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The Sun Didn't Rise Overnight

Yoshi Hayasaki who won the all-around title at the NCAA meet, showed again that the Japanese are the world's best gymnasts because they gladly suffer interminable workouts—and slaps in the face

In 1966 Yoshi Hayasaki left Japan for Seattle. He had won a gymnastics scholarship to the University of Washington, but he didn't understand English and all he could say was "yes" and "no." Therefore, the university enrolled him in a postgraduate course at a local high school. One day, while working out, Yoshi noticed that his fellow gymnasts had disappeared. They never came back. He was bewildered, but he kept practicing by himself day after day. A year later he learned that what had happened was that the gymnastics season had ended. Yoshi understands English now, but he doesn't understand that. "You cannot be a good gymnast if you work out only half a year," he says.

Last week, at Philadelphia's Temple University, Hayasaki's diligence paid off: he easily won the all-around title at the NCAA gymnastics championships. His victory also served as a reminder of Japan's overwhelming superiority in the sport. After the war Japan sought redemption through sport. Make your bodies strong, the young were told, and Japan will heal itself. Gymnastics was the prescribed medicine, and by 1960 Japan< had established its supremacy in international competition.

But Japan's domination is a bitter pill for U.S. coaches. "If those Japanese hit it right, forget it," one said of Hayasaki and teammate Hide Umeshita, who eventually finished third. "My boys are demoralized. It's a great feeling to know you have a chance for first, but who wants to set his sights for third?"

"Foreign gymnasts aren't helping our programs," another coach said. "You do your best to coach a team, you recruit from every corner of the country, then everything goes down the drain."

One gymnast offered a minority view: "Rather than admitting Japanese superiority and giving up," he said, "we should copy their programs and improve on them. That's what Japan did." He was referring to the meteoric rise of Japanese gymnastics in the last two decades. At the 1932 Olympics the Japanese team was nearly laughed out of the gym. After World War II an American made this historic prediction: "We've got nothing to fear from Japanese gymnasts. Their arms are too short for the side horse and their hands are too small for the horizontal bar." Ha! There is no record of any Japanese comment. They just took movies at every meet they attended, smiled inscrutably when asked why, copied what they saw on film, practiced, practiced, practiced, and in 1956 were second in the Olympics. The Japanese team finished first at Rome, Tokyo and Mexico City.

Like the Japanese of 25 years ago, Hayasaki's arms are too short and his hands too small, but no one seems to have told him. When working on the side horse, an event where long-armed men have a pronounced advantage, Hayasaki actually hyperextends his arms at the shoulders. You can see the importance of arm length in this event if you squat and try to lift yourself from the floor on your palms. On the horizontal bar Hayasaki's small hands were such a handicap that he got 9.45 points of a possible 10. Gymnastics is a sport where long, graceful lines can't help but sway judges, and Hayasaki is only 5'4", but he offsets this shortcoming by near-perfect execution of every movement—not a trace of wobble on handstands, no hesitation in transitional movements.

Before competition on the final day the controversy over foreign gymnasts flared anew. "American scholarships should be given to American boys first," said Penn State Coach Gene Wettstone. "A state university is supported by the people of the state and it's bad enough to take kids from out of state, but from out of the country? Why waste our resources on guys who might beat us in international competition? " Wettstone, who is chairman of the NCAA gymnastics rules committee, favors the limiting of foreign recruiting, perhaps to one non-American per team. Some point out; however, that such action would merely be attacking the symptoms. The sickness is American gymnastics itself. In the last three Olympics the highest American all-around finish was Makoto Sakamoto's 20th in 1964, and Sakamoto is a Japanese-American who studied gymnastics in Japan.

There are six events in gymnastics, but five of them are so difficult to master that most Americans specialize in one or two. However, in international competition, gymnasts must perform compulsory and optional routines in all six. Compulsories are composed of the skills on which good gymnastics form is built, but the majority of American kids hate their repetitiveness and haven't the self-discipline to master them. "They come to me with all kinds of mechanical faults," complains University of Iowa Coach Mike Jacobson, "and when you correct them you throw off their timing. They get frustrated, and soon they're ruined for international competition. All they want to do is tricks."

"They're trying to learn overnight here," says Hayasaki. "You can't do that. You have to go slowly and study your superiors. It takes years."

The obvious question arises: If we get more young gymnasts to master the compulsories and to become all-around performers do we then become a threat to the Japanese? The answer: It would be a very small step in the right direction. U.S. gymnasts still would not be growing up in a country with an ancient culture based on stoicism and patience and respect for one's elders. Listen to Hayasaki, then contrast him with some high school kid you know—and bear in mind that Yoshi is a swinger compared to his friends back home. "At my school we had to go through our whole routine three times each day," he says. "Sometimes I would be exhausted near the end, almost falling off the apparatus. Coach would say get up. Sometimes he would slap my face, but I would never get mad because he was my coach. He was trying hard to help me be a good gymnast. I would be feeling sorry for myself, and a slap could make me strong again. The weakness was psychological, not physical."

When Hayasaki was 18 he finished fourth in the Japanese high school championships. Soon he received the scholarship offer from Washington. All modern Japanese boys want to come to America, he says, but the decision was a difficult one. He would never be as good a gymnast if he went, but if he stayed it would be like the army: living in a gymnastics dorm at college; cooking and cleaning for older gymnasts: curfews: no holidays; running and calisthenics before breakfast; four hours of workouts every day. "I could not stand life without gymnastics," he told his worried parents, "but there are other things."

On the last night of competition at Philadelphia, Hayasaki won the horizontal-bar competition for specialists, which was roughly equivalent to Bill Toomey beating Bob Beamon in the long jump. Hayasaki finished his routine with a complete full turn in the air—what is known as a ROV movement, an acronym for risk, originality and virtuosity.

"Gymnastics is so deep," he said afterward. "I am trying to see my limit, how much I can do, and always I am never satisfied with my routine. After each meet I feel that I have to do better next time. Even my compulsories are a challenge. 'How can you do better than the other guy if you do exactly the same routine?" some people say, but everyone is a different physical type, and so there is always a challenge." He was quiet for a moment. "You know," he said, "if somebody takes my gymnastics away from me right now I think I would have a problem."