

My golden Olympic moment* plunging into history

Games of the IX Olympiad in Amsterdam

My first association with the Olympic Movement, and with the Olympic Games in particular, goes way back to the year 1928, when the Games of the IX Olympiad were held in Amsterdam, in the Netherlands.

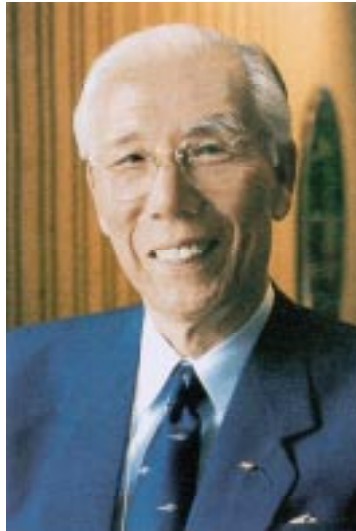
At those Games, a Japanese swimmer named Yoshiuki Tsuruta won a gold medal in the 200m breaststroke event for men, the first gold medal ever won by a Japanese swimmer.

This was a big surprise for me, 15 years of age at that time and an unknown local high school swimmer. "Even a Japanese swimmer can win a gold medal in the Olympic Games!" This motivated me to hope to represent my country at the next Games, but not necessarily to win a gold medal at that time.

After seeing Japanese swimmers win one gold, one silver, and one bronze medal at the Games in Amsterdam, the Japanese Amateur Swimming Federation, the controlling body of swimming in Japan, set



by Masaji Kiyokawa*



a bold objective: to win all the men's events for the Games of the X Olympiad in Los Angeles in 1932.

The number of swimming events for men in the Olympic programme in the 1920s and 1930s was only six: 100m freestyle, 400m freestyle, 1500m freestyle, 100m backstroke, 200m breaststroke, and 4x200m freestyle relay, which is few when compared with the sixteen events of today. The Federation lost no time in proceeding with this new aggressive programme, recruiting young talented swimmers all over the country; and for the first time in the history of Japanese swimming, it ran training camps under the leadership of national coaches for about 50 young hopefuls. I was lucky enough to be included in this group.

Although this was the first attempt of this kind by the Federation, it worked out well, and within two years' time about

twenty boys, their ages varying between 14 and 18, had come close to the level of the then world records in many events. As for myself, my records also had improved immensely and I was ranked number-one in the national ranking list for the backstroke event.

In 1931, one year prior to the Los Angeles Games, the Japanese Federation held the first edition of dual swimming meets between Japanese and US teams. The American swimming team was the leading team in the world of swimming then, and had won the majority of medals at the previous three editions of the summer Olympic Games.

However, to the amazement of the world swimming community, the Japanese team had beaten the US team with a total score of 40 to 23 points.

I took part in this international meeting for the first time in my career and was very lucky to come in second place in the 200m backstroke event and in third place in the 100m backstroke event.

The results of this meeting gave the Japanese Swimming Federation - and me as well - a lot of confidence to challenge other nations in the Olympic Games that would be held the following year in Los Angeles.

I recall putting my motto up on the wall in my room, written in big bold letters "Boy, be ambitious!"

Games of the X Olympiad in Los Angeles

The pre-Olympic situation

Before I discuss the main subject, readers may be interested to know about the social, economic, and sports situation in Japan in the 1920s and 1930s as background.

The backbone of the Japanese economy then was agriculture and so-called light

industries, which depended mainly on the domestic market, but in the latter part of the 1920s this changed to heavy industries represented by steel, machinery, automobile, ship building, petroleum and chemical industries, which enjoyed the benefit of export trade in their products.

As a result, the standard of living of the average Japanese had gone up considerably, as people had more money and time to spend on leisure, pastimes and sports. This resulted in the increase of the number of athletes who could concentrate more on international sport competitions.

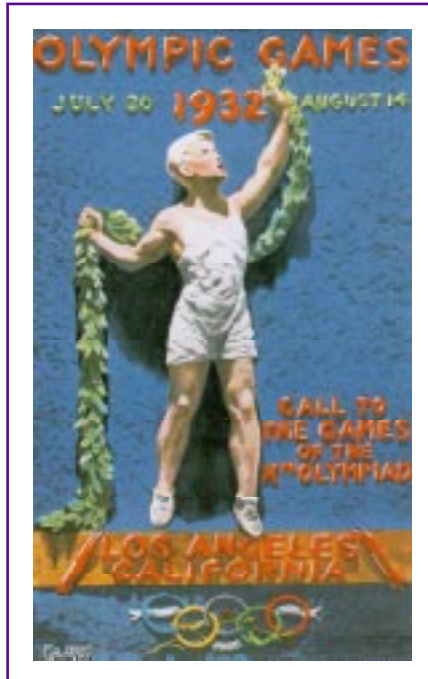
At the same time, the Japanese government, the ministry of education in particular, which controlled school education and physical education for youth, were very enthusiastic about promoting sport activities on an international scale and started to give financial assistance to the Japanese Olympic Committee, which was still suffering from a shortage of funds.

Consequently, Japan soon became the leading nation in Asia for modern sports. Japan was therefore preparing to send a big contingent of 192 athletes to the 1932 Olympic Games in Los Angeles, California, making this the largest delegation among the Asian nations.

Since there was no air service available between Tokyo and Los Angeles, we had to cross the Pacific by boat. The voyage took us 18 days, during which we swimmers could not practise. Anticipating the handicap, we were scheduled to stay one and a half months in Los Angeles prior to the Games to recover our top swimming form.

The Olympic Village

For the first time in the history of the modern Olympic Games, the organizing committee built an ideal Olympic Village in Beverly Hills, located in the outskirts of the city. Male athletes lived in about 550 independent cottages, each of which accommodated only four ath-



letes. Female athletes were accommodated separately from the male athletes, in the Chapman Park Hotel in the Wiltshire District of Los Angeles.

Inside the Olympic Village, there was a post office, a bank, a souvenir shop, a theatre, a fire station, a barber shop, etc., and four dining rooms serving different kinds of food, according to the taste of the different national teams. We Japanese had our own food prepared by Japanese cooks with materials brought from Japan.

The whole area was covered with a beautiful green lawn just like a huge green carpet. One early morning, I saw Paavo Nurmi, the famous distance runner from Finland, running naked and barefoot on the lawn, which was wet from the morning dew. Later, he was ousted from the Village over the dispute of his amateur status.

Nearly all of the people working in the Village were male and I noted that some of the Scandinavians called it the "Stag Party Village" since they could sunbathe half nude on the green lawn in the afternoons after their training.

I have participated in 14 Games of the Olympiad and 7 Olympic Winter Games and visited all the Villages of those Games, but for me, the one in Los Angeles remains the best in my memory, not because it was the first Olympic Village I had seen but because of its real qualities: clean air, no "smog", environmental quality, varied facilities, attendants; everything was perfect and wonderful, so that all the athletes seemed fully satisfied and enjoyed every minute of their stay.

The competitions

The rules for the programme of the swimming meetings at the Olympic Games in the 1930s were different from those of today, where there are preliminary heats in the morning and the swimmers are promoted by their times directly into the final race, which is held on the evening of the same day, followed by a victory ceremony at the swimming pool.

Contrary to the present system, in the 1920s and 1930s there were three-day programmes for each event: the first day for the preliminary heats, the second day for two semi-finals and the third day for the final. The victory ceremony was postponed until the closing day, the very last day of the Games. Day 1 of the 100m backstroke event was 10 August. There were four heats and I was in the first. Despite the fact it was my first Olympic experience, I remember being very calm before the race. The main reasons for this were that I was in peak condition during the training period, and we had sufficient information on other competitors from the different teams. I therefore had a certain confidence in myself before the race.

My timing (1'08"9) was a new Japanese national record, but could not beat the then World and Olympic record of 1:08.2 held by George Kojac of the United States, 1928 Olympic champion. On day two, after analyzing the com-

petitors in the four heats, I felt more confident about the upcoming races. I won the race, leading all the way with an improved time, but it was still 0.4 seconds short of Kojac's World record. My colleague Irie came in second place and Kawazu came in third, and we thus monopolized the all the Olympic medals for this event: the first time ever in the history of Japan's participation in the Olympic Games.

Coming out of the water after the race, we were surrounded by radio reporters and cameramen, but to my surprise I remained calm the whole time, not yet feeling the excitement and joy of my great accomplishment.

However, the next morning when I opened the daily papers and saw photographs of myself on the front pages with the headlines: "Japanese got 1, 2, 3 in swimming", all of a sudden I felt uncontrollable joy and remembered the Lord Byron's famous line "I woke up to find myself famous".

We three swimmers celebrated our success over a late breakfast!

The victory ceremony

The victory ceremonies were held on the closing day of the Games at the main stadium, where the medal presenting ceremonies for the various sport events were held, one after another.

We, Kiyokawa, Irie, and Kawazu, were waiting our turn, sitting under the stand of the stadium. Then came the announcement: "Olympic ceremony for the 100-metres backstroke for men". We were lead to the centre of the field. Then, another announcement was made in a different voice, in a more ceremonial tone: "C er monie olympique protocolaire. Olympic Victory Ceremony. Swimming. 100m backstroke for men. First place: Masaji Kiyokawa of Japan, 'Champion olympique.' Time: One minute eight seconds, sixth-tenths. Second place: Toshio Irie of Japan. Third place: Kentaro Kawazu of Japan." I stepped up onto the centre of the podi-

um, with Irie on my right and Kawazu on my left. The large Japanese national flag went up on the centre pole with smaller flags on each side; the Japanese national anthem played, and the noise in the stands quieted down. I felt it took an extraordinarily long time to complete our national anthem, during which we stood facing the flags.

All of a sudden, a standing ovation was given in the stands and a group of IOC members, headed by Comte Henri de Baillet-Latour, the President of the IOC, came forward, all in morning coats with their personal IOC badges, either wearing or holding their silk-hats. The IOC President handed over the gold medal to me, saying: "Congratulations." And I replied: "Thank you."

This certainly was my "golden Olympic moment".

(Note: both my colleagues Irie and Kawazu passed away many years ago. Irie suffered from heart trouble and died on 8 May 1974 in Takatsuki City, Osaka Prefecture. Kawazu was killed in an accident in Tokyo on 24 March 1970.)

Games of the XI Olympiad in Berlin

At the Games of the IX Olympiad in Los Angeles, the Japanese swimming team won five gold, five silver and two bronze medals out of six events in men's swimming (one of the five silver medals was won by a Japanese woman, Hideko Maehata, in the 200m breaststroke). The Japanese delegation as a whole won seven gold, seven silver and four bronze medals, which placed it seventh in the unofficial medal ranking world-wide.

This created a huge impact on the Japanese Olympic Committee and the authorities of the city of Tokyo, who were very eager to host the Games of the XII Olympiad in Japan in 1940, since the year coincided with the celebration of the 2,600th anniversary of the nation's founding.

At the same time, another factor mentioned earlier - the industrial revolution

in Japan - led to enormous growth in the economy, changing its basis from domestic industry to export industry, which contributed to the rapid expansion of the wealth of our nation, raising the level of potential support for the financial aspect of this large project.

For the Games of the XII Olympiad, there were three strong candidate cities: Tokyo, Rome and Helsinki. Which city would receive the honour of hosting the 1940 Games was to be decided at the IOC Session in Berlin in 1936, one week prior to the opening of the Games of the XI Olympiad. Japan decided to send the largest delegation ever to the Games in Berlin, 259 athletes, as a demonstration in support of Tokyo's election at the IOC Session.

I was appointed vice-captain of the delegation and also playing captain of our swimming team. Since there were no airway services between Tokyo and Berlin at that time, the Japanese delegation travelled by trans-Siberian railway, taking 18 days to reach our destination.

The condition and services of the railway were still rather poor, since only 18





Masaji Kiyokawa at the Games in Los Angeles in 1932.

years had passed since the Russian Revolution in 1917. We could still see the aftermath of the Revolution everywhere. Whenever the train stopped at a station,

poorly dressed boys and girls came up to the windows selling eggs and cucumbers. We stayed overnight in Moscow, and there we also noticed the shortage of food and daily necessities among the people. Russia did not send a delegation to the Games in Berlin.

Foreseeing those unfavourable conditions, we scheduled a one-month training period in Berlin before the Games started, which worked out well. Our swimmers quickly regained their condition and some even improved their times, reaching world-record levels within ten days after our arrival in Berlin.

As for myself, during practices I timed 1:06.0 for the 100m backstroke, which was better than the then Olympic and World record, and it seemed to me that I had a good chance of repeating the victory swim at the upcoming competition. However, all of a sudden, just one week prior to the first heat, my condition began to deteriorate and my times kept going down every day. In the final race, to my great disappointment, I finished in third place.

My coach told me after the race that I had been affected by the unforeseen pressures of my responsibilities as team leader. Although I personally missed the honour of a second gold medal in two consecutive Games, I was satisfied with the result of performances shown by the team as a whole, with four gold, two silver and five bronze medals out of six swimming events for men (one gold medal was won by Hideko Maehata in 200m breaststroke for women), for which I remember being very proud as the captain of our team.

As for the result of the election at the IOC Session, Tokyo was chosen to host the Games of the XII Olympiad in 1940. I call the Olympic Games in Berlin my "bronze Olympic moment".

Games of the XXIV Olympiad in Seoul

The *Olympic Charter* says: "At the victory ceremony, medals shall be presented

by the President of the IOC or a member elected by him."

I was coopted as a member of the IOC at its Session in Warsaw, Poland, in 1969, and since the Games of the XX Olympiad in Munich in 1972, thanks to the generous consideration of the Presidents of the IOC, I have received the honour of presenting the medals for the event I specialized in: the 100m backstroke for men.

In 1988 at the Games in Seoul, the event was won by a Japanese swimmer, Daichi Suzuki. The IOC President was kind enough to give me the honour of presenting him with the gold medal. I presume this was the first time in the history of the Olympic Games that an IOC member, who had won a gold medal 56 years earlier, presented the gold medal for the same event to a fellow countryman.

My greatest dream, for which I had been longing for many years, became a reality! This I would like to call my "ultimate Olympic moment"!

* Honorary IOC member. This article first appeared in the *Journal of Olympic History*, vol. 5, n.3 [official publication of the International Society of Olympic Historians (ISOH)].

