

News From Under the Southern Cross (Edition 53): The Australian Open

28 January 2022

Last week, on a trip to Melbourne, I was fortunate enough to watch the Australian Open for the first time. Here is my report from this event.



Rod Laver Arena, the main court for the Australian Open

(Source: Victoria State Government website)

1. Controversy over vaccine

The issue of Novak Djokovic's visa cancellation and deportation from Australia featured on the front page of newspapers for many days, and has become a topic of conversation in Australia as well as in Japan.

Some Australians are questioning why Mr Djokovic's visa was granted in the first place, or whether there was sufficient communication between Tennis Australia, the Victorian Government and the Australian Border Force. Even so, the Federal Government's response was supported by more than 70 per cent of Australians.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison said that “no special treatment has been given just because he is a famous tennis player” and “rules are rules”, while others argued that “Australians have all made sacrifices because of coronavirus, so we have to work together to keep Australia safe”. These arguments seem quite persuasive to me.



A tweet from Prime Minister Morrison

2. Come on, Naomi

In light of all this, I was determined to throw my support behind the defending champion, OSAKA Naomi, who came to Melbourne after getting vaccinated.



Sitting with my wife alongside Consul-General SHIMADA Junji and his wife
at the match with OSAKA Naomi

On the invitation of the Victorian Commissioner to Japan, Mr Adam Cunneen, my wife and I, along with the Consul-General of Japan in Melbourne SHIMADA Junji and his wife received the precious opportunity to watch and cheer on OSAKA Naomi in her round three match on 21 January.

The match against up-and-coming Amanda Anisimova from the United States definitely kept us on the edge of our seats. OSAKA Naomi was able to clinch match points, but suffered an unexpected defeat in the tie-breaker.



OSAKA Naomi

3. Powerful tennis and Australian-style cheering

Despite this, the chance to see the match up close made a deep impression on me; the discipline and training that goes into physically preparing for a tournament; the sheer number of spectacular volleys, shots and serves delivered; and the clash of power which demonstrates the endless training these athletes have undergone. To me, who has only played social tennis during my university years, these fiery rallies were absolutely awe-inspiring.

One other thing which left a strong impression on me was the audience's way of cheering. During

the match, I heard “Come on, Naomi!” from the Australian tennis fans so many times! Being cheered even louder than her American opponent, every time OSAKA Naomi executed one of her eye-popping bullet-like serves or sharp shots, she shouted “Come on!” to herself. I felt that she was coming back even stronger.

Yet as OSAKA’s opponent proved more determined to seize the ultimate prize, regrettably the match ended in a loss for OSAKA. Nevertheless, watching OSAKA Naomi receive heartwarming applause and cheers from the audience as she exited the court, I can see that she will be hugely successful in next year’s tournament.

4. The atmosphere of the Australian Open

Something which I also found impressive was the atmosphere of the Australian Open. To avoid the scorching sun of Melbourne in midsummer, quite a few matches only start at 7 PM. When this happens, matches can continue until the middle of the night. Naturally, the area around the arena is filled with energy and vibrancy all day, like a festival.

Inside the arena, there is a restaurant run by the representative high-grade winemaker of Australia from South Australia, Penfolds. There you can eat meals accompanied with premium wines, then watch the tennis, which is such a luxurious custom. There, I felt the degree of affinity that this tennis-loving country has for the game.



Melbourne Park, where the Australian Open takes place (at the back right is Rod Laver Arena)

(Source: Victoria State Government website)

5. The inspiration I received from young athletes

When I was lecturing at a graduate school of the University of Tokyo, I often heard the criticism that, “Japanese youth are too passive, they avoid learning overseas”. Indeed, the number of Japanese students going overseas has fallen. Without a doubt, students surely take the question of cost-effectiveness into account. Some attribute it to the generation gap.

However, what is the situation like in the sporting world? Those athletes who are always aiming for higher leagues go boldly out into the world – OSAKA Naomi in tennis, OHTANI Shohei in baseball, MATSUYAMA Hideki in golf, MINAMINO Takumi in soccer, to name just a few.

When I look at the young athletes who go up against the best in the world without hesitation, I feel a strong sense of inspiration that crosses generations. Of course, my job in diplomacy and the job of an athlete are worlds apart, and there is no question that someone engaged in diplomacy must go overseas. However, I am reminded of the importance of ‘giving it your best shot’ and, for this, I express my sincere respect and gratitude to these athletes.

OSAKA Naomi, thank you and I am waiting for you to play in next year’s tournament!

YAMAGAMI Shingo