

Hawai'i's YouTube kicker dubbed the "Tokyo Toe" used grit to become an AP All-American with NFL hopes

By Audrey McAvo

The Associated Press

HONOLULU — Kansei Matsuzawa became an instant star last year, with game-tying and game-winning field goals in a 23-20 victory win over Stanford and a singular backstory about teaching himself to kick on YouTube.

The Japan-born Matsuzawa's near-perfect performance during the rest of Hawai'i's 8-4 season was even more impressive.

He made 25 consecutive field goals, tying a 43-year-old Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) record and earning first-team status as an Associated Press All-American as one the best players in the country. He was a finalist for the Lou Groza award given to the nation's top place-kicker.

"In every moment, I always choose win. Even if I want to go home, just choose when to stay on campus and do something extra," Matsuzawa said before his final game last season. "And that was the mindset I [had this season], and because of that now I get recognition from [the] entire country and also back home in Japan."

Dubbed the "Tokyo Toe" by teammates, he graduated last month and took the field for the Rainbow Warriors for the last time in the Hawai'i Bowl against California.

He has a chance of playing in the National Football League just six years after attending his first football game. Back then, he didn't understand the rules and knew just one player's name: Tom Brady.

Finding kickers on YouTube

Matsuzawa's unlikely path to college football dates to 2019. The high school soccer player failed annual college entrance exams in Japan two years in a row and didn't know what he wanted to do with his life. He was 20 years old and depressed.

"I had nothing. I lost my purpose of my life," Matsuzawa said in an interview.

His father gave him a ticket to travel to the U.S. and see a world outside Japan. He flew to California with no agenda other



than to watch an NFL game, a sport he had some affinity for because his father was a fan and they had watched Super Bowls together.

He didn't fully understand what he saw on the field at Oakland Coliseum. But the energy and fan enthusiasm at the stadium was different from what he had experienced in Japanese sports. Once back home, he decided he would return to the U.S., become a kicker, and play in the NFL.

American football is an obscure sport in Japan, ranking below baseball, soccer, sumo, golf, skating, and other pastimes in popularity. Matsuzawa wanted to learn from the best, an NFL player, but there weren't any in Japan. So he imitated kickers on YouTube, particularly Jason Myers of the Seattle Seahawks. He liked Myers' style, tempo, and rhythm. He told his family and a few friends but otherwise kept his plans a secret to avoid skeptics.

There are only a few football fields with goal posts in Japan, but one was an hour's commute from his house. He begged its owners, the Fujitsu Frontiers of a Japanese industrial league, to let him practice there in exchange for running team errands.

Grit to overcome adversity

After two years of practicing and saving

money from a steakhouse job, he sent video clips of himself kicking to U.S. junior college teams. Hocking College in tiny Nelsonville, Ohio, gave him a chance. He says he knew so little English he barely spoke the first three months. He's not sure anyone there had ever seen a Japanese person before.

The culture shock didn't deter him.

"Nothing beats me," he said with a smile.

He eventually made it on a list of top kicking prospects. Hawai'i's coordinator for special teams noticed Matsuzawa's leg strength and power, form, and technique. It was Matsuzawa's resilience and overcoming of adversity that prompted Thomas Sheffield to recruit him.

"That's what it's going to take to be successful," Sheffield said.

Matsuzawa was a walk-on, but got a scholarship a year ago and sobbed as his coach told him the good news. He was thinking of his parents, he says, who downsized their home to save money and help cover his costs, and of his grandparents, who paid his Hawai'i tuition.

Adjusting to the intensity of FBS play took time. Sheffield left him off the travel roster for a Vanderbilt game his first year but Matsuzawa picked himself up. He

before one puts the clues together.

There are efforts to improve. The National MS Society is educating doctors about newly updated guidelines to streamline diagnosis of multiple sclerosis. And scientists are discovering a growing list of rogue antibodies responsible for the memory loss, seizures, even psychosis that can signal autoimmune encephalitis. That's helping doctors better identify it.

How the immune system gets out of whack

The human immune system is a complex army with sentinels to detect threats like germs or cancer cells, a variety of soldiers to attack them, and peacemakers to calm things down once the danger is over. Key is that it can distinguish what's foreign from what's "you," what scientists call tolerance.

Sometimes confused immune cells or antibodies slip through, or the peacemakers can't calm things down after a battle. If the system can't spot and fix the problem, autoimmune diseases gradually develop.

Autoimmune diseases are often set off by a trigger

Most autoimmune diseases, especially in adults, aren't caused by a specific gene defect. Instead, a variety of genes that affect immune functions can make people susceptible. Scientists say it then takes some "environmental" trigger, such as an infection, smoking, or pollutants, to set the

SELF-TAUGHT SENSATION. Hawai'i place-kicker Kansei Matsuzawa of Japan poses for a portrait at Clarence T.C. Ching Athletics Complex in Honolulu. Matsuzawa became an instant star this past football season, with game-tying and game-winning field goals. (AP Photo/Mengshin Lin)

focused on doing small things right every day and said he gradually earned the respect of his teammates and coaches.

"It goes back to the grit and him finding a way to put him in a situation to fulfill his dreams," Sheffield said.

The right mindset

Matsuzawa worked with a sports psychologist twice a week this season, which he said helped. Last season, when he was 12 for 16 on field goal attempts, he set his mind on results like kicking farther and boosting his statistics. This year, he's focused on process, on kicking footballs, and staying positive.

"Luckily my job is simple, making field goals, and that's what I want to do," Matsuzawa said. "Just one at a time. Go out there, kick."

Matsuzawa credits his special teams unit for his achievements and said he will treasure their connection for the rest of his life. His holder, Caleb Freeman, said he would do anything for Matsuzawa's success.

"It's real easy for the position he's in to kind of take the spotlight and run with it," Freeman said. "But ever since the Stanford game, (when) he made the game-winning field goal, he has always just shined the light on everyone else."

The NFL has players of Japanese ancestry, like Commanders quarterback Jayden Daniels whose great-grandmother is Japanese. Historically a dozen players have listed a birthplace in Japan, according to Elias Sports Bureau, but their backgrounds indicate they were mostly born to parents serving overseas in the U.S. military.

Hawai'i coach Timmy Chang is confident Hawai'i and Japan will be rooting for him.

"I think he's going to do well," Chang said, "if he continues his mindset and the track in which he's at and all the things that made him who he is."

Autoimmune diseases can strike any part of the body, and mostly affect women. Here's what to know.

By Lauran Neergaard

The Associated Press

Our immune system has a dark side: It's supposed to fight off invaders to keep us healthy. But sometimes it turns traitor and attacks our own cells and tissues.

What are called autoimmune diseases can affect just about every part of the body — even the brain — and tens of millions of people. While most common in women, these diseases can strike anyone, adults or children, and they're on the rise.

New research is raising the prospect of treatments that might do more than tamp down symptoms. Dozens of clinical trials are testing ways to reprogram an out-of-whack immune system. Furthest along is a cancer treatment called CAR-T therapy that's had some promising early successes against lupus, myositis, and certain other illnesses. It wipes out immune system B cells — both rogue and normal ones — and the theory is those that grow back are healthier. Other researchers are hunting ways to at least delay brewing autoimmune diseases, spurred by a drug that can buy some time before people show symptoms of Type 1 diabetes.

"This is probably the most exciting time that we've ever had to be in autoimmunity," said Dr. Amit Saxena, a rheumatologist at NYU Langone Health.

Here are some things to know.

What are autoimmune diseases?

They're chronic diseases that can range from mild to life-threatening, more than 100 with different names depending on how and where they do damage. Rheumatoid arthritis and psoriatic arthritis attack joints. Sjögren's disease is known for dry eyes and mouth. Myositis and myasthenia gravis weaken muscles in different ways, the latter by attacking how nerves signal them. Lupus has widely varied symptoms including a butterfly-shaped facial rash, joint and muscle pain, fevers, and damage to the kidneys, lungs, and heart.

It can even hijack the organ that makes us "us" — the brain, with what's called autoimmune encephalitis.

They're also capricious: Even patients faring well for long periods can suddenly have a "flare" for no apparent reason.

Why autoimmune diseases are so difficult to diagnose

Many start with vague symptoms that come and go or mimic other illnesses. Many also have overlapping symptoms — rheumatoid arthritis and Sjögren's also can harm major organs, for example.

Diagnosis can take multiple tests, including some blood tests to detect antibodies that mistakenly latch onto healthy tissue. It usually centers on symptoms and involves ruling out other causes. Depending on the disease it can take years and seeing multiple doctors

disease into motion.

Scientists are zeroing in on the earliest molecular triggers. For example, white blood cells called neutrophils are first responders to signs of infection or injury — but abnormally overactive ones are suspected of playing a key role in lupus, rheumatoid arthritis, and other diseases.

New research links a virus to lupus

Among infectious triggers, scientists already know the Epstein-Barr virus can set some people on the path to multiple sclerosis — and new evidence links it to lupus, too.

Just about everybody gets that virus by young adulthood and after the initial infection, it still hides out, inactive, in the body. Stanford University researchers found a hiding place is in a tiny proportion of the immune system's B cells. They found that occasionally, in some people, the virus nudges certain B cells into an inflammatory state that can spur an autoimmune chain reaction.

The research doesn't explain why 95% of adults have been infected with Epstein-Barr yet only a small fraction of the population gets lupus. But it's a new clue into how infections can have a lasting impact on the immune system.

Women are at highest risk for autoimmune diseases

Women account for about 4 of 5 autoimmune patients, many of them young.

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