

Asians in American sports • Asian Americans in world sports

Fiji, Singapore celebrate Olympic firsts as Japan defies the odds

By Mike Street

Special to The Asian Reporter

The Olympics always bring the world a slew of exciting and heartwarming stories, and Rio brought more than its share to Asian sports fans. Medallists from Fiji and Singapore established Olympic firsts, while Japan's rugby team continued to shock the world on the pitch.

In modern times, several of the early Olympic Games featured traditional rugby, with 15 players on a side, but no Olympics has included the sport since 1924. In 2016, rugby returned in a faster, leaner format, with seven players on each side.

Twelve teams qualified for the men's "sevens" version, including traditional powerhouses like New Zealand, Great Britain, and the top-ranked team in the world, Fiji. But the field also included young upstarts such as Kenya, Brazil, and Japan. Following on the heels of their stunning upset of South Africa during pool play at the 2015 Rugby World Cup, Japan hoped to continue their odds-defying ways in Rio.

They did not disappoint.

In its opening game, the squad faced New Zealand, the 12-time world champion. Unruffled, Japan employed its speedy game to stun the Kiwis, 14-12, grabbing the first-day rugby headlines. Eager to prove the win was no fluke, Japan fought hard against a seasoned British squad, but lost, 21-19, missing a late conversion that would have given them a tie against another formidable opponent.

Japan trounced Kenya, 31-7, in its last group match, to qualify for a quarterfinal matchup against France. Trailing 5-7, Japan scored a try with just 17 seconds left to steal the victory against France and advance to the semifinal round.

There, Japan faced Fiji, rugby's world champions, who were widely expected to win the country's first-ever medal. Fiji had cruised through the tournament, winning



AP Photo/Robert F. Bukaty



AP Photo/Thermba Hadebe

all three of its group matches against the U.S., Argentina, and host Brazil. In the quarterfinal, the team defeated New Zealand, 12-7, scoring on their first possession and then holding off a late Kiwi surge for the win.

Giant-killing Japan failed to deliver an

upset against Fiji, though they kept the match close at first. Fiji's Vatemo Ravouvou scored in the first two minutes, but Japan quickly struck back on a try from Teruya Goto. Fiji pulled away for good at the start of the second half, however, then added to the lead,

RUGBY RETURNS. A Fiji fan, top photo, celebrates his country's gold-medal victory over Britain in men's rugby sevens at the 2016 Summer Olympics in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. In the bottom photo, Fiji's Osea Kolinisau, left, scores a try as Britain's Tom Mitchell tackles him during the men's rugby sevens gold-medal match at the Summer Olympics.

prevailing 20-5.

Fiji continued its momentum in the championship match against Great Britain, who barely put up a fight. The Fijians scored five unanswered tries in the first half to take an insurmountable 29-0 lead as Britain spent the entire first half on their end of the field. A late try broke the shutout, but Fiji cruised to victory anyway, 43-7.

Fiji's gold medal, the first ever awarded in rugby sevens, was also the first medal ever for the small island nation. Fiji erupted in celebration, and thousands tweeted with the hashtag #ToSoViti, which means "life is good." Life was not as good for the Japanese side, however. Japan ended its Olympic quest with a lopsided 14-54 loss to South Africa in the bronze-medal game.

Singapore also won its first gold medal, in a heartwarming story that involved American swimmer Michael Phelps, winner of the most medals in Olympic history. In 2008, Phelps and the U.S. swimming team travelled to a country club in Singapore to train before the Beijing Olympics.

Phelps caused a commotion when he arrived at the club, and adoring fans swarmed him for photos. Among those who snagged a snapshot with the Olympian was a 13-year-old Singaporean swimmer named Joseph Schooling. "I was so shell-shocked," recalled Schooling, "I couldn't really open my mouth."

Inspired by his idol, Schooling became Singapore's top swimmer, qualifying for the 2012 Olympics at the age of 17. There, he raced in the 100-meter and 200-meter butterfly, but Olympic officials told him

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Cup Craze: Souvenir Olympic cups were a hot item

By Dan Gelston

AP Sports Writer

RIO DE JANEIRO — Will Rodriguez put his collectible cup down just for a second, then — swoosh! — it was swiped.

He owned one of the hottest souvenirs of the Rio de Janeiro Games: A plastic Olympic gymnastics beer cup.

"That was a good one," Rodriguez, of Dallas, lamented.

Yes, the Olympics created yet another cupping craze, though this one involved the swirling orange, blue, and green color patterns on a yellow cup that included the name and silhouette of more than two dozen sports.

The most common sight at Olympic venues weren't medals draped around necks, but fans walking around with arms full, fixated on finding the next beer stand and hoarding empty cups.

Beer here!

Sure, but fans were chugging — and sometimes just dumping — their half liters (about 17 ounces) of Skol lager simply for the empty cups. Then it was back in line to put another 13 Brazilian reals (about \$4) on the growing beer tab. That totalled at least 300 reals for the set.

The cups suddenly fuelled the merchandise machine and have been traded, sold, and yes, even stolen, as fans clamored for hard-to-find sports such as gymnastics and soccer.

About an hour before boxing's Sunday evening session started, fans lined up 25 deep at some *cerveja* stands ready to go another round.

The long lines weren't necessarily because of slow pours from the can into the cup. Once at the front of the line, fans would shake through stacks of cups until they found the one sport they wanted.

"Boxe! Boxe! Boxe!" one fan shouted in Portuguese in his search for boxing.

"No! No!" the server shouted, as he pointed to one of the other stands at Rio Centro.

So off the man went, without a beer, with a more pressing mission on tap for the night.

Trampoline, tennis, equestrian, taekwondo, and water polo were the most common cups found at the complex that was home to boxing, table tennis, badminton, and weightlifting.

Brazilian native Sergio De Oliveira, now of Hoboken, New Jersey, wore his Team USA hat and shirt and gripped his equestri-



an (*hipismo*) cup.

De Oliveira and husband Terry Miles were trying to collect the cups of all 14 events they'd seen at the Olympics.

De Oliveira had no idea that when he bought a gymnastics cup at the opening ceremony, the hunk of plastic would soon spark a memorabilia frenzy.

"It was huge we got it all," Miles said.

Miles doesn't drink, leaving all the beer guzzling to De Oliveira.

Don't expect the couple to auction the cups on eBay to recoup all the real they've spent on their collectibles. They planned to keep

CUP CRAZE. A souvenir Olympic cup is seen at the 2016 Summer Olympics in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The cups suddenly fuelled the merchandise machine and have been traded, sold, and even stolen. (AP Photo)

most of them and share a few with friends back in the United States.

Carmen Pruneda, of San Antonio, Texas, had no interest in sipping any light blonde lager.

"I'm looking for cups, but I don't drink beer," she said.

Pruneda traded pins for cups, and cups for pins. She hit a bit of good luck when a woman dropped a cup on an escalator. The woman asked Pruneda if she was a collector. When she said yes, the stranger gave her both of her cups, boosting Pruneda's total to six.

One beer server said it was forbidden to just buy a cup.

The trinkets were a steal compared to other Olympic merchandise. Olympic hats went for about 60 reals, t-shirts for 80 to 100, and keychains 35. One man bought a beach towel at the souvenir stand — a soft landing spot for the three cups he then stuffed inside his shopping bag.

Come to think of it, those purple circles dotting Michael Phelps' shoulder and back from his cupping therapy do look like coasters.

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TALKING STORY IN ASIAN AMERICA



■ Polo

Polo's "Talking Story" column will return soon.



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