

## News From Under the Southern Cross (Edition 66):

### World Cup Qualifiers – Japan vs Australia

6 April 2022

Alright! Japan has secured itself a place at the World Cup in Qatar. As I was fortunate enough to cheer on the team at Stadium Australia, I am presenting my report from that event.



The match took place at Stadium Australia, which was the main venue for the Sydney 2000 Olympics.

#### 1. A crucial match

Needless to say, this was very much a decisive game. The reason being that, in Group B of the Asian Qualifiers, Saudi Arabia was ranked first (with 19 points), Japan second (with 18 points) and Australia third (on 15 points) just before the game. As Japan's success would see it locked in for an appearance in Qatar, this was a must-win match for Australia.

Incidentally, Japan ranks 23<sup>rd</sup> in the world of soccer, and Australia ranks 37<sup>th</sup>. Japan has a track record of 10 wins, 9 losses and 7 draws in matches against Australia. The past ten years have seen Japan gaining the upper hand – with 5 wins and 3 draws over Australia – yet both countries continue to be Asian soccer powerhouses competing for regional supremacy.

## 2. Japanese soccer – a cut above the rest

In Australia, Japan's soccer is regarded as a cut above the rest. This is not just because (as I mentioned above) Japan has won a number of the recent games over Australia, but also because a fair few famous Japanese players have also played in local Australian teams.

This includes MIURA Kazuyoshi, ONO Shinji, TASHIRO Yuzo and HONDA Keisuke – I simply cannot list them all! In [Edition 46 of my News From Under the Southern Cross](#), I introduced Mr TASHIRO Yuzo, a former Samurai Blue (Japanese international) player who founded Mate FC, a football club in Sydney which is gaining popularity. A few days before the match, Mr TASHIRO invited his club's young players to watch a Samurai Blue training session and many children turned up, making the event a huge success.



A group photo at a Samurai Blue training session a few days before the match.

(Source: Japan Football Association)

## 3. The kindness of the Japan Football Association and Football Australia

It was thanks to the kindness of the Japanese and Australian football associations that I was able to watch Japan and Australia battling for the coveted tickets to Qatar in a decisive match

that attracted almost 42,000 spectators.

I was invited to the match by the Chairman of Football Australia, Mr Chris Nikou, whom I first met while cheering on the Matildas in their match against the United States in December last year.

And, from the President of the Japan Football Association, who had flown over from Japan, I was overjoyed to receive my very own personalised Samurai Blue jersey. I immediately changed my shirt – and in doing so, switched gears, ready to cheer on the Japanese team.



With the President of Japan Football Association, Mr TASHIMA Kohzo



With the Chairman of Football Australia, Mr Chris Nikou, and Consul-General in Sydney KIYA Masahiko

#### 4. Duties as an Ambassador

Due to my position, at first I hesitated at the thought of cheering loudly as if I were at Kashima Stadium in Ibaraki Prefecture or Ajinomoto Stadium in Tokyo. On top of this, in my seat in the VIP section, I was conscious of the eyes and ears of those around me.

So, just as I donned my Samurai Blue uniform, I made sure to wind a Socceroos scarf around my neck to emphasise my support for friendly relations between Japan and Australia.

Before the match when a Federal MP was teasing me by saying, “Australia will definitely win”, I had to respond with, “But wouldn’t it be nice if Japan and Australia could participate in the World Cup together?” – the reply of a model student of diplomacy. Sometimes, it isn’t easy to be an Ambassador.

### 5. The match begins

All this aside, once we had sung the Japanese National Anthem and the match had begun, I began shouting myself hoarse to support Samurai Blue alongside Consul-General in Sydney KIYA and the other Japanese nationals around me.

Because of how important this match was, Samurai Blue also received some booing from the home crowd. When Japanese players were tackled and fell over, Aussies sitting in front of me thought these were 'player simulation' (attempting to exaggerate the effect of a tackle) and heckled them again and again, shouting 'get up!' Without thinking, I replied by shouting something like, "a foul is a foul!" (albeit in Japanese). My apologies.

It was a nail-biting match, with both teams coming desperately close, but not a single goal scored until the second half was almost over. In the end, Japan kicked two goals to secure an invigorating victory.



Half time at Stadium Australia

### 6. What makes Australia wonderful

I learned a few things watching this edge-of-your-seat match.

The first thing I learned is about fair play. While this was a match where emotions ran high,

there was no sign of dirty fouls.

The second is about the attitude of the Australian supporters. While I was posted in London, I remember hearing “c-words”, “f-words” and all kinds of colourful language thrown around in Premier League matches – a world apart from the atmosphere of Stadium Australia.

The third is about the reaction after the match. In the past, in certain countries, Japanese diplomats’ vehicles were surrounded and damaged, and Japanese restaurants were pelted with rocks. But in Sydney, many Australians reacted by saying, “congratulations, Japan” and “this result reflects the ability of both teams”.

Even while I was being interviewed by a Japanese TV reporter outside of the stadium, I was struck by a heart-warming, encouraging message from an Aussie lady – a total stranger – who called out to me to say “congratulations”. With this, I found myself saying “Japan and Australia really have an ideal relationship – we cooperate on security, support each other economically, and compete together in sports”.

Next year, Australia and New Zealand will co-host the Women’s FIFA World Cup. I am looking forward to seeing Nadeshiko, the Japan’s national women’s team, fight some fierce battles in front of a refined crowd of Australian soccer fans.

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