

Meet Japan's 2019 Rugby World Cup Juggernaut

The Japan Rugby Football Union announced on Thursday, August 29, the 31-man roster (18 forwards, 13 backs) for a national team that is determined to advance to the 2019 Rugby World Cup Final 8 for the first time in history. The quadrennial tournament is being held in Japan this autumn.

Nicknamed the “Cherry Blossoms,” Japan's squad will be a mixture of veterans and new faces. But probably its most unique characteristic is that a record-breaking 15 of the 31 team members were born abroad. The hope is that diversity will become Japan's ticket to the top ranks of the rugby world.

Among the best known players are captain and flanker Michael Leitch, 38-year-old Luke Thompson (who has appeared in four straight World Cups), and Fumiaki Tanaka (three straight World Cups).

“Foreign players are going to continue to be absolutely essential for Japanese rugby, and the public understands that,” Leitch said on August 18 at the Japanese team's training camp in Abashiri, Hokkaido.

According to the international rugby regulations, even if a player is not native-born, if he has lived in a country for 36 months continuously and fulfills certain other prerequisites, he is qualified to represent the country in international competition.

Leitch, a native of New Zealand, first played for Japan in the 2011 World Cup, when he was one of 10 foreign-born players. He remembers many Japanese fans grumbling that there were “too many foreigners” on the national team.

Leitch later became a naturalized citizen of Japan. Nevertheless, he says that when he was chosen to be captain of the Cherry Blossoms in April 2014, he could not help but worry about how fans would react to a “foreigner” becoming team captain.

However, the prevailing atmosphere changed with the 2015 World Cup, when Japan pulled off arguably the “biggest upset in rugby union history” by toppling mighty South Africa and winning three victories. Moreover, the hearts of many Japanese fans were won over by the sight of foreign-born players shoulder-to-shoulder with Japanese teammates respectfully singing Japan's national anthem “Kimigayo” and giving their all on the pitch.

Building Harmony Into the Team

Again at the helm as captain for this year's World Cup, Leitch goes out of his way to help foreign-born players understand Japan — for example, by bringing to training camp a red traditional suit of armor and helmet to stand as a symbol for the samurai spirit. And when the team was holding a training camp in Miyazaki Prefecture in July, he took the team to the Omi Shrine in Hyuga City, where they stood in front of a huge boulder of naturally-fused pebbles said to be the very *sazare-ishi* mentioned in the lyrics of the “Kimigayo,” and sang the national anthem together.

New members of the team have also been eagerly trying to fathom Japanese culture. Pieter Labuschagne from South Africa and James Moore from Australia, for example, have taken to watching YouTube renditions of “Kimigayo” with the lyrics in Romanized script and practicing by singing along.

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Harmony has been only one side of the rugby man's life in Japan. There has also been no lack of bitterness and dissension. Leitch, who has seen it all, admits that that used to be what the Japan team was known for. However, he hastens to add that, thanks to the influence of straight-shooting foreign players, at present team ranks are harmonious and everyone is working to point out problems and build good human relations.

Leitch is philosophical about the situation: "The time is fast approaching in Japan when [more than before] Japanese will have work together with foreigners. I would like sports to showcase how this can work."

As the record 15 foreign born players don jerseys with the rising sun on the back to represent the host nation in the 2019 Rugby World Cup, hopefully their effort and individual talents will brilliantly fuse to create a powerhouse national side that will win the respect of a global audience.

Meet the team roster and the pro teams in Japan the players are associated with:

FORWARDS

1. Keita Inagaki (Panasonic Wild Knights)
2. Isileli Nakajima (Kobelco Steelers)
3. Jiwon Koo (Honda Heat)
4. Yusuke Kizu (Toyota Verblitz)
5. Asaeli Ai Valu (Panasonic Wild Knights)
6. Takuya Kitade (Suntory Sungoliath)
7. Atsushi Sakate (Panasonic Wild Knights)
8. Shota Horie (Panasonic Wild Knights)
9. Luke Thompson (Kintetsu Liners)
10. Wimpie van der Walt (NTTDOCOMO Red Hurricanes)
11. Uwe Helu (Yamaha Jubilo)
12. James Moore (Munakata Sanix Blues)
13. Hendrik Tui (Suntory Sungoliath)
14. Yoshitaka Tokunaga (Toshiba Brave Lupus)
15. Michael Leitch (captain; Toshiba Brave Lupus)
16. Pieter Labuschagne (Kubota Spears)
17. Kazuki Himeno (Toyota Verblitz)
18. Amanaki Lelei Mafi (NTT Communications Shining Arcs)

BACKS

1. Kaito Shigeno (Toyota Verblitz)
2. Fumiaki Tanaka (Canon Eagles)
3. Yutaka Nagare (Suntory Sungoliath)
4. Yu Tamura (Canon Eagles)
5. Rikiya Matsuda (Panasonic Wild Knights)
6. William Tupou (Coca-Cola Red Sparks)
7. Ryoto Nakamura (Suntory Sungoliath)
8. Timothy Lafaele (Kobelco Steelers)
9. Kenki Fukuoka (Panasonic Wild Knights)
10. Ataata Moeakiola (Kobelco Steelers)
11. Lomano Lava Lemeki (Honda Heat)
12. Kotaro Matsushima (Suntory Sungoliath)
13. Ryohei Yamanaka (Kobelco Steelers)

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「グローバル化は1番」 ラグビー日本代表、過去最多の海外出身者

29日に発表されたワールドカップ（W杯）日本大会の登録メンバーたち。31人中、外国出身者は過去最多の15人となった。多様化が進むチームが一丸となり、初の8強入りを目指す。

「日本のラグビーにはこれから先も外国人が絶対にいる。多分、世間はそれを理解してくれている」。8月18日。日本代表合宿のために北海道網走市に来たリーチ・マイケルは穏やかな表情で語った。

国籍が違って、36カ月継続して居住するなどの条件を満たせば代表資格が得られるのがラグビーだ。

リーチが日本代表として初めて出場した2011年W杯は海外出身選手が10人。「外国人が多い」という不満の声はいやでも耳に入ってきた。その後、日本国籍を取得したが、14年4月、代表主将に指名されると「『外国人』が主将になったらファンはどう思うんだろう」と思い悩んだ。

だが、15年W杯が雰囲気を変えた。「史上最大の番狂わせ」と称された南アフリカ戦を含む歴史的3勝とともに、日本出身選手と肩を組んで君が代を歌い、ピッチ上で献身的にプレーする彼らの姿は日本人の心を打った。

主将として迎える2度目のW杯に向け、リーチは海外出身選手に日本を理解してもらおう努力を惜しまない。合宿先には侍の精神の象徴として赤い鎧兜（よろいかぶと）を持ち込んだ。7月の宮崎合宿では日向市の神社を訪れ、君が代の歌詞に用いられている「さざれ石」の前で国歌を歌い上げた。

新たに代表入りした選手も、積極的に日本文化を理解しようと試みた。合宿中、南アフリカ出身のピーター・ラブスカフニと豪州出身のジェームス・ムーアは、動画投稿サイト「ユーチューブ」でローマ字の字幕が出る君が代の映像を見ながら歌の練習を重ねた。

調和を大切にする半面、厳しさが足りない。日本代表の特徴をかつてはそう指摘していたリーチだが、率直にものを言う海外出身選手の影響で、現在のチームは協調性を保ちつつ、互いに問題点を指摘し合う人間関係が形成されたと感じている。「これから日本は（これまで以上に）外国人と仕事をしなければいけない時期が来る。スポーツでちゃんとできているところを見せたい」。過去最多15人の海外出身選手が日の丸を背負って戦う日本開催のW杯は、見事な融合と進化を遂げたチームの強さを示す最高の舞台となる。

出典:「グローバル化は1番」 ラグビー日本代表、過去最多の海外出身者

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