

MY OLYMPIC GOLDEN MOMENT

“SWIMMING INTO HISTORY”

BY MASAJI KIYOKAWA, HONORARY MEMBER OF THE IOC

1. AMSTERDAM OLYMPIAD (1928)

My first association with the Olympic Movement, particularly with the Olympic Games, goes way back to the year of 1928 when the Games of the IXth Olympiad were held in Amsterdam, Netherlands.

At these Games, a Japanese swimmer named Yoshiyuki Tsuruta won a gold medal in the 200-metres breaststroke event for men, the first gold medal ever won by a Japanese swimmer.

This was a big surprise for me, 15 years of age at that time and an unknown local high school swimmer. “Even a Japanese swimmer can win a gold medal in the Olympic Games!” This motivated me to hope to become a swimmer representing my country at the next Games, but not necessarily meaning to win a gold medal at that time.

In the meantime, after seeing Japanese swimmers winning one gold, one silver, and one bronze medal at the Amsterdam Games, the Japanese Amateur Swimming Federation, the controlling body of swimming in Japan, established a bold policy: to win all swimming events for men in the Los Angeles Olympic Games in 1932.

By the way, the number of swimming events for men in the Olympic programmes in 1920s and 1930s was only six: 100 m. Freestyle, 400 m. Freestyle, 1,500 m. Freestyle, 100 m. Backstroke, 200 m. Breaststroke and 4x200 m. Freestyle relay, compared with the expanded number of sixteen of today. The Federation lost no time in proceeding with its new aggressive programme, recruiting young talented swimmers from all over the country and for the first time in

the history of Japanese swimming, the Federation ran training camps under the leadership of national coaches for about 50 young hopefuls. I was lucky enough to be included in this group.

Although this was the first attempt of this kind by the Federation, it worked out well and within two years’ time, about twenty boys, ages varying between 14 and 18, reached nearly the level of the then world records in many events. As for myself, my records also had improved immensely and I was ranked No. 1 in the national ranking list for the backstroke event.

In 1931, one year prior to the Los Angeles Games, the Japanese Federation held the “First Edition of Dual Swimming Meets” between Japanese and USA teams. The American swimming team was the leading team of world swimming then, winning the majority of medals at the last three Olympic Games.

However, to the amazement of the world swimming people, the Japanese team had beaten the US team with a total score of 40 vs 23 points.

I took part in this international meeting for the first time in my career to swim against foreigners and was very lucky to come in second place in the 200 m. back-stroke event and in third place in the 100 m. backstroke event.

The result of this meeting gave the Japanese Swimming Federation a lot of confidence to challenge other nations in the Olympic Games to be held the following year at Los Angeles, and so did it for me as well.

I recall putting my “Motto” up on the wall in my room, written in big bold letters: “Boy, Be Ambitious!”

2. LOS ANGELES OLYMPIAD (1932)

A. Pre-Olympic Situation:

Before going into the main subject, readers might be interested to know the situation of social, economic, and sports in Japan in the 1920s and 1930s as a background story.

The construction of the Japanese economy then was agriculture and so called “light industries”, mainly depending on the domestic market, but in the later part of the 1920s, it had changed into “heavy industries” represented by steel, machinery, automobile, ship building, petroleum and chemical industries, which could enjoy the benefit of export trade of these products.

As the result, the level of the living standard of the average Japanese had gone up considerably, thus giving the people more money and time to be spent on leisure, pastime and sports. This resulted in the increase of the number of athletes who could now concentrate more on international sport competitions.

At the same time, the Japanese Government, particularly the Ministry of Education which controlled school education and physical education for youth, was very enthusiastic to promote sport activities in international stages and started to give financial assistance to the Japanese Olympic Committee which was still suffering from shortage of funds.

As the result, Japan eventually became the leading nation in Asia for modern sports.

Under the circumstances, Japan was preparing to send a big contingent, numbering 192 athletes, which was the largest delegation among the Asian nations, to the 1932 Olympic Games to be held in Los Angeles, California.

Since there were no air trip services available between Tokyo and Los Angeles, we had to cross the Pacific by boat. This sea voyage took us 18 days during which we swimmers could not practice in water. Anticipating this handicap, we were scheduled to stay one and a half months in Los Angeles prior to the Games to recover our lost swimming form.

B. Olympic Village:

For the first time in the history of the Modern Olympic Games, the Organizing Committee of the Los Angeles Games had built an ideal “Olympic Village” at Beverly Hills located in the outskirts of the city. Male athletes lived in about 550 independent cottages, each of which accommodated only four athletes. Female athletes were accommo-

dated, separately from the male athletes, in the Chapman Park Hotel in the Wiltshire District of Los Angeles.

Inside the Olympic Village, there were a post office, bank, souvenir shop, theater, fire station, barber shop, etc., and four dining rooms serving different kinds of food according to the taste of the different national teams. We, Japanese, had our own food prepared by Japanese cooks with materials brought from Japan.

The whole area was covered with a beautiful green lawn just like a huge green carpet. One early morning, I saw Paavo Nurmi, famous distance runner of Finland, running naked and bare-footed on the lawn, wet from morning dew. Later, he was ousted from the Village by the IOC due to the issue of his amateur status.

Nearly all of the people working in the Village were male and I noted Nordic people calling it a “Stag-Party Village” and who were enjoying sunbathing half nude on the green lawn in the afternoons after their training.

I have participated in 14 Summer and seven Winter Games and visited all of the Villages of those Games, but for me, the one at Los Angeles remains as the best in my memory, not because it was the first Olympic Village I had experienced but the actual facts: clean air, no “smog” as

we see nowadays, environment, various facilities, attendants; everything was perfect and wonderful, so that all athletes seemed fully satisfied and enjoyed every minute of their life in the Village.

It was fortunate for us, the Japanese swimming team, that we could train under such favourable conditions for over a month and a half and it certainly did us good to show better performances later in the competitions.

C. The Races:

The rules for the programme of the swimming meetings at the Olympic Games in the 1930s were different from those of today, where there are preliminary heats in the morning and the swimmers are promoted by their times directly into the final race which is to be held in the evening of the same date, followed by a Victory Ceremony on the spot at the swimming pool.

Contrary to the present system, in the 1920s and 1930s, there were three-day programmes for each event; the first day for the preliminary heats, the second day for two semi-finals and the third day for the final. The Victory Ceremony was postponed till the Closing Day, the very last day of the Games. Day I of the 100 m. Backstroke event started on the

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10th of August. There were four heats and I was in the first heat. Despite the fact it was my first Olympic experience, I remember being very calm before the race. The main reason for this was: (1) I was in my top form and condition during the training period. (2) we had sufficient information on other competitors of the different teams and through its study, I had certain confidence in myself before the race.

Result of Heat 1

- | | |
|-----------------------------|--------|
| 1. Masaji Kiyokawa (Japan) | 1:08.9 |
| 2. Robert Kerber (USA) | 1:13.0 |
| 3. Robert Halloran (Canada) | 1:14.2 |

My record was a new Japanese national record but could not beat the then World and Olympic record of 1:08.2 held by George Kojac of the USA, 1928 Olympic Champion.

Result of Heat 2

1. Robert D. Zehr (USA) with a time of 1:09.9 and my colleague Kawazu came in third place and was fortunately promoted to the semi-final.

Result of Heat 3

1. My colleague Irie came in first place with a time of 1:11.3.

Result of Heat 4

There were no noticeable times in this race. Thus we, the three Japanese, qualified for the semi-finals.

Day II: After analysing the competitors in the four heats, I felt more confident about the upcoming races.

Result of Semi Final I

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|----------------------------|--------|
| 1. Masaji Kiyokawa (Japan) | 1:09.0 |
| 2. Ernst Küppers (Germany) | 1:09.8 |
| 3. Kentaro Kawazu (Japan) | 1:10.2 |

Result of Semi-Final II

- | | |
|-------------------------|--------|
| 1. Toshio Irie (Japan) | 1:10.9 |
| 2. Robert D. Zehr (USA) | 1:11.6 |
| 3. Robert Kerber (USA) | 1:13.0 |

Day III:

Result of the Final Race

- | | |
|----------------------------|--------|
| 1. Masaji Kiyokawa (Japan) | 1:08.6 |
| 2. Toshio Irie (Japan) | 1:09.8 |
| 3. Kentaro Kawazu (Japan) | 1:10.0 |
| 4. Robert D. Zehr (USA) | 1:10.9 |
| 5. Ernst Küppers (Germany) | 1:11.3 |
| 6. Robert Kerber (USA) | 1:12.8 |

I won the race, leading all the way with an improved time, but it was still 0.4 seconds short of the then World Record from George Kojac (USA). My colleague Irie came in second place and Kawazu in third, thus monopolizing all Olympic medals for this event; the first time ever in the history of Japanese sports in the Olympic Games.

Coming out of the water after the race, we were surrounded by radio reporters and cameramen, but to my surprise, I remained calm all the time, not yet feeling the excitement and joy of my great accomplishment.

However, the next morning when I opened the various daily papers and saw large photographs of myself on the front-pages, with big headlines: "Japanese got 1, 2, 3 in swimming", all of a sudden, I felt uncontrollable emotional joy and remembered the famous verse by Lord Byron, the English poet: "I woke up to find myself famous".

We, the three swimmers, celebrated our successes over our late breakfast table!

D. The Victory Ceremony.

The victory ceremonies were held on the Closing Day the very last day of the Games, at the main stadium where the medal presenting ceremonies for the various sport events were held one after another.

We, Kiyokawa, Irie, and Kawazu, were waiting our turn, sitting under the stand of the stadium.

Then came the announcement: "Olympic Ceremony for the 100 metres Backstroke for Men".

After hearing the announcement, we were led to the center of the field. Then another announcement was made in a different voice, in a more ceremonial tone: "Ceremony Olympique Protocolair. Olympic Victory Ceremony. Swimming. 100-metres Backstroke for Men. First Place: Masaji Kiyokawa of Japan, "Champion Olympique." Time: One minute eight seconds, sixth tenth. Second Place: Toshio Irie of Japan. Third Place: Kentaro Kawazu of Japan."

I stepped up onto the centre of the podium, Irie on my right and Kawazu on the left side. The large Japanese national flag went up on the centerpole with smaller flags on each side; the Japanese national anthem played, and the noise on the stands quieted down. I felt it took an extraordinary long time to complete our national anthem during which we stood in attention to the flags.

All of a sudden, a standing ovation started on the stands and a group of IOC members, headed by Comte Henri de Baillet-Latour, the President of the IOC, came forward, all in morning-coats with their personal IOC Badges, either wearing or holding their silk-hats. The President handed over the Gold Medal to me, saying: "Congratulations." And I replied: "Thank You".

This certainly was: "My Olympic Golden Moment".

(Note: Both my colleagues Irie and Kawazu have passed away many years ago. Irie suffered from heart trouble and

died on 8 May 1974 in Takatsuki City, Osaka Prefecture. Kawazu succumbed from an accident in Tokyo on 24 March 1970.)

3. BERLIN OLYMPIAD (1936)

At the Los Angeles Games, the Japanese swimming team won five gold, five silver and two bronze medals, out of six events for men's swimming (one of the five silver medals was won by a Japanese woman, Hideko Maehata, in the 200-metres breaststroke). The



'BOY, BE AMBITIOUS!' THE MOTTO OF MASAJI KIYOKAWA, SHOWN HERE DRESSED FOR THE 1932 LOS ANGELES OLYMPICS GAMES.

Japanese delegation, as a whole, got seven gold, seven silver and four bronze medals, which gave it seventh place in the unofficial medal ranking worldwide.

This gave a huge impact on the Japanese Olympic Committee and the authorities of the city of Tokyo, who became very anxious to invite the Games of the XIIth Olympiad to Japan in 1940, since that year coincided with the celebration of the 2600th anniversary of the Nation's Foundation.

At the same time, another factor, as stated earlier, "Industrial Revolution" in Japan led to an enormous growth in economy, changing its construction from "Domestic Industry" to "Export Industry", which contributed to the rapid expansion of the wealth of our nation, raising the level of possible standards to support the financial aspect of this large project.

For the 1940 Olympic Games, there were three strong candidate cities: Tokyo, Rome and Helsinki. Which city would receive the honour of hosting the 1940 Games was to be decided at the IOC-Session in Berlin in 1936, one week prior to the Opening of the Games of the XIth Olympiad. Under these circumstances, Japan decided to send the largest delegation ever to the Berlin Games, 249 athletes, as a demonstration to support the election at the IOC Session.

I was appointed Vice-Captain of the Delegation and also Playing Captain of our swimming team. Since there were no airway services between Tokyo and Berlin at that time, the Japanese delegation traveled by Trans-Siberian Railway, a long trip taking 18 days to reach our destination.

The conditions and services of the railway were rather poor, since only 18 years had passed since Russia's Revolution of 1917. We could still notice the aftermath of the Revolution everywhere. Whenever the train stopped at a station, poorly dressed boys and girls came up to the windows of the train selling eggs and cucumbers. We stayed overnight in Moscow and there also noticed the shortage of food and daily necessities among the people.

Russia did not send a delegation to the Berlin Games.

Foreseeing those unfavourable conditions, we scheduled to have one month training period in Berlin before the Games started, which worked out well. Conditions of our swimmers showed a quick recovery and the times of some swimmers even improved, reaching world record levels within ten days after arrival in Berlin.

As for myself, during practices, I timed 1:06.0 for the 100 metres Backstroke which was better than the then Olympic and World Record, and it seemed to me that I had a good chance of repeating the victory swim at the upcoming competition. However, all of a sudden, just one week prior to the first heat, I lost my top form and my times kept going down every day. In the Final Race, to my great disappointment, I finished in third place.

Result of the Final Race
100-metres Backstroke for Men

1. Adolf Kiefer (USA) 1:05.9
2. Albert van de Weghe (USA) 1:07.7
3. Masaji Kiyokawa (Japan) 1:08.4
4. A. Drysdale (USA) 1:09.4
5. Kiichi Yoshida (Japan) 1:09.7
6. Yoshiyuki Kojima (Japan) 1:10.4
7. PC. Oliver (Australia) 1:10.7

My coach told me after the race that I was affected from unseen pressure of my responsibilities as team leader.

Although I personally did miss the honour of a second gold medal in two consecutive Games, I was satisfied with the result of performances shown by the team as a whole, with four gold, two silver, and five bronze medals out of six swimming events for men (one gold medal was won by Hideko Maehata in 200 breaststroke for women), for which result I remember being very proud as the captain of our team.

As for the result of the election at the IOC-Session, Tokyo was chosen to host the Games of the XIIth Olympiad in 1940.

I call the Berlin Olympiad: "My Bronze Olympic Moment".

4. SEOUL OLYMPIAD (1988)

The Olympic Charter says: "At the Victory Ceremony, medals shall be presented by the President of the IOC or a member elected by him."

I was co-opted as a member of the IOC at its Session at Warsaw, Poland in 1969, and since the 1972 Olympic Games in Munich, thanks to the generous considerations of the Presidents of the IOC, I have kept receiving the honour of presenting the medals for the event of my specialty, the 100 metres Backstroke for Men.

In 1988 at the Seoul Olympic Games, the event was won by a Japanese swimmer, Daichi Suzuki. President Samaranch was kind enough to give me the honour to present him with the gold medal. I presume this was the first time ever in the history of the Olympic Games for an IOC member, who had won a Gold Medal 56 years ago, to present the gold medal for the same event to his fellow country swimmer.

The greatest dream, I had been longing for many, many years became a reality! This, I would like to call: "My Ultimate Olympic Moment"!

Signed:
Masaji Kiyokawa

Biographical Information:

Masaji Kiyokawa was born on 11th February 1913 in Tokyo. On 24th January 1942 he married Miss Kazuyo Kaneko. They have one daughter. He graduated from Tokyo University of Commerce (currently the Hitotsubashi University) in 1936 and in the same year joined the Kanematsu Trading Corporation (Imports and Exports) in Kobe, which later changed its name into Kanematsu Corporation. In 1976 he became its president. After retiring in 1979, he stayed on as honorary advisor for the Kanematsu and still does until this moment. Already in 1939 Mr. Kiyokawa became member of the Executive Board of the Japanese Swimming Federation. In 1945 he became a member of the Japanese Olympic Committee. In 1952, at the Olympic Games in Helsinki, he was the national head coach of the Japanese swimming team and at the Olympic Games in Melbourne 1956 he was head of the Japanese swimming team. He attended the Olympic Games in Rome 1960 as one of the international swimming officials (judges) for the swimming competitions. At the Tokyo Olympic Games from 1964, Mr. Kiyokawa was one of the general managers in charge of the Olympic swimming competitions on behalf of the Tokyo Olympic Organizing Committee and the FINA. From 1956 to 1964 he was secretary of the Technical Commission from the FINA. From 1964 to 1968 he was honorary secretary general of the FINA and in that capacity attended the Olympic Games from Mexico City. Upon his retirement from the FINA-Board, he was appointed life honorary member of the FINA. In 1969 he was coopted into the International Olympic Committee. In 1975 he was elected into the Executive Board of the IOC, in 1979 being elected to become its third vice-president, climbing up in the Board until his mandate finally ended in 1983. In 1988 he retired from the IOC and in the same year was elected an honorary member of this august body. He received many national and international awards, including the Olympic Order in Silver. In 1977, he was inducted to the International Swimming Hall of Fame in Florida.

(Editor's Note: The exact dates of death of Toshio Irie and Kentaro Kawazu have been researched by ISOH member Bob Miyakawa, for which efforts both author and editors are grateful. It must be noted that the official spelling of Kentaro Kawazu's name is different from those used in most other Olympic publications, including the Official Report on the Games of the Xth Olympiad, Los Angeles 1932, where the name is spelled as Kentaro Kawatsu. According to the author and Miyakawa, who found this difference, this is due to slight differences in the pronunciation and spelling of Japanese characters. Both the author and Miyakawa believe the spelling in this article should be regarded as being the correct one.)
