

Olympism in Japan*

"The Olympic Games are an ensbrining festivity. Those ensbrined are all of us living humans and not those deified by their achievements of the past. That is why we all - competitors and spectators - love the Olympic Games." (Shintara Isbihara, novelist.)

With the sea of Japan to the west and the Pacific Ocean to the east, Japan is made up of a group of islands oriented southwest by northeast and stretching over some 2,500 kilometres. Mountains cover three-quarters of the total surface of the country. Its continental climate is tempered by microclimates, which are created by depressions in the land. With a territory of some 377,829 square kilometres and its capital in Tokyo, Japan has approximately 123,611,167 inhabitants (1990 census).

The advent of modern sport in Japan goes back to the last century: an athletics meeting was held for the first time in 1874 at the Imperial Naval College. Modern judo was codified in 1882 by an outstanding pedagogue, Jigoro Kano. Later on in the spring of 1909, whilst Kano directed the Tokyo Higher Normal School (now known as the Education University), Pierre de Coubertin suggested that he become Olympism's voice in the Orient. The French ambassador in Tokyo at the time, Mr Gérard, was none other than a childhood friend of the reviver of the Olympic Games. Thus, Coubertin, who was looking for someone suitable to found the Japanese Olympic Movement, contacted his former classmate. The latter handed Kano a letter from the IOC President inviting Japanese sportsmen to take part in the next Olympic Games and asking him to help Japan to become the first country in the Orient to understand and uphold

the lofty Olympic Ideal. Immediately, Kano took a deep interest in this invitation. During the 12th IOC Session in May 1909, he was elected unanimously as the first IOC member in Japan.

In a letter dated 14 September addressed to Baron de Coubertin, Kano wrote: "Your letter of 15 June has been duly received. I had already been informed by the French ambassador, Monsieur Gerard, that the International Olympic Committee had requested His Excellency to nominate a gentleman of Japan interested in the work and object of the above society, as a member for Japan, and it is with genuine pleasure that I received your communication of my having been unanimously elected a member at the meeting of your Committee held in Berlin last May."

From that date, Olympism had the most devoted and powerful of advocates in Japan.

In 1911, applying the principles expressed by the IOC, Kano founded the Japanese National Olympic Committee, called the "Japan Amateur Athletic Association", and became its president. In 1912, he led the Japanese delegation taking part in the Games of the V Olympiad in Stockholm. Although symbolic (only two athletes participated), their attendance gave the Games universality since, at last, sportsmen from the Asian continent had joined the Olympic circles.

Though this was a modest beginning for Japan, it was a worthy one as could be seen from the country's achievements in the years that followed.

After 1948, Japan was among the first countries to celebrate Olympic Day, created by the IOC. Half of century later, this Day remains an institution in the country.

In 1964, Tokyo organized the Games of the XVIII Olympiad. The same year, the seventieth anniversary of the IOC's foundation was celebrated in Tokyo. Sapporo hosted the XI Olympic Winter Games in 1972. The first and second Winter Asian Games were held in March 1986 and in 1990 in Sapporo. The XII Asian Games, attended by 4,000 athletes and officials, were held in 1994 in Hiroshima. Now, the city of Nagano has been chosen to host the XVIII Olympic Winter Games.

Since then, Olympism in Japan has continued to be supported, defended and promoted, and its international influence has strengthened constantly.

*Updated excerpts from *The Encyclopedia of the National Olympic Committees*, Tome I (1979), published by the IOC.

The Japanese Olympic Committee

Founded in 1911

Recognized by the IOC in 1912

President: Hironoshin Furuhashi

Secretary General: Yushiro Yagi

Current IOC members in Japan

Masaji Kiyokawa, from 1969 to 1989, member of the Executive Board from 1975 to 1983, IOC vice president from 1979 to 1983, honorary member since 1989.

Chiharu Igaya, member since 1982, member of the Executive Board from 1987 to 1991 and since 1996.

Shun-ichiro Okano, member since 1991.