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Japan's leading cyclist races in his seventh Tour de France

By Mike Street

Special to The Asian Reporter

In recent years, the focus of the Tour de France has been either on the frontrunners or the cheaters, but Asian cycling fans have been cheering for Japanese rider Yukiya Arashiro since 2009. In 2016, Arashiro participated in his seventh Tour de France, showing his strength during one breakaway stage and overcoming a gruesome injury sustained earlier in the year to post a very strong finish.

Arashiro entered the cycling scene in a rather improbable fashion at 18 years old in 2002. An avid handball player, he had never participated in competitive cycling, but a family friend who was competing in France inspired him.

Arashiro followed his friend to France to begin racing competitively. "I never even saw the Tour de France on television until I arrived in France, and I didn't know how it worked," he said later. "Initially, I just wanted to make it to the finish of races." In the more competitive world of French cycling, Arashiro soon began to excel.

In 2005, he won two under-23 championships in Japan: the National Time Trial and the Road Race Championships. After graduating from the junior circuit, he won Japan's National Road Race Championships in 2007, a performance he repeated in 2013.

Arashiro's career began to really take off in 2008, when he finished third overall in the Tour du Limousin, winning the race's second stage. This was his first stage victory and best finish in an HC (Hors d'Catégorie) race. HC races are one level below the top-level Grand Tour, which comprises the three most famous cycling races: the Tour de France, Giro d'Italia, and the Vuelta a España.

In addition to his performance at the Tour du Limousin, Arashiro won both the Tour de Okinawa and the Tour de Kumano. This breakthrough year led to an invitation to ride in the 2009 season with the Bouygues Telecom team, who selected him to ride in his first Tour de France.

That year, Arashiro became the first Japanese cyclist to finish the Tour de France, crossing the finish line in 126th place, ahead of countryman Fumiyuku Beppo. In 2010, Arashiro stood alone as the first Japanese cyclist to finish two



COMPETITIVE CYCLIST. Japan's Yukiya Arashiro (right photo), celebrates on the podium after being awarded the prize for best combative rider during the sixth stage of the Tour de France cycling race over 118.1 miles with the start in Arpajon-sur-Cère and finish in Montauban, France, on July 7, 2016. In the left photo, Arashiro, front, speeds down Val Louron Azet pass during the 17th stage of the 2014 Tour de France cycling race over 77.4 miles with the start in Saint-Gaudens and finish in Saint-Lary, France.

Grand Tour events after completing the Giro d'Italia. In that race, he led a breakaway in the fifth stage, nearly earning his first Grand Tour stage victory. Arashiro also finished ninth at the world road race championships in Melbourne, the first top-ten finish for a Japanese cyclist in that event. Arashiro capped that excellent season by placing 112th in his second Tour de France, improving on his performance from the year before.

After securing the Asian Championship in 2011, Arashiro established another landmark in 2012. His win in the 2012 Tour du Limousin was the first HC victory by a Japanese cyclist, establishing Arashiro among the top echelon of international cyclists.

That year, Arashiro also competed in his fourth Tour de France, establishing new standards for himself and his country. In the second stage, he finished in fifth place after a mad sprint to the finish, the closest he'd ever come to winning a Grand Tour stage.

His fourth-stage breakaway earned him the red jersey for being that stage's most combative rider. He finished in 84th place,

the best performance ever by a Japanese rider in the Tour de France. After the race, he said, "For me, the most important thing every season is to ride the Tour."

In 2013, the year Arashiro repeated as Japan's road race champion, he won second place at the Tour de Limousin and finished 99th in his fifth Tour de France. He improved that result in 2014 by winning 65th place, a year when he also finished the Giro d'Italia for the second time.

Arashiro showed his resilience in 2015, as he broke his shoulder in a wreck during a race in Liege, Belgium. He could not participate in the Tour de France, but six months later, Arashiro completed the Vuelta a España. This made him the first Japanese cyclist to finish all three Grand Tour events. Even better, he did so in 65th place; a month later, he also took third in the Japan Cup.

Prior to this season, perhaps because of his grit, Arashiro was signed by the Italian team Lampre-Merida, who cited his trailblazing ways as well as his performance record. In his inaugural race with the team, Arashiro took second place at the



Asian Cycling championships. Less than a month later, however, he went down in a wreck in the final stage of the Tour of Qatar, this time breaking his left femur.

But Arashiro kept his fitness up and proved his health at the Tour of Japan four months later, leading a breakaway at the end of the seventh stage for his first stage win since his 2013 victory. A month after that, he raced in his seventh Tour de France, once again displaying his grit and sprinting ability.

In the sixth stage, Arashiro led a breakaway after just three kilometers, pulling away from the pack with one other rider for 165 kilometers. They built a lead of more than five minutes before the peloton overtook them. For his aggressive riding, Arashiro won the red jersey for the second time at the Tour de France. He said later, "I'm pleased that I received the award as most combative rider, it's a prize for the determination I had to promote the breakaway ... Today I add another beautiful moment."

In the end, Arashiro was unable to keep up the pace he'd maintained in earlier Tours, but considering his injury in February, his performance was nonetheless impressive. After slipping back to 140th place in the middle stages, Arashiro improved down the stretch to finish in 116th place. Next season, if he can stay healthy, look for Arashiro to set even more Asian records on the international cycling scene.

Japan companies seek hipness through teens posting to Vine

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peaked in Japan. Nobi Hayashi, who consults and writes about technology in Japan, believes Vine's trademark brevity is proving its weakness.

"It becomes just one gag after the other," Hayashi said.

Vine added a "watch more" option in June, allowing an attachment of longer video of up to 140 seconds, and up to 10 minutes for some partners. Vine is also starting to support opportunities to make money through the clips.

But Japanese, like Americans, are often turning to rivals like Snapchat. And other social networks, such as Instagram and Facebook, also offer video.

Oozeki says she is expanding to other platforms, especially YouTube, for self-expression. That reflects the sentiments of many of the Japanese Vine stars, who see their influence on Vine as a springboard for other online or film careers.

Hokuto Ikura quit his job at a major company and moved to Tokyo from Fukuoka to become a planner at Tokyo-based Grove Inc., which recruits and supports Viners and other online creators.

Vine changed Ikura's life in a personal way, too. Oozeki is now his girlfriend. He says they complement each other well because Oozeki is

inspired and creative, while he is more organized and analytical.

Hayatto Noguchi, with about 23,000 followers and 16 million loops or views on Vine, is hoping to leverage Vine as a springboard for his livelihood.

Noguchi uses animation as well as the stop-motion technique of manipulating real-life objects, frames at a time, to create the illusion of movement.

In one, colorful origami-like buildings pop up on a desk. In another, a likeness of Noguchi appears on top of a cake to wish a happy birthday. He has already been tapped by Intel Japan, Tic Tac mints, and other companies to create Vine videos, although the pay is relatively small at a few hundred dollars per post.

It's a tricky process to fine tune the looping and craft an eye-catching concept. An overly polished look can backfire because most people are tired of the slickness of television ads and Hollywood movies, he said.

Noguchi recently quit his job at a cellphone company and is devoting himself full time to Vine. He hasn't told his parents about Vine, dreaming of that day they'll find out on their own.

But he has no illusions about how fleeting the Vine craze might be, and shrugs that time might be running out for him to become a self-sustaining videographer.

"I think this year is it," he said.

Giant panda Xiao Liwu celebrates fourth birthday

Xiao Liwu, a male giant panda at the San Diego Zoo, turned four years old last month. The panda, whose name means little gift, received a birthday party complete with ice cake — flavored with strawberry-kiwi and fruit-punch drink mix, puréed yams, carrots, apples, and honey — and presents. The apples and bamboo sticks on top of his cake resembled candles.

Xiao Liwu's exhibit was also filled with decorated gift boxes that were painted and embellished by a team of San Diego Zoo volunteers. Keepers filled the boxes with enrichment items, including wood wool, alfalfa, and burlap sacks covered in cinnamon — and some boxes just filled with more boxes. The birthday bear, called Mr. Wu by his keepers and panda fans, added blue and green colors to his iconic black-and-white markings.

The San Diego Zoo is home to three giant pandas: Xiao Liwu, his mother Bai Yun, and his father Gao Gao. Xiao Liwu is the sixth cub born to Bai Yun and the fifth cub fathered by Gao Gao. The giant pandas are on loan to the San Diego Zoo from the People's Republic of China for conservation studies of the endangered species.

To learn more, visit <<http://zoo.sandiegozoo.org/cams/panda-cam>>.

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