

IN 1995, JAPAN'S NATIONAL RUGBY TEAM, THE BRAVE BLOSSOMS, suffered a humiliating defeat against New Zealand, 145–17, at the Rugby World Cup playoffs.

At the 2015 games, the team came roaring back to beat South Africa in the World Cup 34–32 in their opening Pool B match, an upset considered by some to be the most shocking in the history of the sport. Selected to host the 2019 Rugby World Cup, Japan was able to enter that competition as a team to watch.

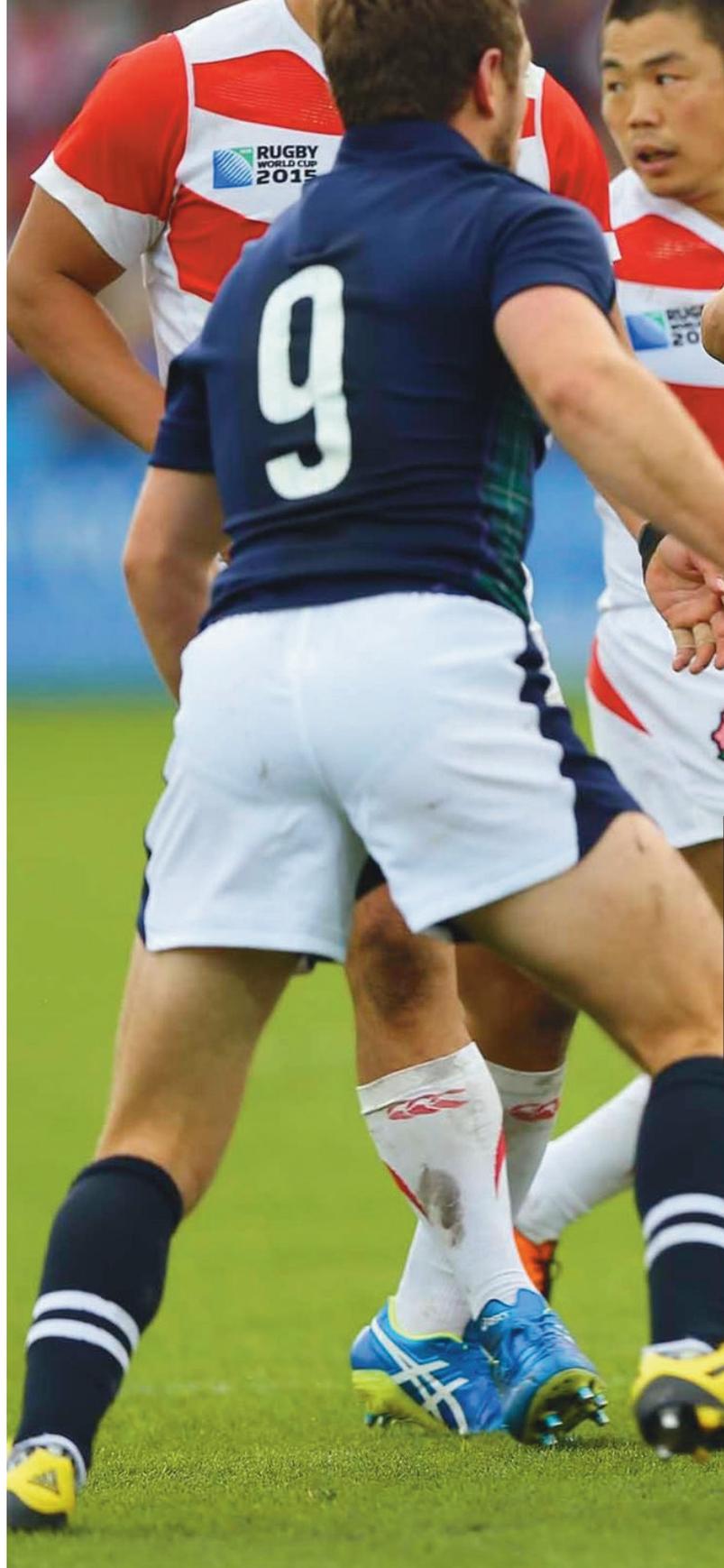
Since then, rugby in Japan has taken on a new significance as a symbol of diversity and pride at home and, internationally, of dramatic change in the world of rugby: from a sport dominated by a select group of nations, to one which is welcoming a growing group of countries vying to compete against the best teams.

Today the Japan Rugby Football Union (JRFU) is led by Chairman and CEO Kensuke Iwabuchi, who was the Brave Blossoms' general manager in the run-up to the 2015 victory.

A lifelong rugby athlete, Iwabuchi played the sport at Cambridge and professionally for Saracens, one of England's top teams. He joined the board of the JRFU in 2015 and became Chairman in 2019. He also led the Japan Men's Sevens Team as Head Coach at the Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympics. (Sevens is a popular variant of traditional rugby, featuring only seven players on each team instead of 15, and shorter periods of play.)

A historically British sport dating to the early 19th century, rugby has been played in Japan at least since 1866, when the Yokohama Football Club was formed. The nation had opened its doors to the West only a dozen years earlier, ending a period of self-imposed isolation that had lasted over two centuries. Since 1987, the country has competed in the Rugby World Cup. As host in 2019, Japan narrowly defeated Scotland and became the first Asian nation to make it to the quarterfinals.

In 2021, the Japan Rugby Football Union (JRFU) laid out plans for its future with a new Mid-Term Strategic Plan, which includes the ambition for Japan to host another Rugby World Cup. It also emphasizes the organization's goal of maintaining rugby's position in Japan as an agent of positive social change. To that end, the JRFU's planning document includes its first-ever diversity and inclusion statement, with the particular goal of opening leadership positions to more women.



The RISE of JAPANESE RUGBY



KENSUKE IWABUCHI, Chairman and CEO of Japan Rugby Football Union, talks to **DAISUKE TSUCHIYA** and **MISATO NASUKAWA** about building on Japan's string of international successes in the sport.

Japan's Brave Blossoms in action against Scotland at the 2015 World Cup.

The JRFU also created a domestic competition, Japan Rugby League One, in response to the broadening interest in the sport among the Japanese. The league played its first games this year. Previously, the country had found regular professional competition only in the Super Rugby, along with Australia, New Zealand and several other southern hemisphere nations.

In addition to the men's, JRFU has women's national teams, the Sakura Fifteen and Sakura Sevens, both of which also compete internationally. The Sakura Sevens made it to the 2016 and 2020 Olympics.

Recently, Iwabuchi sat down with Brunswick's Daisuke Tsuchiya and Misato Nasukawa to talk about the ascent of rugby in the

country, the future of Japan’s rugby teams on the world stage and his hopes for changes outlined in the MTSP. Behind such decisions is an awareness of rugby’s role in Japan as a symbol of national pride on and off the field, he says.

“Promoting rugby’s core values is fundamental to our strategy,” Iwabuchi told the Japan Rugby website recently. “Historically, rugby has been seen as more than just a sport in Japan. Our fans appreciate rugby’s values of integrity, passion, solidarity, discipline and respect, values which Japanese people aspire to, as individuals, and within wider society.”

What are the big changes you’ve seen in rugby for Japan over the last 10 years?

Obviously, the victories in the Rugby World Cup in 2015 and 2019. We beat South Africa in 2015 in Brighton, and we went through to the quarterfinals in 2019. That was the biggest change that Japanese rugby has made for the last 25-30 years.

South Africa actually wanted to host the Rugby World Cup 2019. So in those years there were a lot of arguments and some of the people in the rugby world asked whether Japan really deserved to host the Rugby World Cup. But after the game against South Africa in 2015, everything changed. It used to be that only traditional countries hosted the World Cup. But I’m sure now that Japan is seen as one of the strongest commercial markets for rugby in the world. The Rugby World Cup 2019 was the most successful ever, even surpassing the 2015 games.

As a result of our success, rugby has more confidence now to expand its horizons. For instance, they are looking at the US as one of the potential hosting unions for the World Cup in a few years’ time. The term “Tier 1,” which described the traditional powerhouse countries in the sport, is no longer used. That in itself is an indication that rugby is trying to open up to non-traditional countries, and Japan’s success has definitely had a large part to play in that tidal shift of mindset.

A typhoon hit Japan during the World Cup, just before Japan’s match in 2019 against Scotland. The match was on the verge of being cancelled. Can you talk about that?

Yes, that’s right. The venue was Yokohama, and the Yokohama Stadium was flooded. A lot of people, many volunteers, worked very hard to make the stadium available to play the following day.

If we hadn’t played, if the game was cancelled, it would have been declared a draw and Japan could have advanced without playing. But obviously we wanted to play. In 2015, we lost to Scotland and that’s why we couldn’t go through to the quarter final. So, we wanted to play. We would have gone on to the final regardless, but we wanted to do it the right way, to play them and win. So a lot of people worked to make that happen. Probably 60 hours before the game against Scotland, that was one of the busiest and exciting times for us.

How popular of an attraction is rugby in Japan? Is the audience for the JRFU growing?

We were growing, you could see it in social media followers—over 200,000 on Twitter. But when COVID-19 hit we weren’t able to play and it slowed that down. But even so, Twitter added 10,000 followers since the World Cup. Gradually, things are getting bigger and bigger. Something like 37% of all the followers on Instagram are younger than I think 34 years old, which means younger people are now following us. On our English language official website, 44% of the viewers were younger than 34. Traditionally rugby in Japan has been a sport for older people—in their 40s, 50s and 60s. So those are good signs for the future.

We do have more participation from younger populations, especially in the primary school and junior high school levels. But because of the current situation in Japan, we didn’t have a lot of teams at the junior high school level. So, children who would start rugby at a really young age, would stop. But since the Rugby World Cup, we’ve tried to increase the teams there. We tried to develop school activities or rugby school activities. So the population of players and the audience for the sport at the elementary school level and junior high school level is getting bigger and bigger. But the area that we also need to concentrate on nowadays is the high school level, because the high school population of rugby players in Japan used to be very high and it has gotten lower and lower.

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Why is that?

Mostly because there was a movement of parents who wanted their children to stop playing rugby because they thought that rugby was kind of dangerous. But then, a lot of parents saw the Rugby World Cup and they saw that rugby was a good sport. We’ve tried to encourage parents to let their children play rugby. And we want their mothers and sisters to get involved. The women’s rugby population in Japan has grown dramatically for probably the last five years after rugby was included in the Olympics. Female engagement—fan engagement, player engagement, staff engagement—that is one of the areas that we have been concentrating on so far.

In Japan, women’s football [called soccer in the US] really took off in 2011 after the Japanese national team won the Women’s World Cup. That brought the profile of Japanese women’s football up. Do you see signs of Japan’s women’s rugby teams having that sort of potential?

Absolutely. Personally, before 2019, I thought that the women’s team would go through to the quarter final before the men’s. Our women’s teams have potential. They played at the Olympics and they played the last World Cup. They could have beaten Australia at the last Rugby World Cup; they lost because they didn’t have a lot of international experience. So we have tried to send them to the UK, Ireland, France, a lot of countries. They definitely need

to gain experience, but once they do, then I'm sure that they can go through to the quarter final and they've got the potential to be like the women's national team in football.

In your experience, what are the differences between rugby in Japan and rugby in England? Has that contrast changed over the last 20 years?

When I was playing, people didn't know anything about Japan's rugby teams. Teams wouldn't come here looking for players. If I wanted to play in England, I had to go to England and try out. I had to physically be there, to show the team what I could actually do for them. Nowadays, we've got a very high standard for domestic competition and people around the world watch our games. So if you play really well, you can get a good offer from anywhere in the world.

At the time, too, we didn't have a lot of non-Japanese players playing in Japan. We also didn't have a lot of staff—coaches and analysts—who were international. Now, it is not only players, but also staff, coaches—a lot of people involved in rugby have come to Japan. So the standard has improved dramatically. Not only from the playing point of view, but also the staff point of view.

In the culture and the attitude toward training, there used to be a lot of differences. But because now we've got a lot of top coaches and players from New Zealand, Australia, England, who have experience at the Rugby World Cups and so on, the environment in Japan and the UK is now nearly equal.

Eddie Jones was the coach in 2015—he is currently England's coach, and one of the best coaches in the world. He worked to change the culture of the team, to give them the confidence that they could actually win. I introduced Eddie to Japan.

After that, because we had the Sunwolves—our professional team who played in the Super Rugby—that regular competition obviously helped Japanese rugby leading up to the Rugby World Cup 2019. After 2019 we introduced the new League One competition. If you look at England or South Africa or Scotland or France, they have top domestic competition. That is a driver for their success. Having that high-level domestic competition is necessary to maintain an international rugby team.

What is your future vision for Japanese rugby and what could be the hurdles to overcome?

We just made our Mid-Term Strategic Plan where we officially said that we wanted to host the Rugby World Cup again. We don't just want to host, of course; we want to win that Rugby World Cup. The next possible World Cup that we could host would be 15 or 19 years away. So that's our target. To make that happen, we definitely need to have to have regular international competitions and do well at them.

In that plan, you place an emphasis on diversity and inclusion. What has the experience been of the national team as it has become more diverse and what impact do you feel that has on broader Japanese society?

The team at the Rugby World Cup 2019 had a slogan: "one team." That philosophy demonstrates our attitude that rugby can be a very good platform for highlighting diversity and inclusion in Japan.

Japan's team has had a lot of non-Japanese players. From the first Rugby World Cup, we had two non-Japanese players in the team; in 2011, we had, I think 10 or 11 non-Japanese players in the team. Society actually changed, especially after Rugby World Cup 2015. We were criticized before the Rugby World Cup for having non-Japanese players. But after we beat South Africa, we became a symbol of diversity and inclusion. Since then, it's been around 50% of the team were non-Japanese born players.

If you look at the five values of rugby outlined by World Rugby, one of them is solidarity. Solidarity means players or staff or people engaged in rugby, all of them actually make a team, irrespective of the historical or cultural or geographical background. So rugby is a sport that is really familiar with diversity and inclusion.

We declared this commitment to women's empowerment. One reason we did that was because, although the Japan team is a symbol of diversity and inclusion, the JRFU itself didn't have a lot of female board members. We didn't have a lot of female officers in the union. If we want to have the best team around the world, we definitely need to have the best union in the country.

The union needs to lead the team and the union needs to be number one. Otherwise, we can't achieve our target, which is to host the Rugby World Cup again and to win the Rugby World Cup. Diversity, having a lot of different voices in the conversation, is necessary to achieve any big thing. That will actually stimulate the organization.

What is needed to make the game of rugby more diverse in terms of countries that compete at the top level?

The biggest thing is to open up more opportunities to play the top competition. Japan only had one game against "tier 1" nations between 2007 and 2011. But before the World Cup in 2015 we played five, and before 2019 we played 10 games against tier 1 nations. There is a clear link between the experience of playing with top competition and success. Providing such opportunities to other countries is important in order to broaden the group who compete at the top level.

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