

News From Under the Southern Cross (Edition 62):

Rugby — Bringing Australia and Japan Together

15 March 2022

In these dark days, when we can hardly turn our gloomy thoughts from the news coming out of Ukraine, please allow me to tell a somewhat brighter story, which should cheer you up.

1. The Brumbies' signing of two Japanese players

The Brumbies are one of the top rugby union teams in Australia and beyond, based in Canberra. The men's team is the three-time champion of Super Rugby, a competition currently made up of the top teams from Australia, New Zealand and Fiji. They became champions in 2001, 2004 and then in 2020, and half of the 35 players also play for the Wallabies, representing Australia in international competitions. The women's team is also one of the giants in Super W, the top league for women's rugby union in Australia. Although it is a word not many Japanese are familiar with, the team name refers to "wild horses".



Canberra Stadium with the Brumbies' mascot

And what a surprise! It is to the Brumbies' formidable women's team that two Japanese players have been signed. They are Ms FURUTA Mana and Ms LAVEMAI Makoto, both from Fukuoka Prefecture and current members of Japan's national team. On Saturday 5 March, amid heavy

rain, I dashed over to Canberra's stadium to cheer them on.

2. Links to Japan

This might be something well-known to rugby fans, but there are actually many links between the Brumbies and Japan.

Eddie Jones, former Head Coach of Japan's national team – whose great contribution to the country culminated in leading the team to a historic victory against South Africa in the 2015 Rugby World Cup – was also the Head Coach of the Brumbies from 1998 until 2002.

Furthermore, Scott Fardy, who played in Kamaishi (a city in the Tohoku region of Japan) from 2009 to 2012, and gave great encouragement to the region ravaged by the Great East Japan Earthquake, also played for the Brumbies from 2012 until 2017.



Scott Fardy helping out after the Great East Japan Earthquake, March 2011

(source: MOFA website)

Because of these historic bonds, the Japanese community in Canberra was thrilled to know that two Japanese players have joined the Brumbies.

3. Rugby in Australia

This is actually something I did not know well about Australia before coming to the country. While in Japan, where Australia has a reputation for being a rugby super power, I had imagined every park in Australia to be filled with children playing the game, practicing their kicks and passes.

However, in reality it is not that simple. Rugby must compete with other popular sports such as

cricket, AFL (Australian Rules football) and soccer. What's more, what confuses many Japanese people is the fact that there are two codes of rugby in Australia – Rugby League and Rugby Union – both with different rules.

My understanding is that, in the former code, emphasis is placed on the continuation of play, so that when players are tackled, the ball is reset on the ground and the opposition steps back to signal a sort of 'confirmation' before play is allowed to restart.

The rugby code played in Japan is the latter – Rugby Union – and the Brumbies are one of the rugby union teams.

I asked about the popularity of Rugby Union in Australia, and I was told that, at one point, it faced a slump, but that its popularity is now steadily recovering. When you look at each team's line-up, there are players from not only Australia, but also from Fiji, Tonga, Samoa and many Pacific Island nations, which gives you a sense of the closeness between Australia and these countries.

4. The 2019 Rugby World Cup

While rooting for the Brumbies at the stadium, I met with many eminent people and Brumbies fans, including ACT Chief Minister Andrew Barr and Director of the Australian War Memorial Matt Anderson.

During our pleasant conversations, some referenced the 2019 Rugby World Cup, which Japan hosted. They mentioned praises for the orderly running of the games by the Japanese organisers, the fairness of Japanese supporters, and the excellent performances of the Japanese national team. Something that I have frequently felt in the diplomatic world is that sports will always prove influential. There is no doubt that being active in major sports strengthens a nation's presence on the international stage.



Japanese players tackling an Irish player



Japan supporters



Meeting between volunteers for the games

(Source: White Paper on Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology)

5. Expecting a rampage

And now, for the crucial match. Befitting the team name, at many points during the game, a loud neighing sound was played across the field, bringing a smile to my face.



FURUTA Mana on the stadium screen



An attack by FURUTA Mana (centre)

I decided to stay on after the women's match to watch the men's game. Just as I expected from a Super Rugby giant, I felt overwhelmed by their remarkable power and speed.

The Women's Rugby World Cup is due to take place in New Zealand in the latter half of this year. It is my hope that Ms FURUTA and Ms LAVEMAI will gain valuable experience playing in the Brumbies, and again take the world by surprise with their outstanding performances.



With LAVEMAI Makoto (left) and FURUTA Mana (right)

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