

I Love This Game

"Sport has the power to change the world. It has the power to unite in a way that little else does. It speaks to youth in a language they understand...it laughs in the face of all types of discrimination."

-Nelson Mandela

At my embassy interview for the position of Sports Exchange Advisor, I summoned this quote to help me explain how, even though I was familiar with neither Japan's culture nor language, I would be able to coach basketball in Japan. Even my interviewers could provide me with little more than speculation about the team I would be coaching, but I assured them that sport is a common denominator, and transcends language and culture. After a whirlwind month of meager preparation, I took the leap of faith and headed halfway across the world to teach a sport essentially invented in my backyard. I arrived at the gym at Nagasaki Nishi High School to meet my students, who were, naturally as I would soon learn, practicing. They stopped for a moment while I arrived and all 37 of them introduced themselves to me—all 37 BOYS.

In the United States, to say that a woman coaching a boy's basketball team is a rarity is an understatement. Although the number of women coaching boys or men in across a spectrum of

sports has been growing considerably, basketball has somehow fallen outside the statistic, and the number of female coaches at either the high school or college level is less than one percent of all coaches. For this reason, it is rare for women to even *apply* for such jobs, simply because it is still the status quo that men coach, and women coach women.

Admittedly a product of such a school of thought, I had reservations about my chances for success. My minimal experience coaching boys, amounting to running a basketball clinic twice a week at an elementary school in Brooklyn, would do little to prepare me to teach an already successful high school team in a language I couldn't speak at all. So, I decided not to think about the gender difference. I focused all my energy on learning enough of the language to slowly convey my ideas. It helped, of course, that when Japan imported basketball from the United States, they also imported a large portion of the words we use in English, making for a swifter transition than had I been trying to a traditionally Japanese sport.

As the months past, I was woven into the fabric of the team little by little. They adapted some of drills and plays I brought with me from my own experience. Travelling a considerable amount for various practice games and tournaments, I had a

Spinning Memories

The art of DJing involves merging two different songs into a new composition. The more noticeable the difference the greater the challenge to unite them, and often, the more remarkable the new song becomes. Surprisingly, this process has paralleled my time working for the JET Programme in Shiroishi. In effect, I've found myself mixing my experiences before and during Japan into the rhythm and melody of a new life, with the medium of music being what has permeated and connected them. Music has allowed me to share the most cherished aspects of myself and culture with my community, while simultaneously imprinting my memory with the unique harmonies of the new people I've been blessed to encounter.

If my memory was a turntable, one special incident would be on instant replay. At the end of an office party in nearby Takeo, I found myself in need of a ride home. Fortunately, Moroishi san, the school's handyman, custodian, groundskeeper, and technology specialist (his list of duties and skills seemed endless) was being picked up by his wife and offered to bring me along. While waiting in the lobby we had all but exhausted our limited ability to communicate in the others' native language, and as we were about to resign ourselves to 15 minutes of silence, he took out his cell phone. After showing me a few pictures of

his daughter and wife, he paused, and said, "Do you like Pink Floyd?" I almost fell backwards, amazed at the circumstances. My girlfriend and I had our first kiss to the song "Us and Them" from *Darkside of the Moon*. One of my all time favorite albums is *Animals*. I consider *The Wall* to be one of the most successful pieces of mixed-media story-telling EVER. Serendipity had brought me 6 months and 5000 miles away, to the lobby of an onsen where just as one conversation was ending, one that could continue for weeks was about to begin. Invigorated, I pulled every last bit of Japanese I could from my meager supply, and aided by song and album names, we scratched together a mix of each other's favorite songs, guitar solos, and scenes from *The Wall*. When his wife arrived, Moroishi san proceeded to play, in order, every single one of my favorite Pink Floyd songs. The streets of Saga Prefecture and poor Moroishi san's wife's ears echoed with our rendition of "Shine on You Crazy Diamonds" and what was left of the language barrier lay crumbling in the lobby of a Takeo onsen.

Risk-taking is another corollary to both DJing and living overseas. On the dance floor, differences are set aside and the unity of rhythm is worth the risk of opening yourself up to something new. In early Spring of 2010 some ALT friends of

Christine Wegner

chance to interact with the players, parents and other coaches in settings not seen by a lot of foreigners who come to Japan. Eight months after I arrived, we went to South Korea for a week, and I acted as interpreter, translating the Korean coaches' broken English into my broken Japanese.

That summer at Nationals, my students and I scouted the opposition together (another concept I brought with me from America), and made it to the Sweet Sixteen, missing the Elite Eight by a single goal. After each win, we laughed and celebrated together. After we lost, we cried together. As we returned home from Saitama via Shinkansen and I soaked in Japan's beautiful landscape, I realized I had been in Japan almost a year. I also realized, for the past year, I had not been a woman coaching a boys' team. I had been, simply, a coach.

Three years later, I feel at home. The students that I met on that first day have now all graduated, many of them still playing in college. The students I teach now I have seen from their first day of practice, and in many cases even earlier, recruiting them out of junior high school. I have cultivated relationships with all of them, and most don't hesitate to come to me when they have a question, or even a suggestion.

Not to say that there have not been difficult moments. Anyone coming to live in Japan for the first time or even the 10th time will tell you that. And I am sure that my presence on the bench causes a stir for opposing teams or fans—the red-headed gaijin, taller than half her players, drawing up plays on the sidelines and yelling in Nagasaki-ben. But from the inside looking out, I don't feel the oddity. I am, simply, another proud member of the community of students, parents, teachers, and fans that make up the Nagasaki West Basketball Team. And while we may have little else in common, the team connects us in a way that little else can.

Japan has taught me volumes about a world that I had little knowledge of. But it also taught me something I thought I already knew. I haven't merely witnessed the transcending power of sport: my experience is a reflection of it. The language of sport finds commonality among all of us, and it helped me break through stereotypes and prejudices I didn't know I had. Three years, almost 7,000 miles, and 37 amazing students later, I think I now truly understand the quote I so boldly offered half a world away and what seems like a lifetime ago.

英語

Christopher-Michael Daeley

mine stumbled upon Central Park, a restaurant that was almost completely unknown to the people of Karatsu city. It was more spacious than many dance clubs, with a unique layout featuring a projector, musical instruments, a manga corner and even trees scattered around. The owners were desperately seeking a way to bring customers in, while my friends—who happened to be DJs—were looking for a place to share their music with the people of Karatsu. After a few more visits and some heavy planning and promotion, Karatsu's first International DJ Event: "Funktion" was born, and Central Park metamorphosed into a dance club for one evening. That night people were introduced to House, Breakbeat, Hip Hop, Electronic, and Reggae music that they may never have heard otherwise, by DJs from places as far away as New Zealand and America, as well as local Japanese DJs who had yet to have an opportunity to showcase their skills. That first night brought in over 200 people and since then, Funktion has become a monthly event, with new DJs and visitors showing up each time.

When constructing a remix, the additions a DJ makes to a song are what leave their signature and change the song forever. In the same way, my life has been changed by the unexpected addition of a Japanese brother. From the first moment Tsun and I

met we talked about bands, bands, bands. Punk bands, ska bands, jazz bands, reggae, blues, hip hop... We talked about bands from America, from Japan, from China, Korea, Australia, England, Jamaica. It was a natural progression that amidst the whirlwind of concerts and music festivals we saw together, we would form a band. Because music was one of Tsun's inspirations to learn English, he writes songs in both English and Japanese and while he sometimes asks for my help, he rarely needs it. He is an incredibly gifted lyricist, and often speaks in poetry without realizing it. On our way to Sky Jamboree in Nagasaki, his girlfriend Keiko told a story about a necklace she had lost. Tsun responded with one of my favorite quotes of all time, "When I lose something, I just say it took my bad luck." Recently, I told him I may have to leave Japan after this year. His response was brutally beautiful, "I don't need to say what I think. I know the day will come. I'll never become used to saying goodbye..."

The record skips... Poetry. Music. This last song is a sad one, but like the others, every note bears the signature of Japan and especially, my brother, Tsun.

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