

# Soccer as a Popular Sport: Putting Down Roots in Japan

*The quadrennial FIFA World Cup was held in Germany from June to July 2006. For the qualifying matches of this eighteenth World Cup, 197 countries and regions participated and thirty-two teams competed in the finals, with Italy winning the championship. The number of television viewers worldwide had reached 28.8 billion during the previous World Cup, and there is no doubt that people around the globe were glued to their television sets for the 2006 tournament as well. In Japan, enthusiasm for the World Cup was evident from specials that ran on television and in magazines before the tournament even began. And during the tournament itself, Japanese fans went crazy over the national team. A total of 70,000 Japanese traveled all the way to Germany to support the Japanese national team. Many fans also cheered for the team at stadiums and sports bars in Japan, watching the games being televised on giant screens. The Japanese national team did not advance to the round of 16, but many people enjoyed the spectacle of world-class soccer. In fact, it is only recently that soccer has attracted this much interest in Japan. In this issue, we introduce the state of Japanese soccer.*

## History of Soccer

The history of soccer goes way back. There was a game in Europe during the medieval period in which the goal was to transfer a ball to a specified place. Even before that, games were being played in both ancient Rome and China that are said to be the origins of soccer.

Soccer as we know it today began when the Football Association was founded in England in 1863 and soccer rules were standardized. Subsequently, soccer spread beyond England to other countries, and from the second Olympic games held in Paris in 1900, it was designated an Olympic sport. In 1904, based on a proposal from France, seven European nations (France, Belgium, Denmark, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, and Switzerland) formed the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA). The number of member countries and regions continued to grow, and in 1932 the first World Cup tournament was held in Uruguay. Today, football associations from 205 countries and regions belong to FIFA. The popularity of soccer has spread around the world, and it is said that over 250 million people play the sport.

## History of Japanese Soccer

Soccer is said to have been introduced to Japan by an English military officer in the early Meiji period (1868-1912). Subsequently, soccer teams were formed mainly in normal schools and the game spread across the country through teachers who graduated from these schools. In 1921, the Zen Nippon Shukyu Kyokai [All Japan Kickball Association] (currently the Japan Football Association) was established.

### *After the Tokyo Olympics*

After World War II, Japanese soccer made little progress either in technical skill or popularity. When its national team ranked

in the top eight at the 1964 Tokyo Olympics held during the rapid economic growth period, however, the popularity of soccer soared. In 1965, the Japan Soccer League (JSL), a non-professional soccer league sponsored by corporations, was founded with eight teams. As this momentum continued to grow, the Japanese national soccer team won the bronze medal at the 1968 Mexico Olympics.

The number of teams in the Japan Soccer League slowly increased from the original eight, and in 1985 the league was split into two leagues, with twelve and sixteen teams respectively. The popularity of soccer was on the rise, but fan attendance at games remained dismal, with 1,000-3,000 per game. The number of spectators at soccer games totaled a mere 200,000-300,000 per year. Meanwhile, baseball had been the overwhelmingly predominant professional game in Japan. The Yomiuri Giants, the most popular of the twelve league teams, drew an average of 30,000 fans to the stadium per game, and professional baseball as a whole attracted 20 million fans annually.

World-class competitions like the World Cup were considered beyond Japan's reach. Increasingly vocal demands arose for a professional league with a view to raising the level of Japanese soccer and boosting its popularity. In 1992, the decision was made to establish a professional league. The JSL was divided into the J. League, comprised of professional teams, and the Japan Football League, made up of nonprofessional teams.

### *The Birth of the J. League*

In May 1993, 50,000-odd fans attended the launching of Japan's first professional soccer league, the J. League, at the National Stadium in Yoyogi, Tokyo. Famous players from all over the world, including Brazilian hero, Zico (who later became 2006 World Cup coach of the Japanese team), joined the new Japanese teams. Fans flocked to games to watch Japanese and foreign players play up close. The birth of the J. League wiped away shadowy images of soccer, stimulated local in-



J. League inaugural ceremony.

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terest in the game, thereby broadening the base from which players could be sought, and fostered improved performance by Japanese players.

### *The World, Still Out of Reach*

As soccer grew more popular, the Japanese national team attracted more attention. People had great anticipation for their team's participation in the 1994 World Cup. The Japanese national team made it through the preliminary Asian Zone in first place and arrived in Doha, Qatar to play against Iraq in the final match of the qualification round. If Japan had won, it would have been the first time to qualify for the World Cup tournament. Japan had been leading 2-1, but in the last minute of injury time in the second half, the Iraqi team scored with a header. Many Japanese fans still remember this game as the "Agony of Doha."

Perhaps as a result of this game, J. League popularity began to wane. On the other hand, the number of teams seeking to join the J. League rose, and the league began to grow. The number of teams went from the initial ten to eighteen by 1998. In 1999, the Japan Football League was divided into the J. League Division Two, comprised of teams aiming to join the J. League, and the Japan Football League, comprised of teams that are not. Therefore, the professional teams are divided into two leagues, J1 and J2. As of 2006, there are eighteen teams in J1, and thirteen teams in J2, attracting over 7 million spectators per year.

### *Competition on the World Stage*

Finally, the opportunity for Japan to go to the World Cup for the first time presented itself. The qualifying playoffs for the 1998 tournament in France took place in Johor Bahru, Malaysia, and Japan was playing Iran, a powerful rival. The victor would win a ticket to the tournament. The two teams went into overtime with a 2-2 tie, and it was in the last minute that Japan scored a goal. This game is remembered by many Japanese fans as the "Joy of Johor Bahru." Forty years had passed since a Japanese team had first participated in the preliminary rounds of the World Cup in 1954 for the dream of qualifying to come true. At the 1998 tournament, Japan suffered three losses without gaining any tournament points,

but many fans were awed by the world-class plays they saw on the field.

Starting around this time, players such as Nakata Hidetoshi and Nakamura Shunsuke began to transfer to teams abroad. Sports news programs on television began featuring stories on European soccer leagues, and world soccer grew increasingly familiar to Japanese fans.

The 2002 tournament was the first World Cup to take place in Asia, and was jointly hosted by Japan and Korea. The Japanese team reached the second round of the tournament for the first time in history. This World Cup became a huge craze in Japan, spreading to people who until then had had no interest in soccer. The 2002 World Cup had a great impact on Japanese soccer, prompting the construction of large-scale stadiums to host important matches and the establishment of new soccer teams.



Japanese national team at the 2006 FIFA World Cup tournament. ©J. LEAGUE PHOTOS

## History of Women's Soccer

Women's soccer has only recently captured popular attention, but in fact, it has a long history. In Europe during World War I, women's soccer flourished as women appeared on the field replacing men who had left for war. With the end of the war, however, men's soccer resumed, and, arguing that "soccer is harmful to women's bodies," football associations in England, the Netherlands, and Germany prohibited the rental practice space to women's

teams. The unfavorable times for women's soccer continued for decades thereafter. Around the late 1950s, however, as the notion of gender equality spread throughout the world, women's soccer began to make a comeback. Women's soccer teams popped up in Eastern European countries and women started playing soccer in East Asia. In the United States, with the rise of the women's liberation movement, women's soccer flourished as teams were established on college campuses. In 1971, the first international women's match recognized by FIFA was held between France and the Netherlands. Finally in 1996, at the twenty-sixth Olympic games held in Atlanta, women's soccer became an official Olympic sport.

## Japanese Women's Soccer

Japanese women slowly began playing soccer in the 1960s. In the 1970s companies and universities established women's teams, and teams across the

country played against each other.

In 1980, the All Japan Women's Football Tournament took place, open to teams from all over Japan. In 1986, the women's national team was organized by players selected from teams around the country.

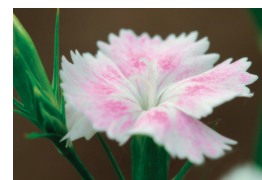
In 1989, six teams joined together to form the Japan Women's Football League. With hopes of riding on J. League popularity, the Japan Women's Football League was nicknamed the L. League ("L" is for "lady"). The league attracted widespread attention, and though not a professional league, some players began to sign on as professional players. Players from abroad, moreover, flocked to join Japanese teams. After the Japanese women's team lost all of its three games at the Atlanta Olympics as well as the opportunity to play in the Olympic games in Sydney, spectators at L. League games began to drop off, and the league remained at a low ebb for a while. In 2003, however, after a close game in the World Cup preliminary round, the Japanese women's team received heavy media coverage for winning a ticket to the World Cup set to take place the following year. This led to a revival of interest in the L. League. In 2004, the league switched to a two-league system (each consisting of eight teams) and invited the public to submit ideas for a league nickname. The league adopted the name "Nadeshiko League," and the Japanese national women's team is now referred to as Nadeshiko Japan. The *nadeshiko*, or dianthus flower, traditionally represents the ideal Japanese woman.



Nadeshiko Japan playing game in blue uniforms.

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Approximately 25,000 girls and women play soccer in Japan. Though these numbers have been increasing steadily in recent years, it is far from the 8 million who play in the United States. Girls who play soccer in elementary school often have to give up once they go to junior high or high school because there are no girls' teams at that level. Convinced that "no advance can be made in Japanese soccer without advance in Japanese women's soccer," Japan Football Association (JFA) Chairman Kawabuchi Saburo has embraced the creation of opportunities for junior high and high school-aged girls to play soccer, thereby broadening the playing base of women's soccer. The nurturing of women's players is one of the major goals of the JFA. The establishment of the JFA Academy (see Meeting People) is one of the steps being taken to achieve this goal.



Nadeshiko (dianthus)

## Soccer as a Familiar Sport

Elementary school children engrossed in soccer games on school fields after school and on weekends is today a familiar sight. There are different types of

elementary school-level soccer teams, including local teams such as junior sports clubs, as well as club teams. Both boys and girls have a chance to play at the junior high and high school level on school teams. For students who play on school teams, the All Japan High School Soccer Tournament is one of the most important events. The playoff game of the Tournament held in January is televised, and is watched not only by high school students, but people of all ages. For children playing in club teams, the Club Youth Football Tournaments (U-12, U-15, U-18) are the most significant.

A look at the soccer careers of professional players in the J. League today reflects the variety of paths they followed: some played in junior sports clubs and on school teams in junior high and high schools; some played on club teams from junior high school; some started on high school teams and went professional after taking a club team test; and there are those who played on school teams from junior high school through university. This is a testament to the broadening range of opportunities in soccer, and to the fact that it has become an increasingly familiar sport in Japan.

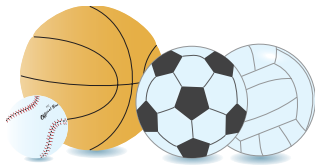


Soccer games are held all over the country on weekends.

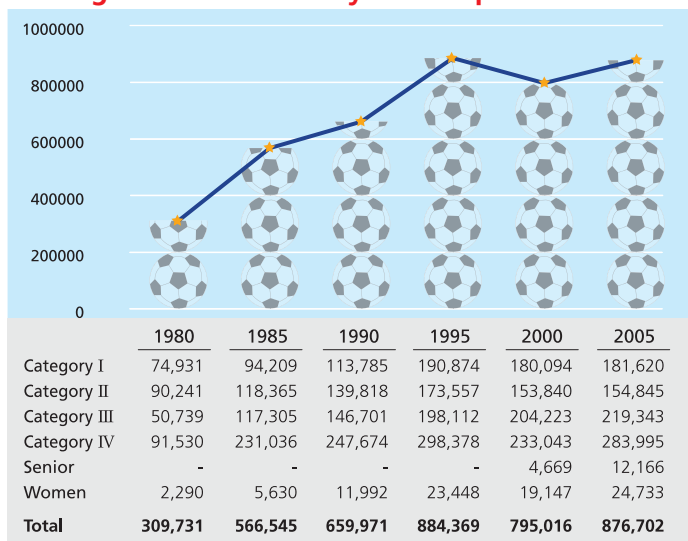
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## Children's favorite sports

According to a 2005 survey entitled "Seishonen no supotsu raifu deta 2006" [Data on Young People's Participation in Sports 2006] conducted for a sample of 2,500 girls and boys aged 10 to 19 by the Sasakawa Sports Foundation, the top three sports played on a regular basis by boys were 1) soccer, 2) basketball, and 3) baseball. Among girls, the sport played the most on a regular basis was volleyball. Sports at which respondents have been firsthand spectators were 1) professional baseball, 2) high school or college baseball, and 3) J. League soccer. In addition, sports they wanted to see in the stadium were: 1) Japanese national team soccer, 2) professional baseball, and 3) volleyball.



## JFA-registered Soccer Players in Japan



[Source: Japan Football Association]

Category I: Teams made up of members without age limit.

Category II: Teams made up high school students or others under 18 years old.

Category III: Teams made up of junior high school students or others under 15 years old.

Category IV: Teams made up of elementary school students or others under 12 years old.

Seniors: Teams made up of members 40 years and older.

## Community-Based Soccer Teams

In order to join the J. League, teams are required to establish a home town in cooperation with a local municipal governing body, secure a stadium that can accommodate over 10,000 people with nighttime lighting and a natural grass field, and establish an organization devoted to nurturing its lower branches, in other words, to have teams that accommodate elementary, junior and senior high school students.

These requirements are closely related to the goals of the JFA. By drawing on the roots set down by club teams in local communities, the JFA aims to make sports a part of people's daily lives, encouraging the health and happiness it nourishes. JFA Chairman Kawabuchi Saburo has said that he was moved as a young man by the sight of people of all ages playing soccer on grass fields in Germany. From then on, it became his dream to make the same thing possible in Japan. The passion of others who shared his dream and wanted to take a part in it engaged many people and led to the establishment of the J. League and the birth of many club teams.

The JFA idea about sport was something quite new in Japan. In the vastly popular sport of professional baseball, teams are owned by corporations and named after their owners. There is a tendency for teams to be concentrated in large cities such as Tokyo and Osaka. In the J. League, on the other hand, club teams feature place names because of their strong ties to local communities. Among them are quite successful teams based in smaller cities. In addition, because the teams aspire to appeal to a local community, they refer to them as "supporters" rather than "fans." Moreover, teams conduct soccer lessons for local children and value opportunities for interaction with local residents. It is these aspects, perhaps, that are increasing the number of people playing and watching soccer in Japan.

## Captain Tsubasa

*Captain Tsubasa*, a serial manga started in 1981 in the weekly comic magazine *Shonen Jump* (published by Shueisha), is a huge hit among children. It is a story about the experiences of the soccer-loving boy Tsubasa, as he grows through the friendships and rivalries he makes through the sport. Tsubasa, who has now become a professional soccer player, appears today in the weekly comic magazine *Young Jump*. More than a few professional players started playing soccer after reading *Captain Tsubasa*. Over 50 million copies of the book *Captain Tsubasa* have been sold, and the anime is televised in over 100 countries.



"CAPTAIN TSUBASA GOLDEN-23"  
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## Why do we call it soccer?

In England where soccer was born and in many other countries, the sport is called "football." Yet in Japan, it is generally known as "soccer." It is also called soccer in the United States, Canada, and Australia. Why is that? The rules of modern soccer were standardized by the Football Association in England, and the sport was originally called association football. In England at the time, it was common to add the suffix "-er" to words. Hence "association football" became "assoccer," and then "soccer." During the time around World War II, the game was called *shukyu* (kick ball) or *a-shiki shukyu* ("a" (for association)-style kick ball). After the kanji for kick 蹴 (*shu*) was removed from the list of *toyo kanji*,\* however, the term *sakka* (soccer) became increasingly common. Even today, the University of Tokyo and Waseda University formally use the term *a-shiki shukyu bu* ("a"-style kick ball club).

\* A government-announced list designating the range of kanji for daily use, this is the standard used by newspapers.

The emblem on the Japanese national team uniform is the *yata-garasu*, a type of raven seen in Japanese mythology. The three-legged bird also appears in Chinese classical literature. The J1 league champions are allowed to wear the emblem on their uniforms the following year.



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