

What a wonderful day it was!

On 24 October 1968, we defeated the Mexican Olympic team 2-0 at the Azteca Stadium and secured third place in the Olympic football tournament at the Games of the XIX Olympiad in Mexico in 1968.

On 25 October in the Azteca Stadium I was on the platform, wearing the N° 19 jersey for the Japanese Olympic football team and waiting to receive a bronze medal from Sir Stanly Rous, president of FIFA. I was very proud and extremely happy because it was a historic moment for a Japanese football team to be awarded the bronze medal. Even in the Games of the XVIII Olympiad in Tokyo in 1964 we failed to reach the best eight, although we defeated Argentina 3-2 in one of the group matches. So, I had good reason to be very proud and extremely happy!

However, I must confess that I did not play a single match in the Mexico Olympic football tournament, because upon arrival in the Olympic Village in Mexico City, I was really a coach and not a player.

I hope that I will not be banned for writing this story!

After I arrived at the Olympic Village with our players, one of my good friends, who had formerly been a football coach and was at that time an official of the Mexican Football Association, came to my room to say hello. As we were chatting, he asked me why the Japanese Olympic team had only 18 players when 20 players could be registered. I explained that the Japanese Olympic Committee had decided that our team should not register 20 players because of the bad results we had had in the past Olympic Games.

He listened to me carefully and suddenly said that I must be registered as a player

by **Shun-ichiro Okano***



because the schedule of the tournament was tough and he could foresee injuries to players and so on. My friend insisted that I register so that our team would have one additional player available. He confirmed that I could still play even though I was a coach.

The next day, I discussed his kind proposal with my manager, Mr Nagahuma, who is now the president of the Japan Football Association, and he accepted the recommendation of my Mexican friend. The bronze medal and diploma are now proudly displayed in my living room.

This sort of thing could happen in 1968. There were no computers at that time, so my Mexican friend was able to add my registration on his own authority.

Even today, the Japanese Olympic Committee, which I served as secretary general for 14 years, does not recognize me as an Olympic medallist but both the IOC and the FIFA recognize me as one because I have a medal and a diploma. I am probably the only medallist in the world in such a unique position.

During our stay in the Olympic Village our team, including myself, had lots of fun, not only in the Village but also in town, where we enjoyed every minute of our stay because the Mexican people were very kind and friendly. I still look back with great pleasure on the enjoyable evening we had on the day after we received our bronze medals. We went to town to celebrate our victory. In a steak house called Lincoln Gaucho we drank a few bottles of beer. When we had finished them, a waiter brought more. I told him that we hadn't ordered them. He replied that a guest sitting at a nearby table had bought them for us to celebrate our victory over the Mexican team. I asked him whether the guest was a foreigner or a Mexican. He answered that he was a Mexican!

It is my firm belief that sport is a universal culture, and that people throughout the world can understand each other through sport. This conviction stems from my experience as a member of the Japanese national student football team at the Internationale Hochschule Sportswoche organized by the FISU in Dortmund, Germany, in the summer of 1953. It was my first trip abroad, almost 45 years abroad.

At that time there were no jets making direct flights between Europe and Japan. I remember very well how many stops there were between Tokyo and Frankfurt. Our aircraft was a DC-6B with four reciprocating engines, and the itinerary was Tokyo - Okinawa - Taipei - Hong Kong - Manila - Bangkok - Calcutta - Karachi - Tel Aviv - Cairo - Rome - Zurich - Frankfurt: a total of 10 stops between Tokyo and Frankfurt! The total flying time was almost 60 hours. I am sure that today's generation cannot imagine such a journey.

Immediately after the opening ceremony a football game was played between West Germany and Japan before a massive crowd at the Rote Erde Stadion in Dortmund. I imagine the reason why we were invited to play against the host country was that the organizers thought that Japan would prove to be a weak opponent. and that the West German team would easily win their opening game. However, our team was not as weak as they had imagined and we gave them a hard time.

The West German team scored first. We drew level and then gained a 2- lead. The West German team then made the score 2-2 and moved into a 3-2 lead. We then scored another equalizer. but eventually ended up 3-4 and lost. It was a really exciting and good match,

even though we did not win. After taking a shower in the locker room, we - 17 players in all - went to the dining room of the Athletes' Village. Before entering the dining room I could hear the voices of athletes and officials who were chatting and enjoying their meals. As soon as we walked in, all the athletes and officials, who came from all over the world. suddenly stopped talking. Silence reigned throughout the room. We could not understand what was happening and just stood still in front of the door. Suddenly, everyone who was in the dining room rose and gave us a standing ovation.

It was a moving moment which I will cherish for the rest of my life. It was also the moment when I learned to appreciate the wonders of sport. I had not met

any of these people before. They came from different continents. They had different languages, different religions and played different sports. Even so, they realized what we had achieved on the football field, and with their applause showed their respect and friendship. Yes, sport can overcome barriers of race, language, religion and ideology, and it can make everybody friends! It was also at that moment that I made up my mind to devote myself to sport in the future. It was a hot and beautiful summer evening in 1953.

The athlete's badge is also proudly displayed in my living room, together with the bronze medal and diploma of the Games of the XIX Olympiad in Mexico.

*IOC member in Japan.



Shun-ichiro Okano (first from the left) and his bronze medal-winning teammates at the Games in Mexico.