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1964: The Greatest Year in the History of Japan -- Three Reasons Why

Roy Tomizawa

Abstract: The 1964 XVIII Olympiad enabled the Japanese to take a breather from their breakneck economic growth, and reflect on and celebrate in collective joy. Pulling it off was a big test that Japan passed with flying colors thanks to a stunning alignment of purpose across government, corporations, educational institutions, and local neighborhoods. In the aftermath, Japan was a nation reborn - young, confident, world-beaters.

"It's the Olympics!"

The film trilogy, *Always—San-chome no Yuuhi* (Always—Sunset on Third Street) charts the lives of two families in a tight-knit neighborhood in central Tokyo from 1958 to 1964. The films, which were released in the years from 2005 to 2012, track the economic and social trends of Japan as the nation emerges from a decade of postwar misery and subservience to the United States.

In the last segment of the trilogy, *Always—Sunset on Third Street '64*, one of the main characters, a struggling novelist named Chagawa, is happily watching the opening ceremony of the 1964 Tokyo Olympics on his small black and white television. But his wife convinces him that it would be better and more sociable to watch together with their neighbors, the Suzukis, on their big color TV. As they walk out into the street, they are startled by the roar of jet engines, and the spectacle appearing above their heads. Chagawa calls to his neighbors to come outside to see.

As the Suzukis come out to join the Chagawas, directly above their heads in the clear blue sky are five jets forming the Olympic rings. The immediate audience for the display was the crowd of 70,000 spectators, officials and athletes at the National Stadium a few kilometers away. But this powerful integration of technology and art pierced the hearts of the tens of millions of Japanese who witnessed the spectacle on television, symbolizing for them, that indeed, the sky's the limit.

Suzuki, who has built his auto repair shop after returning from the war with nothing, chokes up at the realization that he and his family, like so many others in Japan, have overcome so much pain, have sacrificed so much and worked so hard to get to this point.

> This whole area was burned out in the war. There was nothing to eat. And now…look at this. So many buildings have gone up around us. And there, rising up before our eyes: Tokyo Tower, the tallest in the world. And now, finally, it's the Olympics!

He then leads his family and friends in a mighty yawp —a cry without shame, proclaiming that indeed Japan is back!

Why 1964 is Japan's Greatest Year

It is of course hyperbole to call any year the greatest year in a country's history. But one can argue that the XVIII Olympiad held in Tokyo, Japan, in October 1964, enabled the Japanese to take a moment to breathe during their breakneck economic growth, reflect and celebrate in collective joy because:

- **The challenge was great** – At the end of World War II, only 19 years prior to the Olympics, never had Japan been so devastated.
- **The achievement was unprecedented** – The Japanese were praised the world over for their efficiency, modernity and friendliness during the 1964 Tokyo Olympics; never had an Asian nation been so celebrated.
- **The support for the Olympics was universal** – Everyone celebrated in Japan's accomplishments, in a time when television was just bringing the world live into everyone's living room; never had Japan been so unified.

The Challenge was Great

In the powerful documentary, *The Fog of War*, director Errol Morris interviews Robert McNamara, who was secretary of defense for American presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson. During World War II, he was also a captain in the US Army Air Force whose job was to analyze the efficiency and effectiveness of American bombers. Intimately familiar with the incendiary bombing raids on Japan during World War II, commanded by General Curtis LeMay, McNamara describes the results of American bombers in Japan with hard cold facts.

50 square miles of Tokyo were burned. Tokyo was a wooden city so when we dropped these firebombs they just burned it. In order to win a war should you kill a hundred thousand people in one night, by firebombing or any other way? LeMay's answer would be clearly 'yes'. 'McNamara, do you mean to say that instead of killing a hundred thousand – burning to death a hundred thousand Japanese civilians in that one night, we should have burned to death a lesser number, or none? And then have our soldiers cross the beaches of Tokyo and be slaughtered in the tens of thousands? Is that what you are proposing?'

Why was it necessary to drop the nuclear bomb if LeMay was burning up Japan? And he went on from Tokyo to firebomb other cities. 58% of Yokohama – Yokohama is roughly the size of Cleveland – so 58% of Cleveland destroyed. Tokyo is roughly the size of New York. 51% of New York destroyed. 99% of the equivalent of Chattanooga, which was Toyama. 40% of the equivalent of Los Angeles, which was Nagoya.

According to McNamara's rational mind, this was overkill. And yet, in the end, the desire for the American government to end the war as quickly as possible was the overriding objective.

The result was devastating.

In his book, *Embracing Defeat*, John Dower wrote of the utter destruction to Japan's physical landscape, its industrial infrastructure, and its people. According to Dower, 80 percent of all ships, 33 percent of all industrial machine tools, and 25 percent of all motor vehicles and trains in Japan were destroyed. He also wrote that sixty-six major cities in Japan were bombed by American planes, on average destroying 40 percent of those geographies and leaving 30 percent of their populations without homes. The three largest cities were rendered wastelands with the homeless rates at 89 percent for Nagoya, 57 percent for Osaka, and 65 percent for Tokyo. (Dower 2000)

The end of the war did not bring joy, only momentary relief, as the vast majority of Japanese citizens entered a new phase of open competition for food and security. Any elation

over the repatriation of 5 million Japanese citizens and military men from the colonies and warfront in Asia was quickly overwhelmed by feelings of anxiety over job opportunities and ability to feed more mouths.

Dower referred to this postwar malaise as *kyodatsu*, a Japanese word for the collective depression that fell on the country.

> The immediate meaning of 'liberation' for most Japanese was not political but psychological. Surrender—and, by association, the Allied victory, the American army of occupation itself—liberated them from death. Month after month, they had prepared for the worst; then, abruptly, the tension was broken. In an almost literal sense, they were given back their lives. Shock bordering on stupefaction was a normal response to the emperor's announcement, usually followed quickly by an overwhelming sense of relief. But that sense of relief all too often proved ephemeral. (Dower 2019, ebook location 1231)

The late 1940s was a very difficult period for the Japanese. They had lost their family members, their homes, and to a great extent their identities. They were in need of the basics to survive: food, shelter, and medicine. And they had no assurances about the future. Will Japan recover? Will my family survive?

On August 15, 1945, in the aftermath of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings, the Emperor's voice was heard over the radio for the first time by his Japanese subjects. The Emperor asked his people to surrender, to "bear the unbearable, and endure the unendurable."

However, only nineteen years later, the Emperor presided over the Olympics, an event symbolizing peace and unity, in a city that was unrecognizable from its bombed-out shell in 1945.

The Achievement was Unprecedented

The scenes likely evoked a wide variety of emotions – a man in white shorts and tank top with a bold red circle emblazoned across the chest. The unmistakable rising sun of Japan was blazing a trail across Asia during the torch relay leading up to the 1964 Tokyo Olympics.

From August 21 to September 6 the torch wended its way through Eurasia, first from Greece to Istanbul. After a day in Turkey, the flame hopped on a plane to Beirut, Lebanon, and then to Teheran, Iran. The course continued on to Lahore, Pakistan, New Delhi, India, Rangoon, Burma, Bangkok, Thailand, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, and Manila in the Philippines.

It was only a little more than 22 years prior when the Japanese military embarked on a massive military attack across multiple fronts. In addition to Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor on December 8, 1941, Japan's military executed simultaneous invasions on Hong Kong, the Philippines, Thailand, Singapore and Malaya, and then eventually Burma.

Despite the lingering aftertaste of World War II and Japan's occupation of large parts of Asia, there was still pride in Japan as a representative of Asia, standing tall amidst the nations of the developed world.

"We were all conscious that it was the first Asian Olympics," said the captain of the 1964 gold-medal winning field hockey team from India, Charanjit Singh. "And during that period the Japanese just rose to the occasion. There was so much devastation (after the war). But instead of giving up, they built it back up themselves. The Olympics were a very good show there, and it showed the world that Asian people can do it very well, like the rest of the

world."[1]

For Robbie Brightwell, the United Kingdom athletics team captain, the 1964 Tokyo Olympics was a watershed moment in Olympic history. Brightwell, who helped his 4x400-relay team to a come-from-behind silver medal running the anchor leg in the finals, said that Tokyo "internationalized the Games."

Up to Rome, 1960, the Olympics was perceived primarily as a mash between European and North American competitors. Tokyo internationalized the games. It was a historical moment for Asia, and I had the feeling that the Olympic ring that represented Asia was finally added for real.

It was Tokyo that took the Olympic torch to Asia. The torch was a tremendous promotional vehicle. You didn't need a celebrity. You needed a torch. it could be carried by anyone, and it awakened people all over Asia of the forthcoming Tokyo Olympics.

Japan was an emerging economy in 1964 and any new goal was a new challenge, and the Japanese had no preconceptions about how to get things done. If they had a problem to solve, they tried anything and everything, leveraging what resources were available and learning from the world.

Toyota's famed just-in-time (JIT) lean manufacturing methodology has been recognized the world over as a superior process to maximize both quality and efficiency, leading to the transformation of the auto industry by the Japanese. Instead of stocking large inventories of doors that sat in a warehouse unused for weeks and exposed to potential damage, as was the case with large American manufacturers in Detroit, the Japanese engineers improvised.

With little capital available during those lean postwar years, they could not "waste" money on one or two months of stock. So parts were built only when they were going to be used—just in time. Capital was used efficiently, parts were not damaged while sitting for weeks, and everyone on an assembly line was charged with the mandate to innovate in any way that eliminated waste and improved quality.

And so, even in 1964, to the surprise of visiting Olympians, Japanese products were not cheap and low quality. They were cutting edge.

Brightwell, and then fiancé (as well as two-time gold medalist at the '64 Games) Ann Packer flew to Tokyo with their fellow Olympians on British Overseas Airways Comet, the world's first commercial jet airliner. They had the opportunity to visit the cockpit and talk with the pilot. They asked about Japan, and Brightwell asked the well-travelled pilot whether he had any recommendations for things to buy there.

> He said, "Yeah, Seiko watches. They make fantastic watches. Get a movie camera. Get a tape recorder. You got to get one of those transistor radios. And a camera. Oh, I see you're wearing glasses. Go and get contact lenses." So I did see the optician one day in Tokyo. And got them the next day! The Japanese were already making gas-permeable contact lenses. They were brilliant. For my first race, I could actually see the track.
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> We were very impressed. We knew about Japanese engineering in heavy industry, but we didn't know anything about their use of American transistors and computers in Japan. We could see they were moving to higher-value, technologically intense products.
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> "Relatively speaking," said Brightwell, "we were still on steam locomotives."[2]

The Support for the Tokyo Olympics was Universal

On Monday, October 12, 1964, a package arrived at the Olympic Village in Yoyogi, Tokyo. The package contained 4,500 little boxes, which had a small gift for all of the foreign athletes in Japan for the XVIII Olympiad. Upon opening the small cardboard gift box, the athlete found a doll in the shape of Dharma (pronounced "daruma" in Japanese), as well as a letter.

The daruma doll represents for Japanese hope and luck, and because it has a rounded bottom that allows the doll to bobble and roll while remaining upright, it also represents perseverance. One usually receives a daruma doll with both eyes white and blank, and the custom is to fill in one eye with a black dot to get you started on your journey of fortune and success. And when you have fulfilled a goal, or had a landmark life event, like a graduation, marriage or a birth of a child, then you fill in the second eye.

A group of high school students who called themselves the Fuji Companion Head Office in Shizuoka Prefecture produced these papier-mâché daruma dolls and had them sent to the Olympic Village. The enclosed letter explained that "in this doll is hidden a small story of friendship and good will of all the young and grown up people from all Japan."

In 1964, Japan was preparing for one of the most complex, global events of its time – the Summer Olympics. Over 5,000 athletes from over ninety nations were coming to Tokyo. So were thousands of government and sports officials, members of the press, coaches, athlete-family members and sports fans from all parts of the world.

It was all-hands-on-deck in Japan – students, corporations, government workers, volunteers, and everyday citizens – all believed they had a role in making the Olympics a success. If they could show the world that they were peace-loving, Western-like, modern and eager to contribute, then they could stand tall with the other great nations of the world.

Only two decades before, the Japanese were considered Asian upstarts, aggressors, and in some parts, cruel barbarians who would die for the Emperor without a thought. The 1964 Tokyo Olympics was the biggest coming-out party in Asian history, and Japan wanted to change perceptions, and look its absolute best.

Hundreds of known pickpockets were plucked off the streets by police months in advance. Gangs were prevailed upon to send their scarier-looking yakuza out of town. Signs were posted around the city declaring that urinating in the streets or littering would not be tolerated. Bars were closed by midnight. Taxi drivers were advised to drive with "proper traffic manners." Local citizens brushed up their English and, overcoming their normal reticence, proactively sought out foreign visitors who looked as though they might need guidance. For a while, "May I help you?" was the most commonly heard phrase on the streets.

Stories abound about the lengths to which the Japanese hosts went to look after visitors in need of help. To rescue an Australian couple who had lost bullet train tickets to Kyoto, their hotel voucher and a notice of remittance so they could pick up cash at a local bank branch, the manager of the Japan Travel Bureau at the pier where they docked raised money from his own staff to buy new train tickets, called the hotel and arranged for the couple to stay without the voucher, and made arrangements with the bank so the cash would be made available. (Mainichi 1964)

When a European prince reported his Dunhill tobacco pouch lost at the equestrian event at Karuizawa, an entire Self-Defense Force platoon combed the 33-kilometer course and found the pouch in less than an hour. (Japan

Times 1964) A journalist who had dropped his signed traveler's checks—in a nightclub as it turned out—got them back after the Mama-san spent two days tracing and deciphering his illegible scrawl, and then rang the hotels and the Press House before finally discovering to whom they belonged (Brasher 1964, 55).

Billy Mills, hero of the 10,000-meter event, also came in for some of Japan's famous *omotenashi* (hospitality). As a Native-American subjected to his own share of suffering back home, he empathized with his hosts:

> In Japan, I saw people who were so courteous and polite. I knew underneath there had to be this anger. I could relate to the pain. Almost a sacredness of the way they contained the pain, and the respect they showed. They were like the elders I knew, who controlled their pain, and still showed respect to others.[3]

Mills and his wife, Pat, had plans to return to the United States a day before the end of the games and so would not be joining the USOC-arranged transport to the airport. When the USOC refused to make any special arrangements for Billy—an amateur with little discretionary cash in his pocket—he turned to his Japanese hosts, who expressed surprise that the Americans would not take care of a gold medal winner and one of their biggest stars.

> They picked up our bags, and put them in the largest, widest limousine I had ever seen, with Japanese and Olympic flags up front and an American flag on the back. We took off with two motorcycles escorting us to the airport. We left Japan in style.

The XVIII Olympiad was Japan's big test. And if they passed, they thought, the world would welcome them back with open arms. And they did indeed pass that test, thanks to a stunning alignment of purpose across government, corporations, educational institutions, and local neighborhoods. As Azuma Ryūtarō, Tokyo governor and member of both the IOC and Tokyo Olympics Organizing Committee, wrote in 1965:

> One of the intangible legacies of the Tokyo Olympics is that it gave Japanese people the opportunity to be united for the first time since World War II. Additionally, the Tokyo Olympics succeeded in playing a vital role in connecting the East and West in terms of worldwide peace and sports. As a result, the world began to show greater respect for Japan and its people. (Shimizu 2011,44)

And if there was one day, when all of Japan came together as one, it was Friday, October 23, 1964.

The Nippon Budokan was packed. But perhaps there was a sense of resignation at this, the penultimate day of the 1964 Tokyo Olympics.

Despite the fact that three Japanese judoka had already taken gold in the first three weight classes over the previous three days, there was considerable doubt that Akio Kaminaga could defeat Dutchman, Anton Geesink, in the open category.

After all, Geesink shocked the judo world by becoming the first non-Japanese to win the World Championships in 1961. More relevantly, Geesink had already defeated Kaminaga in a preliminary bout. So while the Japanese, including Crown Prince Akihito and Princess Michiko who were in the Budokan, were hoping Kaminaga would exceed expectations, all they had to do was see the two judoka stand next to each other to be concerned - the 2-meter tall, 120 kg foreign giant vs the 1.8-meter tall, 102 kg Japanese.

Even though judo purists know that skill, balance and coordination are more important to winning than size, deep down many likely felt that the bigger, stronger foreigner was going to win. After all, the bigger, stronger US

soldiers and their allies had defeated the Imperial forces of Japan in the Pacific War.

And so Geesink did, defeating Kaminaga handily, sending the Japanese nation into a funk.

That was late in the afternoon on October 23. About 13 kilometers southwest of the Nippon Budokan and the site of Kaminaga's defeat, the Japanese women's volleyball team was preparing for their finals at the Komazawa Indoor Stadium. They too were going up against bigger, stronger adversaries, the USSR.

In this case, however, there was a lingering sense that their magical women of volleyball would defeat the Soviets. They had in fact already done so at the World Championships in 1962, walking into the lioness' den in Moscow and winning the finals. So when nearly every citizen in Japan had settled in front of their televisions that Friday evening, they were gearing up to explode in celebration.

And yet, Geesink had just sunk Kaminaga, as well as Japan's hopes of sweeping gold in the only sport at the Olympics native to Japan. “Maybe we just aren't big enough, or strong enough,” some may have thought.

Hirobumi Daimatsu, coach of the women's volleyball team, accepted the challenge and worked over the years to train his players to compensate for relative weaknesses in size and strength, with speed, superlative technique and guts. And much to the relief and joy of the nation, the Japanese defeated the Soviet Union in straight sets: 15-11, 15-8 and a tantalizingly close final set, 15-13.

And on that Friday evening, the day before the final day of Japan's two-week Olympic journey to show the world that they were a nation to be recognized and respected, a team of diminutive Japanese women took down the larger Soviet women.

Whatever lingering sting from Kaminaga's loss remained, whatever bad feelings of boycotts by the Indonesians or the North Koreans may have left, even perhaps, whatever shame that came from enduring the unendurable after the nation's defeat in the Second World War may have washed away in that moment the ball fell to the ground for the final point in that match.

And it wasn’t just the spectators in the arena that exploded in joy. It was the entire nation. The Japanese were buying televisions, this magical device that brought the world into their homes. And with the Tokyo Olympics arriving in October, 1964, sales for color television were soaring like their pride in hosting the Olympics.

The Tokyo Games had a massive impact on the psyche of the Japanese – no event in the history of Japan was viewed by as many people. Reports of television ratings in Japan vary wildly depending on the source. One source explains that over 75 million people watched some part of the Olympics over the two-week period, for a rating of 97.3%. That’s amazing since the population in Japan at the time was about 100 million.

Another source explains that three of the four highest rated programs in Japan in 1964 were related to the Olympics:

- 15th NHK Red and White Song Battle (NHK General, December 31) 72.0%
- Tokyo Olympic and Volleyball Women’s Final “Japan vs Soviet Union” (NHK General, October 23) 66.8%
- Tokyo Olympics Closing Ceremony (NHK General, October 24, 16: 52-18: 20) 63.2%
- Tokyo Olympics Opening Ceremony (NHK General, October 10 13: 43-15: 20) 61.2%

But this list is misleading as it focuses on ratings for only one channel. The number one program, the annual New Year’s Eve

programming was broadcast only on NHK. But the Tokyo Olympics, on the whole, was broadcasted on multiple channels, sometimes up to five channels covering the same event. That was the case for the Opening and Closing ceremonies, as well as the highest rated event during the Olympics – the women's volleyball final – when the Japanese defeated the Soviet Union to win gold.

Never was the nation more aligned, never was the nation prouder than in 1964—rising from the rubble to embark on the greatest Asian economic miracle of the twentieth century. The only thought most Japanese had in October 1964 was to convince the world that Japan was peaceful, friendly, productive, innovative, and modern—that they belonged to the global community as much as any other nation.

On that day, Japan was a nation reborn - young, confident, world-beaters.

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ROY TOMIZAWA is a former print journalist for a local Gannett paper outside Philadelphia, who was the lead reporter on a team that was awarded 2nd prize in investigative journalism by the Pennsylvania Newspaper Publishers Association for coverage on a maximum-security prison in Eastern Pennsylvania. He is the author of three books, including *1964 – The Greatest Year in the History of Japan: How the Tokyo Olympics Symbolized Japan's Miraculous Rise from the Ashes.*

roy.tomizawa@outlook.com

Notes

[1] Interview with the author, May 5, 2015
[2] Interview with the author, December 19, 2018
[3] Interview with the author, September 30, 2016