

SPORTS

OTA: Brings his own brand of English, Volleyball to U of A

by Keith Steinbach

The first time I saw Suichi Ota was through a maze of sweaty bodies and pounding volleyballs. He was shouting what seemed to be inaudible instructions to his U of A volleyball team who responded almost immediately to his command. This amazes onlookers as they can only pick a few words out of Ota's broken English.

But once you start to understand Suichi Ota's brand of English, you find that he is a warm, intelligent man.

Suichi (nicknamed "squeegee") was born, raised, and educated in Hiroshima. That is also where he got his start in volleyball at age 8, playing in a mini-volleyball league. In high school he played on three championship teams. His coaching career got underway at the top level 2 years ago when he took over the Tokyo Police team. The team did fairly well under his direction and the pay was good. Why then did he come to Canada?

"I came to Canada as a favour to Mr. Toyota (Toyota toured Canada a few years ago giving v-ball clinics). Mr. Toyota helped me so I must help him. He told me to come to Canada to help Hugh Hoyles. I also want to study the Sociology of Sport (which isn't taught in Japan) and hopefully get my Master's Degree in Phys. Ed."

The 25 year old Ota arrived in Canada last May and worked with the Canadian National team for a few months and then took over for Hugh Hoyles here at the U of A.

"I was treated very well by the U of A. Especially Mr. Zemrau and Dr. Glassford who helped me a great deal."

When asked about the Golden Bear team he coached this year, Ota stated, "They've got potential. They certainly improved over the year." But Suichi admitted to a mistake he made during the year. "I shouldn't have used the Japanese system of volleyball in the first year. Especially with all of these rookies. It confused them."

He is almost always the first one to point out his own mistakes. "I wasn't able to do my best this year. There was no assistant coach and there was the language barrier to get over."

Suichi's English does take some getting used to. It was about three weeks into the volleyball season before I knew what he was saying. He makes up for this, however, by making comical gestures to get his point across. At Color Night a

few weeks ago, Suichi was chatting with myself and my escort and after he disappeared into the crowd my escort said "He's funny," although she never understood a word he said.

Ota's main interest, outside of volleyball, is the sociology of sport which he plans to study if and when he passes the TOEFL test in May. He sees the major differences in the Canadian and Japanese cultures as contributing to the differences in athletic prowess.

"You see, in Japan we see sport as an education. Here it is merely a leisure time thing. There are few resources in Japan so we must work hard and always do our best. That's the way the Japanese do everything, including sport. In Canada, there are lots of resources, people don't have to work that hard."

Ota likes the Canadian "system" of sports as opposed



"In Japan, we see sport as an education, not merely as leisure. In Canada...people don't have to work that hard." Photo Gavriloff

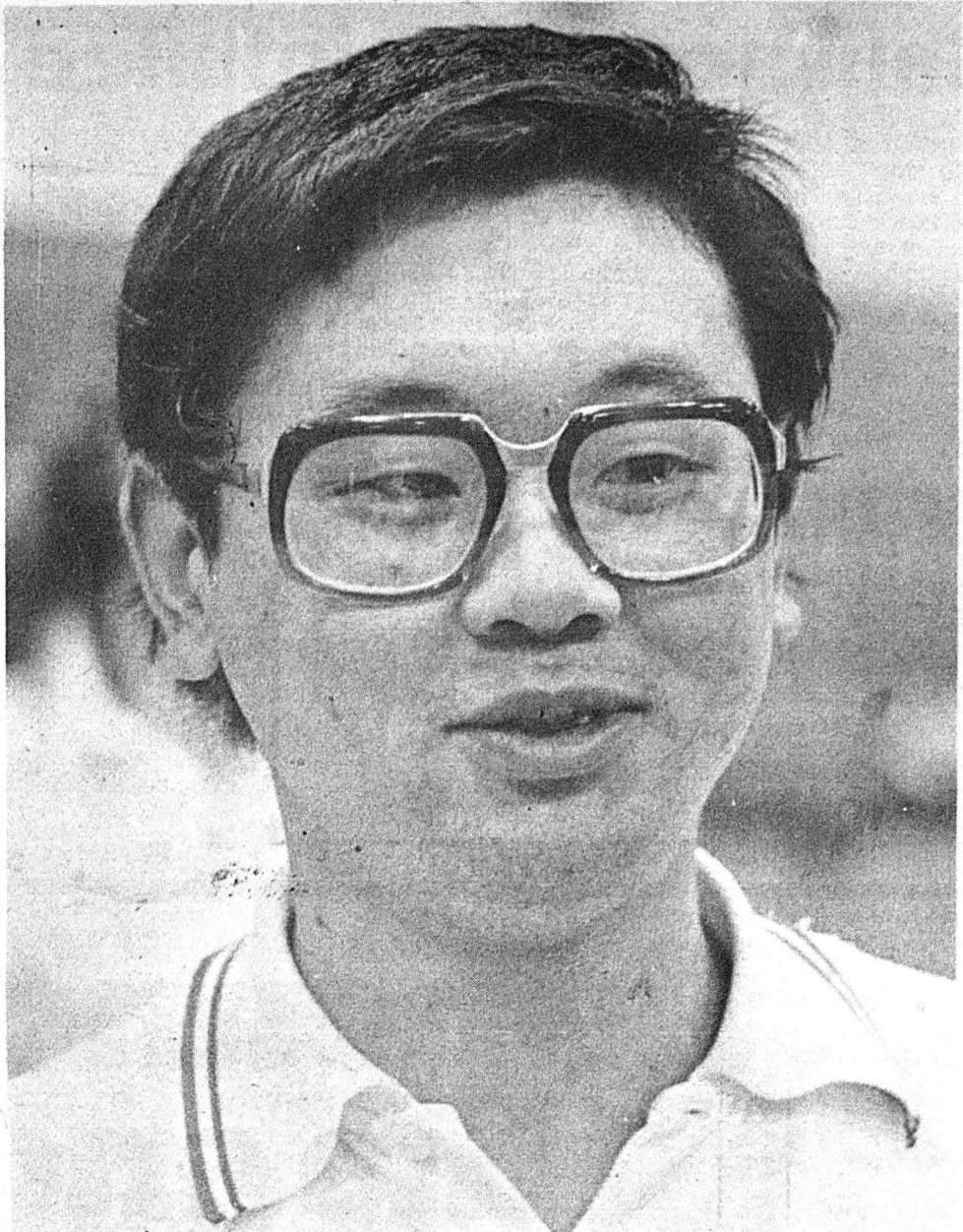


Photo Brian Gavriloff

"People in Japan think Canada should be a leader in the world."

to the Japanese. "In Japan, if you were in a volleyball town, you played volleyball and nothing else. If you played baseball you played nothing else. In Canada there is more variety which is good for the athlete."

Suichi's plans for the immediate future hinge on the results of his TOEFL exam this May. If he passes he said he will go to Montreal for the Olympics. "If I don't," he said, "then I'll stay here and study more."

Next year, when Hugh Hoyles returns as coach of the Golden Bears, Ota is considering taking the assistant coaching job or even playing on the team. Also being a Grad student there is the possibility of becoming a T.A. in a volleyball course. After his Master's Suichi would like to return to Japan to teach.

Talking to Suichi Ota is always amusing whether you understand him or not. His boyish humor reflects the fact that back in Japan he is "just a kid at 25." He is amazed that almost all the people he knows are younger than him. The question he asks most often is "How old are you?" "Eighteen," I answer. He falls back in his chair with practiced amazement and says "You just a kid."

That is another difference about our culture that interests him. "Canada is young and has lots of resources. It has potential. People in Japan think Canada should be a leader in the world," he stated.

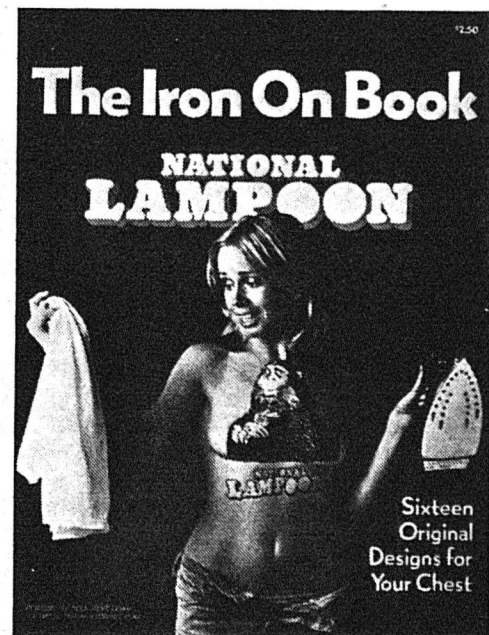
Ota's social life in Canada is not the greatest. Besides volleyball and Physical Education personnel he has few social

contacts. "Oh, it's not bad. But I have no girlfriend," he says with a sly smile.

Nonetheless the diminutive coach of the U of A v-ball team is enjoying Canada very much and with a year of our "confusing way of life" under his belt next year could see bigger and better things for Ota and possibly the Golden Bears.

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