

## **The Heisei 20 Sports Festival**

*by William Matheson*

On Sunday, September 21<sup>st</sup>, 2008, the Seiko Gakuen Primary School held its annual sports festival. From my perspective, the sports festival was a great success – everyone had a good time, only a few students puked their way out of the Opening Ceremony, and the weather cooperated, too – although it was unbearably humid, and rain threatened things after lunch – fortunately, the program was almost finished by then anyway.

It was heartwarming to see the children and parents having fun together – especially the fathers, some of whom might have needed assistance in figuring out which child was theirs. I'm joking only slightly – the opportunities for busy fathers to spend time with their children are vanishingly few, and the realities of work mean that this event has to be put on on a Sunday or a national holiday. I think it's important that Seiko provides this opportunity.

The sports festival required a lot of preparation, and I feel that the story of the sports festival is really the story of our preparing for it. Our rehearsals were demanding, and the weather was usually boiling hot. The children were required to march again and again until the ceremonies and event transitions were virtually flawless. This was required so that the children would be able to conduct themselves autonomously on the day, and when the day came they did so rather well – they had to be told very little. We wouldn't have had the time to tell them very much anyway, what with all the scurrying about over equipment and other logistics!

A great portion of the rehearsal time was devoted to the dances. We foreign teachers were responsible for conducting a dance to go with the Village People song "Y.M.C.A." In the beginning I found it difficult to be interested in lining the Year Ones and Twos up into formations again and again, or deciding which children should be lined up in what way while standing and sweating either outside or in a hot gymnasium without air conditioning. But as the dance came together, it became much more fun.

We had many rehearsals involving the school as a whole – we even pantomimed the flag raising and a tug-of-war before we had flags and a rope, respectively. Even on partly cloudy days when we had the luxury of being prepared, we would still "lose" children to the heat and humidity. I was amazed at the children's toughness and fortitude. If I had to march as long as they did in even partial sun and that heat and humidity, I'd be a sweaty, exhausted, seared mess.

I once brought an umbrella to a rehearsal for shade, but I think some observers felt it looked too decadent, and I was told not to bring it again. Not owning a hat, I started wearing a towel and sunglasses, and it probably looked a little ridiculous as the junior high students next door couldn't resist poking fun at me over it. Of course, when it came time for the real festival, I left the towel in my bag and wore lots of SPF 50 sunscreen instead, and I didn't get burned. I always wore long sleeves and long pants, and while these were sometimes a liability in the heat, it was much better than getting burned. I came to understand why certain Muslims in much of the (predominantly sunny and hot) Arab World dress the way they do. There is a religious slant to it, but underneath that, covering up is practical. Not adhering to code would be asking for a wicked sunburn.

I rail about the heat, but there was one swelteringly hot day when I came back into the staff room to collect some things and discovered something magical.

AIR CONDITIONING! *Finally!* It was kind of like locking the door after the stolen horse had sired a Triple Crown winner, but it was welcome just the same. The hard-hatted men had been putting the finishing touches on the system and testing it while we were all outside, and bless them for keeping it on for us after we got back. Over the following weeks, we used it regularly. This development made September a whole lot easier for all of us.

The weather in September can be quite mercurial. On the days when it wasn't blindingly sunny, we were better able to appreciate the poetic qualities of the formations and marches. One day, a dust devil blew through our rehearsal, knocking some things around and scaring some children. I'd never seen one before; it wasn't very big, and it lasted less than a minute, but it was quite the thing to see up close.

My favourite event from the festival was the relay. It was a lot of fun almost every time we practised it. In fact, it was interesting enough to attract attention from onlookers inside the nearby junior high when I was teaching math there. After we got the hang of things, we could complete two whole runs in less than forty minutes. I once had an opportunity to run in the relay in order to stand in for a missing student. I think it would have been fun if parents and teachers had the chance to run their own relay, but with an already tight schedule and many other concurrent responsibilities, it might not have been easy or even possible to arrange.

In any case, the relay format is ingenious. It's structured so that everyone participates: Years One through Three run quarter laps around the track, then Years Four through Six run half laps (and they really book it). The entire school is divided into six teams, with three teams representing each main team (Red and White). Every time it's run, it's anybody's to win, and it stays thrilling

right up to the very last lap. It's a great event – it's arguably the most exciting thing in the festival, and so it's the last event on the program.

Most of the festival's events have machine-gun scoring (like the one where the First Years and their parents throw small balls into a hanging basket until the clock runs out –each ball is worth a point), and on top of that there are several whole-school events where all 152 students run in numerous heats, with the top placers in each heat getting points, so it all adds up to a lot. The final score was, if I recall correctly, 608 (Red) to 530 (White).

At the festival's conclusion, the parents and other guests were extremely helpful in getting the tents folded up and put away. Rain was threatening, so time was of the essence. Everyone quite literally carried their weight, and it was a delightful thing to be a part of. The Japanese teachers were very kind to us, too. At lunchtime, we were given bentos – not just child-size bentos, either – these were big honking all-out super bentos. The quantity and varieties of unfamiliar food made it a bit of an adventure – although the food may have been tame by Japanese standards, to me it was something to eat strategically. Food should be more than just something to chew on and swallow. I don't ordinarily eat Japanese bentos, so when we get them they are always novel and exciting for me.

All in all, I found the sports festival to be a worthwhile and enlightening experience. If I were conducting it, I would probably run it in a more relaxed, less formal style and put the greatest (nay, only) emphasis on participating and having fun. While we weren't attempting to outdo Beijing, it did sometimes seem like we were demanding a lot from the children. Moreover, I don't know how much ceremonial adherence translates into athletic excellence. Nevertheless, the festival was greatly successful in both respects. Many students report a desire to be in our festival again – even ones who will be graduating! We foreign teachers were also pleased to be a part of such a positive family event.

I would, though, advise prospective Seiko employees to invest in a hat.