

News From Under the Southern Cross (Edition 75):

Leaping ‘Gullivers’

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At last, my dearest wish has come true. I was able to see a game of the famous AFL (Australian Football League) live at a stadium. Please allow me to give my report from this event.



The oval in Manuka, Canberra, where I watched the game

1. A “Cool” Gesture from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT)

The question I am always asked when I meet with Australian friends is “Shingo, you’ve seen an AFL match, right?”

I do not think it’s an overstatement to say that AFL has the same status in Australia as the MLB (baseball) and NFL (American football) do in the United States, and the Premier League (soccer) has in the United Kingdom. It certainly is a sport representative of Australia, and it also has a large number of wildly enthusiastic fans.

I was very happy to be invited to an AFL match in Canberra between the Sydney-based GWS Giants and the Geelong Cats (from a city in Victoria). It was the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT)'s Office of the Pacific who invited me. What a "cool" gesture!

The High Commissioner of Fiji (my cycling friend), the High Commissioner of Papua New Guinea, a diplomat from the British High Commission and I all gathered at the oval in Canberra's Manuka buoyed by excitement.

2. What is AFL?

The term 'Australian Football' probably doesn't click with many Japanese people. If I describe it as a sport where brawny men in sleeveless uniforms run around in cross between soccer and rugby, there might be some who then say 'ah, that one'.

It was my first time watching a game, but I found the rules extremely simple to grasp. It is a competition between teams to pass the ball through a mixture of kicking and handballs (holding the ball in one hand and punching it across with the other) and to kick it between high goalposts. With one goal awarding 6 points, the winner is the team who can get more points.



The ground size is bigger than those of most other sports.



Kicking the ball through the taller inside posts will result in 6 points.

Out of 22 players on each team, 18 will play on the field, therefore 36 players in total will enter the field to contend for the ball. The highlight is when the ball is kicked and players jump up to catch it. The play even becomes acrobatic sometimes, such as when a player leaps up and puts both knees on his opponent's shoulders to catch the ball.



Players sometimes even jump onto their opponents' shoulders to catch a kicked ball

Tackles are allowed above the knee and below the shoulder

(Photos taken from a [video](#) on the Australian Football League Japan website.)

3. Packing a Punch

The offense and defence changed quickly and frequently, and points were scored again and again, so I did not feel the same stress that I do when watching soccer matches, where goals are rarely scored. What's more, when there was such fierce competition for the ball as it flew through the air, and tackles were allowed above the knee and below the shoulder, the intense, high-contact play was full to the brim with appeal.



Giants vs Cats game that we watched on 8 May (the Giants' main sponsor is TOYO TIRES)

Even in seats a little further back from the field, the players' towering physiques stood out. The field was packed with players running around who easily stood at 185 cm, or even close to 2 metres. I also heard that running 20km in the space of

one match is fairly common.

For these players, not only is it necessary to be tough to withstand the high-contact play, they must also have the agility to run quickly around the field, and the stamina to keep running for a long time. In particular, kicks are used not only to score goals, but also to pass between teammates, meaning that accuracy is vital and players must be able to kick with both feet. Besides, unlike American football, players don't wear protective gear, so injuries to the knee and shoulder are an unavoidable part of the sport.

Surely there can't be a sport tougher than AFL. While enjoying watching the game, I thought to myself "this is a match contested between Gullivers!" (the giant main character of *Gulliver's Travels*) I hasten to add that, in Australia there is a women's AFL league too.

4. Regional Characteristics

What I found interesting is that, out of all of Australia, AFL has flourished the most in Victoria. This is because league was formed there in the 1850s during the colonial period and afterwards took hold in the southern states of South Australia, Western Australia and Tasmania.

Currently, both New South Wales and Queensland have two teams each in the AFL. However, if anything, rugby is more popular in these states. Whichever way you put it, Victoria takes centre stage in AFL, with ten teams participating. These idiosyncrasies between respective regions in Australia are something I have only come to understand since living here.

The Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG) in Victoria's capital is the 'sacred ground' of AFL. The MCG's capacity is a whopping 100,000 people! I can already imagine the cheering of the crowd like the rumbling of the earth, as the 'Gullivers' leap for the ball, vying for a kick.



The MCG on the day of the AFL finals (Source: Australian Football League Japan website)

5. A Great Sporting Nation

From a Japanese perspective, we regard Australia as a country of great swimmers and rugby players. Of course, this was the case in the swimming events at the Tokyo 2020 Olympics, when Australia achieved great results in the pool. I have heard people tell me about swimming, “we practice in school from a young age, so there’s no one in Australia who cannot swim”.

At the same time, I have also heard from many Australians that “the best summer sport is cricket, and the best winter sport is AFL”. Indeed, the most athletic children are drawn to AFL. In Japan, perhaps it would be the equivalent of baseball, which has continued to produce sporting greats who have left us with impressive records and memories, such as SUZUKI Ichiro and OTANI Shohei.

At any rate, when watching AFL up close, you can see its incredible force! I can guarantee that anyone who sees it will think “Australia is not to be underestimated.”

So then I asked my host from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade who kindly and precisely explained everything to me, “If we bring a delegation from a country who rely on coercion and intimidation to an AFL game, they must think twice, mustn’t they?” And I saw in the way my host nodded and burst into laughter the toughness of this country, mingling with the quiet pride of an Aussie.

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