

# My Story

## Yamamoto Takayuki

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### Me in a Nutshell

I'm just an ordinary guy with a nice smile. I tend to take things pretty seriously. Whether it's football or a girlfriend or whatever, if I like something or someone, I'm committed, heart and soul. Once I've decided to do something, I stick with it to the end. I'm basically pretty coolheaded. When things go wrong during a football match—I make a mistake or the team is in trouble or whatever—I can keep calm. I almost never get carried away by my emotions. I am positive and open-minded by nature, so although I might get upset for a while about something someone says, by the next day I'll forget all about it. I think that's why I've been able to enjoy life without getting hung up on my hearing disability as something distressing or tragic. Of course, some people with hearing disabilities really do have a pretty hard time. I made an effort not to think of it as a hardship. Thinking about it too much only makes it tougher, and when I do have a problem I get lots of support from the people around me. Besides, for me to take a pessimistic approach to life would really be an injustice to my parents, who gave me this great life.

My main character flaw is that I am sloppy. On my elementary and junior high school report cards <sup>2</sup> there was always the comment that I was untidy and disorganized. But I'm the

type of person who performs well under pressure, so when friends come to visit me, for example, I give my room proper cleanup.

### Growing Up

#### Preschool years

I was born in Kyoto <sup>1</sup> in 1982. Apparently I was a pretty unruly kid. There were lots of older kids in the neighborhood and I was always outdoors playing with them.

My parents realized that I had a hearing disability when I was one year old. I went to a kindergarten attached to a school for the hearing-impaired, which was about a thirty-minute bus ride from home. Most preschoolers must spend their days messing around and having fun, but all I remember about kindergarten was constantly studying. I had intensive speech training, and when I got home my mother would have extra drills for me. The training was strict and it was difficult, and often I ended up crying. In speech therapy I learned to speak standard Japanese. I picked up the Kansai dialect later, especially after I started playing football and talking more with my friends.

#### Elementary school

I went to a school that has a special program for hearing-impaired students. There were a total of about thirty-five of us from grades one

to six. For our physical education classes and for lunch (served by the school) <sup>3</sup> we joined the kids in the regular classes. The biggest event of my elementary school life was my first experience of American football. My school was rare among Japanese elementary schools in that it had a football team. I used to watch the older kids at practice and think how cool they were, and in the third grade I joined the team myself. When I was in grade five our team made it to the finals of the regional intramural league. I remember being really happy about that, even though we didn't win the pennant.

My encounter with football during elementary school changed the course of my life. It brought out abilities I hadn't shown before. The head coach told me he had always thought I had natural talent, but I never thought of myself as very athletic or coordinated until I started playing football. I've also learned various other things through interacting with my teammates, such as how to get along with friends and what to say in various situations. I wasn't much of a talker before I took up football. When it came to dealing with trouble, too, often I couldn't express myself readily, so I'd end up striking out first. That tendency, too, has disappeared since I started playing football. If I'd had normal hearing and gone to the regular elementary school near my home, I might never have discovered football. Football is a really important part of my life. In that respect, I'm even sort of glad that I have a hearing disability.

There were two teachers in my elementary school for whom I have nothing but deep gratitude and respect. One was the head coach of our football team, who taught me both the joys and the rigors of the game. I was little, but I

learned all the moves, and I relished in the joys of victory and anguish of defeat with my teammates—I had a great time. The training was tough, though. The coach didn't make any concessions for the fact that we were just elementary school kids, and there were lots of times when he bawled us out pretty severely. I learned that if you're serious about playing a sport, there's more to it than just having a good time. If it weren't for that teacher, I doubt that I'd have kept playing football. He's one of my dearest mentors. The other was my homeroom teacher in grades 1, 5, and 6. She treated me almost like her own son, and for me, too, she was like a mother. Even now I sometimes go to her house to visit and talk to her.

## Junior high school

The junior high school I attended was near my elementary school and also had special classes for people with hearing impairments. The special-ed classrooms are specially equipped to block out noise from the outside. They even had air conditioners so that the windows could be kept closed in summer as well. This is a big help because it is difficult to distinguish sounds coming from outside the classroom from those generated inside. In a regular classroom, it is hard to pick out the teacher's voice from among other sounds. If I had switched to regular classes at the junior high school level, I wouldn't have been able to follow the lessons. I doubt that I could have understood what the teacher was saying as well as I do now.

The school didn't have a football team, so I joined a junior football club in the city of Kyoto. I did pretty well, too—even got voted MVP of the regional league. At school I joined the basketball team, so I spent just about all my free

time in sports, with basketball on weekdays and football on the weekends. Even so, I managed to keep my grades up. I didn't like studying, but I'm the type who knuckles down under pressure, so I always study hard when tests are coming up.

## High School Life

### Entering high school

My high school, Osaka Sangyo University High School, is an hour and a half by train from my home, and I have to change trains along the way. The reason I decided to go to a school so far away was that it had a strong football team and I really wanted to go on playing. I learned about the school's team from an article in a football magazine I read in sixth grade. It was my dream to play on a strong team like that. In my third year of junior high, I applied for a sports recommendation, was accepted, and entered Osaka Sangyo in its course for sports majors. <sup>4</sup>

In high school, for the first time in my life, all my classes were with students with normal hearing. By that time, thanks to the friendships I had made with my football teammates, I had gotten pretty comfortable about communicating with others, so I wasn't worried at all about the move to high school. In fact, high school has been really enjoyable and I haven't had any trouble at all.

I think my high school is pretty strict in terms of school rules and regulations, particularly regarding the dress code. For example, shoes made of anything but leather are forbidden. I sometimes wish we had a bit more freedom.

In any case, my life has pretty much centered

around football. When I look back, it seems all my memories of high school involve football.

### American football

I've been playing football for ten years now, since I was in the third grade of elementary school. Until part-way through junior high, I played both defensive and offensive positions. I always wanted to be a tackler, but at the elementary and junior high school levels tackling was prohibited. We played touch football. In high school I decided I wanted to be a tackler, so after a while I opted to play exclusively on the defense where I could concentrate on tackling.

Up until high school I played in the position we call "safety" (defensive back), but in high school, at the coach's suggestion, I switched to cornerback. This position demands versatility; you've got to have good judgment, speed, catching ability, and stamina. I and the opposition team's wide receiver try to outmaneuver each other to get the ball. If I get the better of him and make an interception, it can really make a difference in the game. Being able to have that kind of effect on the game is what I like about playing cornerback. In my second year of high school I had a great season, making lots of intercepts, and since then I've come to enjoy the game more and more. Since switching to cornerback my skills have improved, so I think the position suits me.

American football is a tough, macho kind of sport. In tackles, the players' helmets and protectors collide with a resounding crack. Well, I don't actually hear the sound, but that's how it feels from the reverberation. Tackles sometimes hurt so much I see stars, but the thwack

of the impact is exhilarating.

If there's one thing I hate it's being treated differently because of my hearing disability. I've always gone along just like anyone else. There were times, though, when I was singled out for special treatment on the team. That was really tough on me, because I just wanted to be treated the same as everyone else, to be recognized as a normal human being. But in my high school team I haven't had any problems like that at all. The other guys act naturally with me and the coaches treat me equally.

I've almost never felt handicapped in playing football. Although the plays are called verbally, my teammates have taught me block signs (gestures) for the various instructions. There was one time, though, at the national championships in my second year of high school, when the play was changed at the last minute and I was the only one who wasn't told about it. Things were happening so fast that there was no time to tell me. Anyway, I didn't clue in to what the rest of the team was doing in that play and the other team scored. It was the most mortifying moment of my life. On the other hand, football has also given me the happiest moments of my life, like winning the national championships two years in a row in my second and third years of high school. To me these are precious memories.

## My Future

I plan to keep playing football through college and even after I finish studying and get a job. I'd like to become the kind of player who leaves no doubt that he's among the best in the game. To do that, I have to do a lot of running and

weight training and improve my speed. After graduating from high school I'll go to a university with a strong football team. I've already been accepted by recommendation. <sup>5</sup> I hope to play well at college so that I can go on to join a strong professional team. Then there's the dream of playing in the United States. Although the prospect is a bit daunting, given that the game's played at whole different level of power over there, if I get the chance I'd love to play in the homeland of American football.

## Family and Friends

### My family

There are four people in my family: my parents, my elder sister, and me. My parents operate a fish shop. Usually we're all so busy that we don't get time to sit down together and really talk about much of anything. I usually end up eating dinner alone, too, because my after-school club activities keep me out until late. But we still get on really well. My parents pretty much let me do what I want. Their attitude is: if it's your business, it's your responsibility. I like that approach. To me, family is where you are most at ease, and most content, just being together. Whenever I have a problem, they're always there for me if I want to talk it over. They support me in my football, and look out for me health-wise as well. My family is the mainstay of my life.

### My friends

I tend to have lots of easygoing friendships rather than a tight group of very select friends. I enjoy having friends and I think my friendships now will be important to me from now

on as well. I have a lot of friends who are easy to talk to and always happy to hang out with me. They understand me and are always ready to help me out of a jam. Without my friends, any troubles I have would be doubly difficult to handle. And besides, it's just no fun not having friends around. Most people think it's difficult for hearing-impaired people to join new groups on their own, but I think that unless I take the initiative to get involved in new groups I won't be able to make new friends.

As for my ideal girlfriend, my standards are pretty high. I'd like someone with medium-long hair whose fashion sense matches mine, who is artlessly goofy by nature, and who is totally devoted to me!

## My Town: Kyoto

Kyoto is famous for its centuries-old temples. Our neighborhood has a fairly rural feel about it, with hills and mountains all around and not much else. I like it a lot, though, because it's peaceful and pretty and still has a lot of old buildings. People in this community are lively and industrious, too. To me, Kyoto is most of all the place where I feel totally at home. In April I plan to leave Kyoto and find a place of my own close to my university in Osaka. I'm really looking forward to this chance to test myself living alone in a new environment.