks to swimming pools, has been vastly improved in order to better records. Mere time comparisons do not show whether present athletes are better than those of the past, or vice versa.

If humans were to compete to test their real abilities, they should run barefoot and swim naked. These days, some athletes even take drugs to build muscles. I wouldn't say all drugs should be illegal, but drugs shouldn't be used in sports.

Q: *In sports, the strong win. Since professionals are stronger and better-trained than amateurs, why shut them out of the Olympics?*

A: That opinion is gaining ground. It is difficult to draw the line between professionals and amateurs, but in principle, the Olympics should be the place where the strongest compete. They should not be for second-rate athletes. Yet at the same time, it would be bad for the Olympics to get too commercial.

Q: *Given all the international sports meets today, does it make sense to just hold the Olympics once every four years?*

A: There are many international sports competitions, but the Olympics remain the biggest sports event in the world, and are upheld by tradition and honor. There is no more spectacular forum than the Olympics for the strongest athletes of the world to get together. To preserve the Olympics, we must maintain their authority: the winners of the Olympics are the world's strongest athletes. ■

Takashi Suetsune is a Tokyo-based free-lance reporter.

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