

Playing Gateball in Japan

by Barbara Northcott

Many people are now aware that skiing in Japan is fantastic because of the conditions and access to ski fields. Well, for the gateballers who like travelling, we would recommend that you plan a trip to Japan so you can play gateball. Thousands of courts exist with millions of players and there's even a pay TV channel for the game.

Fortunately we have become acquainted with Mr Keiichi Imagawa following his visit here October 2007. As the Development Officer of The World Gateball Union, based in Tokyo, he is well known to many Australian gateball players. His helpfulness in arranging our games must be acknowledged.

Jim at the World Gateball Union Headquarters



Keiichi appreciated the opportunity to get out of the office and to play the game in the surrounding area of Tokyo.

Our first such day was in September last year. Using a much-thumbed train guide, we made our way to a station in Adachi prefecture about 45 minutes travel north from the centre of Tokyo. Keiichi and our wonderful local hosts met us there.

Being welcomed very warmly by our hosts, we were introduced to the many people who arrived to play at the Community Centre. Then came the first of many surprising parts of the morning. Exchanging "omiyagi" (small gifts) was followed by the swapping of ages as each person spoke their name and their age accompanied by a low bow. Their ages were from 60 to 88 years and with an equal ratio of males to females.

Playing on a cinder surface was the second big surprise but we adapted very well. Rather than



Jim being guided by the Captain

numbers on bibs, the players wore small circular discs that showed the number and that disc easily fastened on to your clothes using Velcro. No referee was designated as all the players knew the rules and the team captains helped by calling out the number. No-one would consider disobeying the rules.

In English and /or Japanese the game flowed smoothly as there really is no language barrier when the hand signals are used.

Many of the lovely people there spoke some English and, of course, Keiichi is capable of translating if necessary.

After 2 games, there was break for a drink of water and then came 2 more games. Lunch was a treat in a local restaurant for us (even though we had brought a packed lunch) while the others either walked or cycled home for a bite to eat before arriving at another nearby court that is permanently set up for gateball. It is in an enclosed area near the baseball and tennis courts, locked and cared for by the local council for very cheap prices.

More games followed and I even had the opportunity to be the 'captain' for one game. There certainly are differences in

Barbara and Jim with the morning group of players





Jim and Barbara at Adachi courts with the afternoon group

tactics. So often the 'following' teams used the tactic where they would gather 3 balls together to earn a 'double touch', then advance to take charge of all the gates. 'Gate and touch' skills were very good because of their accurate ball placement. Sporting behaviour at a high level was always evident even though they were competitive and full of jokes about the game (not that we could understand but they saw the funny side of the events).

Our day concluded with photos taken and sticks and balls were put away in the storage area. Many smiles and bows later we said our farewells and promised to return. Tired, but so pleased



Keiichi Imagawa

to be outdoors under sunny skies playing gateball, we left by train to head for our accommodation after 4:00p.m.

So in May this year, we took our next trip to play gateball at



Gate is locked when the games for the day are over

Adachi prefecture with the same group of players and accompanied by Mr Imagawa. We must tell you that we were not strangers to the Tokyo scene having lived there from 2001-2005, spent more than 10 years visiting Japan before that. Our adult son has lived there since 1988, is now married to Junko

and we went in September to visit our gorgeous grandson born several months earlier. For this visit in May we were attending our daughter's wedding since she and her Australian husband live in Tokyo as well.

We were more confident during the 2nd trip because we had completed a Captain's Course and a Referee's Course run by Keith McLeod from Broadbeach Croquet Club and had qualified for our Level 2 Referee's Badge. Our playing skills also adapted quicker to the surface this time around. It was the same format - 4 morning games at one Centre including breaks, lunch and then 4 games in the afternoon. The

Eating ice cream in a break between the games



ice creams we were given were deliciously cold and so welcome during the breaks because the weather was hot. We had another terrific day of gateball.

Keiichi again thanked us for coming and he really enjoyed his day out once again. His friendly banter and relaxed manner was appreciated by all of us. We would recommend to any of you keen gateballers who are

travelling to places where gateball is played- not just in Japan but to Asian countries like Taiwan, China, South Korea and Singapore - to make contact with people like Keith McLeod (aims@smartchat.net.au), Gilon Smith (info@gateball.com.au) or even Keiichi Imagawa (imagawa@gateball.jp) all of whom can provide contact details for gateball clubs.

Cleaning and smoothing over the courts between games

