

Gateball Games in Japan

During a three-week visit to visit our family in Tokyo, we managed to play three full days in three separate places. Of course it is not wise to play Gateball in cold weather in Japan, but Jim and I were rugged up, grateful that some places play even if the Celsius temperature is in single figures.

Our first event was a Triples competition held at Adachi for the local clubs. World Gateball Director, Mr. Keiichii Imagawa, Jim and I made one team out of the ten teams that played that day. We were most fortunate because there were fifteen teams vying for entry. Triples games have grown so much in popularity that a competition between local clubs is now held for one day every month. It was explained to us that it was easier to get three or four people of similar standard available to play as compared to the five to six needed for teams events.



As we have experienced before, we were warmly welcomed at both the Opening and Closing Ceremony. Our team won the first two games but in the third game came up against members of an Adachi team who have played in Australia. We lost that game in a close finish. Considering we were combining as a team for the first time on this cinders surface, we were happy with our result. Also, we had the opportunity to referee a game and, by request, used English for the communications.

From my point of view, apart from the tactics and concept of a Triples Event, two interesting concepts came from this event. Two teams in the event were comprised of people with hearing disabilities. We played one of the teams. They were so excited to meet up with people from Australia and to be able to play against us while sharing in the common language of Gateball. They also refereed games. It seems that there are quite a large number of teams throughout Japan with members who have a hearing disability. There is a special, National competition just for them. In addition, there is a similar competition for people who are confined to wheelchairs. The referee helps to set the ball for a variation in the skill of 'sparking'. Have we in Australia ever considered taking Gateball to people who have physical impairments such as I have described?

Our next Gateball day was in Shiojiri in the highlands of Central Honshu. Catching an 8 a.m. fast train from Shinjuku station, we sped past Mt. Fuji in the distance, past broad expanses of cities and then mountainous country villages and through long tunnels snaking into the heart of the main island of Honshu. With wine barrels featured at the station and the countryside all around being vineyards, Shiojiri is famous for its white wine. Close to the famous city of Matsumoto with its castle and snow covered mountains, it was very cold with snow lying on the 3 outdoor courts. However, we were playing inside a huge, covered area sheltered from the chilly

winds. A friendly kerosene fire valiantly tried to warm up the interior. Previously, we have played inside a similar structure but which had an artificial grass surface. This one had two courts with dirt floor surfaces that were quite acceptable and better than some grass surfaces we have played on. Between the courts were enough comfortable chairs and tables able to accommodate fifty or so people and several more heaters.

From eleven a.m. to five p.m. we played with barely a break between games except to have a very delicious lunch and afternoon tea. Homemade delicacies were shared with us as we sampled local vegetables and fruit. Our host, Mr. Kakuzaki, from Sunshine Ace Company, demonstrated his excellent slide/ touch skills and was eager to keep us informed as to the tactics being used. It was hard to keep count but perhaps we played 8 games altogether - some doubles but mostly team games. So keen were they to play that one couple traveled about an hour to join us. This couple manage a similar, bigger facility with four indoor courts. Winters are bleak and cold in this region. Local governments want people to be active and socialize all year round so funding is provided for such centers, we were told.

Sadly, we left this venue and its cheery people. We were tired from having had such an early start at 6:30, but exhilarated by the dedication and enthusiasm of this group of players who would not wish to have more than five minutes break between games. We learned also that there was another type of competition that might be hard to replicate in Australia. It is a team competition where there must be three generations playing in the one team. Mr. Kakuzaki was a member of the team that won the competition for that category in that region of Japan. So his family including his six-year-old daughter will compete in the All Japan Championships for three-generation teams. In addition, his nine-year-old son plays in his school team.

Just a few days later we experienced another incredible day of Gateball. During my time working in Tokyo, 2010 -11, I played Association Croquet in the Japan Open Championships. There I met up with Mr. Paul Salisbury (on a sub zero handicap) originally from the UK, who demolished all of us to win the title for 2010. Presently living in Nagoya with his delightful wife, teenage son and daughter, we quickly discovered our common interest in playing Gateball as well as traditional croquet. He had hosted us previously on a visit to Nagoya so, for this visit he introduced us to another group in the area who play at Chiryu close to the city of Toyota.

The most striking feature of this group is their nationality. The players are young men and women who have Brazilian / Japanese ancestry. Their club called Brasil Gateball club (www.brasilclub.org) The contact person was Mr. Kimura who was a lively, gracious host sharing his jokes and rhythmic movements with us. Don't let their relaxed nature fool you, is what we discovered.

Paul, his son Joe, Jim and I played against them in game one. We made a promising start to secure a lead, and set up our balls away from danger near our next gate – Gate 3. It seemed they were safe on the edges of the court. However, the extraordinary skills they have perfected includes the jump /touch. Accurate to within centimeters on the cinder surface, one player was able to reach our balls from the opposite edge of the court near Gate 2. We lost control of the gate, then the game by 13- 10.

Needless to say, we mixed up the teams after that. Our games went from 10:30 until

3:00 p.m. A delivery of Brazilian pizzas arrived for lunch and we enjoyed that plus hot coffee on this very cold day. It was great fun indeed. One of these young men was celebrating his 27th birthday that day. Proudly showing photos of his squad, an older gentleman arrived after lunch. This Brasil Club team won the All Japan Club competition. Obviously they are excellent players, full of laughter and friendship towards us visitors from overseas.

Many photos were taken, (see the Brasil Club blog) many gifts were exchanged and more games played before we finished off with coffee at a local coffee shop. During the course of the day we realized how invaluable were their range of skills and their precision in ball placements for skills such as slide/touches, jump/touches and 'super touches' that we call gate/touch or touch/gate. We will always remember their camaraderie, laughter and sheer enjoyment of playing the game in a really sporting atmosphere.



That concluded our three diverse days of Gateball. Using a Japan Rail Pass purchased in Australia before departure, we used the Shinkansen (bullet train) and local very fast trains to cover long distances in a short space of time at a very reasonable price. We would heartily recommend this way of touring Japan - sightseeing, playing Gateball and meeting like-minded, friendly people. We readily acknowledge that with such marvelous friends as Imagawa-San, Kakuzaki-San and Paul, we are very fortunate and greatly appreciate their organization of these visits.