

Visiting a Centre of Gateball Excellence

Recently I had the opportunity to visit a "Gateball Centre of Excellence" at Ogaki which focuses on developing the skills and tactical knowledge of young people. Their ages ranged from about ten years of age to High School Students. It was arranged by Mr Keiichi Imagawa of the World Gateball Union because he knows of my interest in coaching Juniors. Accompanying Jim and I was a friend, Mr Paul Salisbury. Originally from the UK, Paul is a croquet player with a minus handicap. He has been very interested in playing Gateball and has been playing for the short time he has lived in Nagoya. Despite the language barrier he has managed to develop into a very good player but trying to learn the tactics when you don't speak Japanese is very difficult.

The centre at Ogaki is located in a small sporting complex about one hour by car from Nagoya. The surrounding area is quiet and semi-rural that is quite different from surrounding big cities. Contained within an aircraft hangar type of structure, the two courts are artificial, sand based ones that allow Gateball games and practice to go on during all types of weather. It is owned by a non-profit organisation.



This is quite a different environment to what we have experienced so far in Japan where crushed gravel is the normal surface. By the end of the session, I was "sold" on the idea of this surface because of its reliability.

The coach who runs this facility is Mr Takayuki Ohno who is renowned for his excellence as a coach of Junior Players. He has coached winning junior teams to many successful wins at the annual competition for Japanese High Schools. As a famous coach throughout all of Japan, he seems very humble, thoughtful and has great rapport with these young teenage players. Once or twice a week he and several other team members provide coaching at this Gateball centre.

Every summer there is a Junior Gateball Competition. Last year there were 21 teams competing in the Junior Boys' Group (boys aged 15-18) and 24 teams competing in the Junior Girls' Group (girls aged 15-18). However, in the competition for Boys and Girls under 15 there were 48 teams! As you could expect, this big group of youthful players will certainly expand the quality of the game in the future.

Recently, Mr Ohno travelled to Guangzhou, China, to coach his team which is the number 1 Junior Japanese Team. He is quoted as saying that he thinks the Chinese skill level is the best in the world at present. Despite not reaching the finals, his team of young players were able to experience competition at a very high level. Another feature of this competition Mr Ohno reported upon was the standard of Refereeing by the Chinese Referees. Even more interesting was the fact that these Referees do not play Gateball.

While in Nagoya playing at Paul's local court, situated under the huge freeway, we met two young men who showed great skill and knowledge. One of them, we were told, worked at the Toyota Company. He was a member of the Young Gateball team that represents Toyota. Much like other sports in Japan, teams from the companies compete against each other instead of playing in amateur clubs that we have in Australia.



After this visit, I have been convinced that young players turn into superb Gateball players with the right combination of skills, tactics and motivation. Softly spoken, unassuming but oh, so ruthless on the court, these Japanese high school boys will lead the way for Japan to fight back to regain first place in World Gateball rankings if they keep developing the way they are going.

No opposition ball is safe even on the edge of the court. Setting up gate and touches accurately from the opposite side of the court is literally 'child's play'. To attack the opponents requires effortless slide-touches that takes their ball way across the court. You can see it coming but there is nothing you can do to avoid being a target. Also, they never put their own ball or their team members' ball out of the court. How good it would be if Mr Ohno could bring such a group of young players to Australia as well as conduct master classes for coaches to demonstrate some of his successful coaching techniques!

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