

Sports! A Vehicle for Cultural Exchange!

By: Mike Rothwell

Since, my previous article (Trip of a Lifetime) was so well received, Hatchiroe asked me to write a follow up about the “Cultural Exchange” between the Orlando Runners Club and our counterparts in the Urayasu Runners Club.

In the time since my visit to Japan in March 2002 several things have happened that makes one think of the essence of our relationship. The ORC’s / URC’s involvement in the Sister City Program (Cultural Exchange) between Orlando, Fl. and Urayasu, Japan is a bit different due to the fact that it is not just an “exchange” of cultures but is also oriented around a sporting event (Tokyo Bay Urayasu City 1/2 Marathon). This brings a different dynamic due to it’s nature of sharing in an athletic endeavor that is universal and timeless to man. **RUNNING** is the purest sport, since the beginning of time and our individual lives we have known running. We all once were children running around our homes, cities, parks and farms. It is natural to run, it is innate in our very being. Some of us continue as adults to run or perhaps have rediscovered in our later years this wonderful athletic expression of not only who we are but who we were.

This is what makes our connection with the Cultural Exchange so unique. We share a common bond with our Japanese friends that gives us immediately something to share. Most runners spend hours not only training but talking and sharing the details of our races and adventures. This common knowledge and passion for the sport gives us an immediate kinship that helps break down some of the barriers that come with the great differences in our cultures. It is not that we are so vastly different, as human beings we are very much the same. But differences in societies, cultures and customs frame our lives to seem so foreign in so many ways. That is what is so fantastic about the “homestay” part of our program. One gains an opportunity to be part of a home and a family in order to learn more about the people and the places they live.

In the time since my visit, a couple of events have transpired that the United States and our Japanese counterparts have shared. Since my participation in the program these events now take on greater significance to me personally. In June, the World Cup took place not only in South Korea but in Japan. As I watched the various games I found myself paying more attention to and cheering for the Japanese team. What was really important though was the realization that all of our U.S. fans and representatives were sharing in a “cultural exchange” with other countries from around the world. After my trip to Japan you get a greater sense of what is going on beyond the games. Again, sport gives us the greatest opportunity to share and compete in an arena that promotes camaraderie and likeness not differences and disputes.

The second event that just happened was the Little League World Series. Just like last year a U.S. team and a Japanese team met in the championship game. This year both teams played an intense game with the U.S. team squeaking out a hard fought 1-0 victory. Last year, the Japanese team had a last inning two-run rally to take home the World Championship Trophy. The significance of this event lies not only in the sport of baseball but the fact that our youths get this special experience. It is great to see our young people participate in something that ultimately promotes understanding and exchange. Again, it is through sports that we come together to share our common passions.

Obviously, the greatest vehicle for sports is the Olympics. These things that I have written about are all at their zenith at the Olympics. Sportsmen and women representing countries from all over the world come to compete against not only their allies but their enemies in an event established precisely for the this cause of sharing and understanding our commonalties and working to overcome our differences.

The history between Japan and the U.S. is an amazing story of triumph to me. Not in it's battles from WWII but from the fact that since that time the two countries have come so far in their relationship and growth that they have established mutual respect and understanding. I see conflicts around the world that have gone on for hundreds of years that seem they will never end. I think they need more sports not more discussions.

As I sat on the stage before the 1/2 Marathon in March, to my far left was the winner of the 1952 Boston Marathon. It was a true honor to meet Mr. Yamada, the greatest Japanese Marathoner of all time. I am so humbled in knowing that I never heard of this man before but here I was sharing the stage with such greatness. Ultimately, it is these people, our heroes, that lead the charge of breaking barriers. It is through their greatness that we are humbled as human beings to understand not just our athletic potential but our human potential. These heroes carry our hopes and dreams with them. In this way, one realizes that as participants of our program that while we are not heroes, that in some small way we carry the hopes and dreams of our people on our shoulders, that we represent something bigger than ourselves and that we are lucky to experience an event that promotes understanding and friendship along the way. Because, actually in our hearts and souls we all really want to celebrate our common bonds as human beings.

On the final night of my stay in Japan, Hatchiroe (my homestay host), Seino (URC President) and I talked about our club's relationship with the Sister City Program. After our discussion I left feeling that our club's friendship was strong and happy. I know that Hatchiroe and others have made many friends over the last 11 years. I hope that this continues for decades and that others get to experience the unique and awe inspiring trip that is at the heart of our cultural exchange. I look forward to seeing the URC representatives in Orlando in early December and I certainly hope to make it back to Japan in the years to come.

Long May You Run!

Mike Rothwell