

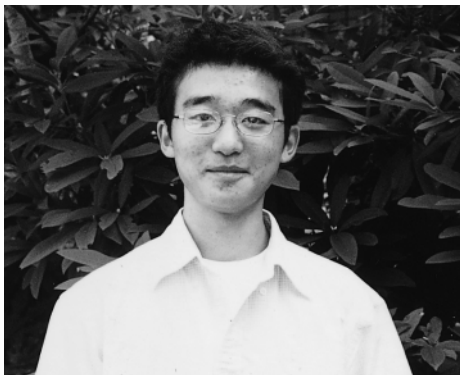
Meeting People



In this series we will “meet” real-life individuals and consider from various angles the culture they represent. In each issue we will introduce a person or group of people and the events they are part of, as well as provide the necessary information on the TJF website for discussing those events. We hope these stories will prompt students to think about their own situations, discuss the similarities and the differences, and gain a fuller awareness of the multi-layered nature and rich diversity of culture. In this issue, we meet Shiro, a high school student in Tokyo. This is a story from his experiences in junior high school.

Meet Shiro

First Impression Misses the Mark!



志郎

年齢： 16才(私立高校1年)
 家族： 両親、妹1人
 住所： 東京都杉並区
 趣味： テニス(スポーツ)、音楽
 特技： テニス

When I was little my father’s company assigned him to work in the United States. I lived in New York from age four through first grade and in California from fourth grade through the end of seventh grade. In Japan, there are a few schools (both public and private) with programs designed to accept “returnee” students (*kikoku shijo* 帰国子女¹) like me. It was the summer after seventh grade when we moved back to Japan. I visited several schools offering these programs, but in the end I decided to enter the public junior high school not far from our home, starting second term, which begins in September, of second year.² I chose the school because it was located close to home and I did not have to wear a school uniform. Although most public junior high schools in Japan require uniforms, by chance, the schools in my school district³ did not. I had never once attended a school requiring uniforms, including when I was in the United States, and I didn’t like the thought of them: anyone could tell at a glance where you went to school, which seemed like an invasion of privacy. It bothered me that everyone looked exactly the same. I didn’t like the idea of commuting to some distant school

like the study freaks aiming for elite schools, and besides, I had long hair at the time and the other schools I visited would not allow it.

My hobby, by the way, is tennis. I started playing in the United States. Tennis is an individual sport, and if you lose you cannot blame it on anyone else. This suits my personality. I am fairly confident of my skill at tennis. Still, I had no intention of entering the tennis club⁴ when I first started Japanese junior high school. They did not play at a very advanced level, and they played the softball-style (played only in Japan) instead of the hardball-style (the international style) I had been playing, so I thought about enrolling at a tennis school in my community, instead. Aside from the expense, the tennis school only offered late-night, group lessons, which I really didn’t want to take. At the time, it was mandatory to join a club at my junior high school (this restriction was later lifted), and my homeroom teacher (*tannin* 担任⁵) was asking me nearly every day which club I planned to join. Finally, I gave up and decided to join the boy’s tennis club. To be honest, at the time, I had no intention of taking it very seriously.

The Tennis Club

テニス部

My first impression upon entering the tennis club was that no one seemed very enthusiastic about playing. When I went to elementary school in Japan, I had played baseball on a local community team with a strict coach, so I had an image of Japanese teams in which the coach is tough, and the kids stick to it, though they are nearly in tears. The teams I knew then were strong in their own way. In junior high it was different. There was little enthusiasm and the other members' play was weak. Although they seemed little motivated, they complained a lot about practice, and made snide comments about my play, "You played in America—it's no wonder you're so good!" I began to think that I should quit. I really did like tennis, however, and I had already bought a soft-style racket, so quite the opposite of my original intentions, I ended up more and more involved with the club.

In the junior high school tennis club the upper-class students held higher status—second- and third-year students were given priority in hitting balls, while first-year students, even the more able ones, were relegated mostly to

ball retrieval. We spent a lot of time during practice sessions doing exercises that didn't seem of much practical significance. I thought that any first-year member who was good enough should be able to mix with the second- and third-year students for practice, and I proceeded to do so. I also took the lead in making our exercises more rigorous to improve the parts of our game we needed to win. Naturally, I encountered some resistance, since I had just arrived and was already attempting to make changes. A rift had developed between the team members who supported me (mainly first-year students) and those, led by the team captain, who did not. The atmosphere in the club became quite strained.



Today, Shiro is the captain of his high school hardball-style tennis club.

The Turning Point

てんき
転機

The turning point came at an official match in the third term of my second year. I approached the team captain and said, "We can't win if we don't pair up!" We had to play doubles for official matches, and it happened that his usual partner was injured. The captain was the next best player on the team after me, I really wanted to win, and I didn't have a fixed partner at the time. Since we had been yelled at together in practice by the coach and had supported each other at matches, my relationship with my teammates, including the captain, had improved. Teaming up turned out to be a brilliant stroke for our school: we got all the way up to the top sixteen in one of the Tokyo regional tennis championships. Even so, we both couldn't help thinking that we could have gone even further. We teamed up for all our matches after that, and the team's record began to improve. The ice melted and everyone in the tennis club became good friends. A new, positive sense of rivalry had arisen and everybody showed visible improvement. The team captain and I won the championship in the ward tournament, the last tournament before we graduated from junior high school. Even after going on to different high schools, we are still really close, and everyone from that team continues to play tennis. One of my friends told me, "When you first entered the club, I thought you were conceited, going around giving orders even though you had just joined. But thanks to what you did, the atmosphere in the tennis club changed and I'm still playing tennis now."

Looking back on this experience now, I have to admit I was a bit hasty at first. I tried to tell everybody what to do, impatiently attempting to change the club into what I

thought it should be. Moreover, I have come to understand, from the shift in my attitude towards the team captain (he is now one of my best friends), that sometimes your first impression misses the mark. If I knew then what I know now, I think I would spend a little more time getting to know the other members, and would not be in such a rush to force changes on everyone and on the organization of the club. I have also realized that, even if I think I am the best player, there are still things to learn about human nature from the people around me. Even if I am now in a position to give instruction, I sometimes get scolded if I am not careful and considerate in how I teach and treat the other players. I want to continue playing tennis for the rest of my life, not only honing my skills, but also cultivating myself through interaction with others.



Shiro (far left) with his junior high school tennis club friends and coach.

Notes

1 | きこくしじ 帰国子女 Returnee students

The term “returnee-students” refers to Japanese children who have returned to Japan after living for an extended period abroad due to their parents’ reason. Since these students often require special attention in terms of Japanese language skills, readjustment to life in Japan, etc., some public (including national) and private elementary, junior high, and senior high schools accept returnee students under separate entrance and enrollment criteria from those for regular students. Some returnee students enroll at schools without such special criteria or programs.

2 | Japanese school year

The Japanese school year begins in April and ends in March. Most schools operate on a three-term system, the first term extending from April to July, the second from September to December, and the third from January to March. There are some differences from one region of the country to another.

3 | School districts

School districts are established on the municipal level for public elementary and junior high schools and on the prefectural level for public high schools. With some differences from region to region, students attend the elementary, junior high, and high schools located in the school district where they live. Recently, an increasing number of areas are allowing students to enter schools outside of their own school district. National and private schools accept students regardless of school district.

4 | Club activities

Japanese schools typically offer students a variety of sports, humanities-related, science-related, and arts clubs. School club activities start as a part of the formal curriculum from the fifth or sixth grades of elementary school. In elementary and junior high schools there are two types of club activities—those that are part of the formal curriculum and are compulsory, and those that are extracurricular clubs and are optional. The latter are more popular in high schools.

Clubs are basically managed by the students themselves—led by a club president who is supported by other club officers such as a vice-president and manager. Normally club presidents are upper-class students. Members of the school teaching staff usually give guidance, acting as supervisors or coaches.

At most schools, club activities are held after school. Each club determines which days of the week it will hold practice or training sessions. Most clubs practice for two or three hours after school, though a few opt for morning sessions. In sports and athletics clubs, practice matches and official matches are held on weekends and holidays.

References: *Chugakusei kokosei no nichijo seikatsu ni kansuru chosa hokokusho* [Survey on the Daily Lives of Junior High and High School Students], Japan Youth Research Institute, 2000.

5 | なんにん 担任 Homeroom teachers

In addition to providing instruction in regular subjects, homeroom teachers are also involved in other activities, such as supervising extracurricular activities and providing advice and guidance to their homeroom and other students.



Photo: Shinohara Midori

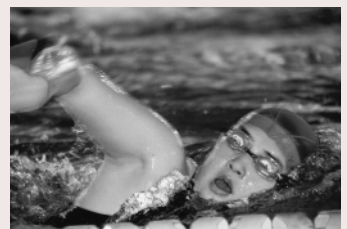


Photo: Murata Asami



Photo: Maeji Akihiro



Photo: Watanabe Hirokazu

Discussion Points

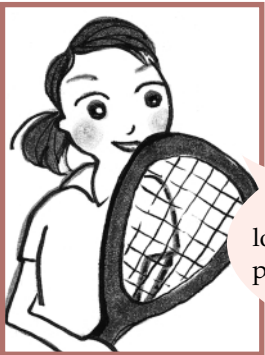
1. After reading this selection, give examples of things you could or could not relate to in the story.
2. What would you do if you were in the same situation?
3. The following are two different people's opinions about sports. What do you think? Write your own thoughts in the space provided.



しょうくん

スポーツでは チームワーク がいちばん 大切です。
下手でも いっしょうけんめい がんばることが 大切です。

I think the goal in sports is not just to become technically skilled but to discipline yourself mentally. It's very important to learn how to cooperate with others and to understand the importance of striving. Team sports, in particular, require cooperation, and no matter how skilled you are, I don't think you should join a team if you are the type of person who cannot be a team player. I appreciate people who try hard even though they are not so skilled more than those who may be very good at a game but don't try so hard.



さくらさん

スポーツでは「勝つこと」がいちばん 大切です。
チームワークより、個人の自由が 大切です。

The object in sports is to win. All the practice in the world won't mean a thing if you don't win in the end. If you're good enough, I don't think it really matters how long you spend practicing. I think it should be left up to the individual. I think form and practice method should be left up to the individual, since you won't get any better practicing things that don't suit you.



あなた

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Vocabulary

スポーツ sports

大切 important

上手 skilled, good at

下手 unskilled, not good at

～でも although, even if

勝つ to win

負ける to lose

チームワーク team work

がんばる to do your best, to strive, hang in there

個人 individual

自由 freedom