**Interview with Professor Yuichi Nakagaichi**

**May 31, 2024**

**1. Could you start by telling me a little bit about yourself and your international experiences?**

**Nakagaichi**: I was born here, in Fukui city, in 1967, and I started playing volleyball at Tsukuba University. I was a member of the Japanese national team from the age of 22, in 1989, until I was 32 years old in 2000. I retired from active volleyball in 2004, and became the head coach of my club’s team. After coaching the Japanese men’s national team at the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, I quit coaching and returned to Fukui. Now, I’m also growing rice. That’s my family business, so I’m running the company and I’m teaching sports and health science.

**Hofmeyr:** Do you teach mainly in Japanese?

**Nakagaichi**: Yeah, I teach completely in Japanese, not at all in English.

**2. In broad terms, in your sports career, how often did you work in international or intercultural environments?**

**Nakagaichi**: Club teams or professional teams usually have foreign players, and some teams have foreign coaches or foreign staff. I spoke a little English, so I always took care of those players and coaches. Also, the national team had a French coach. When I was the head coach of the Japan national team, I had a French assistant coach, and we worked together for five years. I also worked at the Asian Volleyball Federation, where I was a member of the coaches committee, and I spent a lot of time promoting volleyball in Asia and developing coaches.

**Hofmeyr:** Did you have to travel a lot for that job when you were promoting volleyball?

**Nakagaichi:** Actually, I didn’t because COVID-19 happened, so we always had meetings on Zoom or Teams. During my two years doing overseas training, I worked as a volunteer coach for the US national men’s and women’s teams and also as a volunteer coach at Pepperdine University.

**Hofmeyr:** In your experience, did most communication happen in English? You mentioned that there were foreign players and coaches, and you also worked with the French assistant coach. Did you use English to communicate, or did you use any other languages?

**Nakagaichi:** No, I always communicated in English. When I stayed in Brazil for two months for coaching training, I tried to speak Portuguese, but I was there for just two months.

**3. Throughout your career, you have worked closely with other players, coaches, and technical staff both in Japan and abroad. Could you tell me about any similarities or differences you noticed in team dynamics?**

**Nakagaichi:** It’s difficult. Actually, around the year 2000, Japanese teams were highly individual. I mean, powerful coaches managed the teams with a strong sense of authority. That’s the old Japanese style, when the head coach controls everything with complete authority. In the US, all information was open, and the staff members shared and discussed the information as they worked on the project. I believe this is now the case of Japanese sports teams as well. In the US, the staff were a group of experts in different fields, and we put together a team where everyone could discuss and demonstrate the abilities that the experts had. Now it’s also changing in Japan.

**4. Since you have had to communicate with a lot of different people from different countries who speak different languages, what strategies have you used for effective communication in these international sports events?**

**Nakagaichi:** Before camp began, we had a meeting with all the staff to go over what we were trying to do. In that period of time, we discussed how all the players were feeling and their condition. We tried to fill in any missing information by having a staff meeting every morning, especially about the condition of the players. Before each match, we would take time to analyze our opponents to determine our strategy. Before important matches, we also created a video to motivate the players and we asked them to watch it, so that they could be motivated. I asked a TV company to make those type of videos. Yeah, I think that helped us a lot.

**Hofmeyr:** Did you ever have to communicate directly with the other teams or the coaches from the other teams during these events?

**Nakagaichi:** Yeah, I did. We did.

**5. Can you think of any examples of very successful communication experiences in an international or intercultural environment?**

**Nakagaichi:** I don’t know if it’s successful communication or not, but when I was in California – it was a part of the JOC’s (Japan Olympic Committee) program for coaches to be sent overseas –, I stayed with the US men’s and women’s national team as a volunteer coach and learned the American way of coaching. In my spare time, I also assisted the men’s volleyball team at Pepperdine University. The players, the national team also, but the university players were all young and had never seen me playing because they are like my child’s age, but they always respected me when they talked to me. So, actually, it was really great, I really appreciated that. I also had discussions at Pepperdine University about the old Japanese coaching style. And after I finished speaking, they asked me lots of questions. Lots of. For example, in Japan, if we do that, there is almost nothing. I mean, if I ask the US national team players about their politics, they can answer. But in Japan, they don’t know the prime minister’s name or they don’t know what’s going on with foreign politics, so it’s totally different. The players are different. The US players can speak their mind. In Japan, especially in volleyball, I don’t know, but when I asked the players, I think they hesitated to speak. They can’t express what they think, or decide how they should talk, so there is a difference in ability.

**Hofmeyr:** How is it now with your students? Do you have a similar situation or are students in Japan nowadays asking more questions?

**Nakagaichi:** Nothing. No response. That’s based on the Japanese mentality. They are always afraid of making mistakes, or they are worried about what others will think if they say something. They always care about something.

**6. Have you faced any challenges working in diverse intercultural environments, for instance in global sports competitions like world championships and the Olympics?**

**Nakagaichi:** Fortunately, we had a common language, volleyball, so we never faced any major problem. However, just before the Tokyo Olympics, we had a problem in Italy. I think 16 teams were staying in the same hotel and also in the same game site. And it was during COVID-19, so we couldn’t go out freely. We could just get on a bus, or we could go to just the beach in front of the hotel. So, in the middle of the tournament, the other countries’ players were going out, taking a taxi or going somewhere, going shopping or to a restaurant. They did that. I think only the Japanese followed the rules. It was very, very stressful for us. The players from other countries had a lot of freedom.

**Ana:** So for the Japanese players who were staying, it was a stressful situation.

**Nakagaichi:** Yes, very much so. One of the most suffering moments in my career. Because we had to decide the Olympic members so 12 players out of 17, so our staff and players were feeling stressed.

**7. During your career as a player and as a coach you had to travel to international tournaments and go back to Japan. Did you face any challenges moving back and forth between Japan and overseas locations for competitions?**

**Nakagaichi:** Yeah, simply it was the time difference. In my coaching days, VNL (Volleyball Nations League) had three matches in a weekend – Friday, Saturday, Sunday; every Friday, Saturday, Sunday, we had a game. And then we travelled on Monday somewhere else, for five weeks. So fifteen matches in five weeks. It was so tough. If we play in the same spot, it could be tough. But from Europe to Asia, Asia to America, America to South America, travelling all over the world, it was so tough. For example, it takes about over 24 hours, 26 or 27 hours from Brazil to Japan, so they started on Monday, we arrive on Wednesday morning or something like that, and it’s so so tough. We were always fighting the jet lag.

**Hofmeyr:** Was it difficult to move between different countries or different cultures, different food, languages, or really was it mostly the time difference that was main issue?

**Nakagaichi:** Yeah, no we didn’t care about the food, we didn’t care about the hotel, we didn’t care about the languages, we just cared about the jet lag. So every time after we got to the hotel, after a long flight, even if we were really sleepy, we couldn’t [sleep]; we had to walk around and we had to wait for nighttime. After sunrise, we walked again before breakfast. Also, we always flew in economy class. You know, we are volleyball players, so we're like over 2 meters tall. Some Russian players are like 2.10m, 2.15m or something like that, so it’s always so tough. That’s very stressful for the players. We always chose aisle seats, but even if we take aisle seats, the spaces are so tiny.

**8. What kind of competencies do you think are necessary for students who are considering living and working across cultures in the future?**

**Nakagaichi:** This is what I told you before, I guess. When I had a lecture in a university in the US, they talked, or they asked me lots of things. Even Japanese students, they have to speak what they think. That’s not a natural thing, that’s not natural in Japan. But if they go overseas or if they work with foreign people, they have to communicate in other languages. They need training, like in volleyball. Japanese, Japanese didn’t get used to do that, so they need training.

**9. Can you think of any strategies that you have acquired through your experiences that can help prepare students in Japan for future careers in sports?**

**Nakagaichi:** Learning English is the start. Maybe English is still one key language in Japan. Maybe Chinese is, most people say. But English is still a key language to use. So for communication, for example in volleyball, if I want to go Germany and play, I have to learn German. If I want to go to Italy, I have to learn Italian. But English, we can use everywhere. The national team players study on their own. I mean, our national team players studied foreign languages on their own. We didn’t say anything about that, but after they join the national team, they start to learn English.

**Hofmeyr:** Is there any language course provided to players who join the national teams to prepare them to work abroad?

**Nakagaichi:** We don’t provide [a language course]. One player playing in Italy right now – actually, he’s a pretty good player, he is one of the best outside hitters in the world – he can speak really good Italian right now. Also, he can speak English. Most of the guys who play in Europe after one season – one season means five, six months – they can have interviews in English. Before they go overseas, they can only say “Hello”, “Thank you”, like that. But after five, six months, their English is not so good, but they can speak English with confidence, dignity, and openly. It’s quite big progress. They surprised me. Huge, huge difference. That’s why right now, the Japan men’s volleyball team’s world ranking is 4th. When I took the job, it was 14th, so it is a big difference. Because technically they get better, but I mean, as people, mentally, they grow. I still believe that.