

SOCHI/ Mental strength attained overseas enables Japan's teens' success

- 1) Japanese teenage athletes, led by men's figure skating gold medalist Yuzuru Hanyu, offered hope for the future in leading Japan to a total of eight medals in Sochi, its second largest ever haul in the Winter Olympics. Medalists in past Olympic Games and others marveled at the young Olympians' psychological toughness, honed on experience competing and training abroad. "The environment currently surrounding young sport players is completely different from that of our age," said Kyoko Iwasaki, 35, who won the gold medal in the women's breaststroke at the 1992 Barcelona Olympics at age 14.
- 2) Japan won a total of eight medals, a gold, four silvers and three bronzes, in Sochi--the most since the 10 tallied at the 1998 Nagano Winter Olympics hosted on home soil. Of the Japanese medal winners in Sochi, only 19-year-old Hanyu stood at the top of the podium. In the men's snowboarding halfpipe event, Ayumu Hirano, 15, and Taku Hiraoka, 18, captured a silver and bronze, respectively.
- 3) Iwasaki said teen Japanese medalists at Sochi had accumulated more beneficial experience over a longer period at an earlier age than she did. "Despite their young age, they have a lot of experience," the former gold medalist said. Hirano, Japan's youngest medalist in a Winter Olympics, has competed as a professional snowboarder since he was in the fourth grade. He has been competing with world-class rivals in the U.S. X Games. Hiraoka has had a similar career.
- 4) "Today's young players are more composed," said Iwasaki, referring to the two youngsters' detachment when speaking to the media. Their mental strength, or calmness, helps them reach their potential on the biggest stages, Iwasaki said, as contrasted to her emotional way of telling reporters decades ago, "I'm the happiest I've ever been in my life."
- 5) Miyako Tanaka Oulevey, 47, a bronze winner in synchronized swimming at the 1988 Seoul Olympics, who currently instructs athletes as a psychological adviser, also said the experience of competing overseas is a significant factor behind their latest success. "Even when an athlete is famous in Japan, few people know him or her abroad," said Tanaka. "(By training and competing overseas), they are relieved of the shackles put on them in Japan, and can meet various people and accumulate fruitful experience there. Such experience enables them to remain calm whatever happens."
- 6) Tanaka said she felt Hanyu, a Sendai native, in particular, has inner fortitude. "His strong feelings for his hometown, affected by the Great East Japan Earthquake and tsunami disaster, as well as loads of practice in Canada, have generated his mental toughness," Tanaka added.
- 7) A researcher at the Hakuhodo Youth Life Lab said Japan's long-continuing economic doldrums play an important role. "Teenagers at present have never heard any good news because the economy has been in deflation since the time they reached the age of reason," said Yohei Harada, 36, leader of the lab. "Because of this, they are down to earth and have iron nerves."
- 8) Sports scientist Kagamoto Yuasa said there is another reason why the youngsters won medals in Sochi. "Those types of sports are better suited for those in their teens, who typically have great body flexibility," said Yuasa, 66, a Chukyo University professor. He said psychological toughness, excellent skills and physical strength are needed for exceptional performance. Yuasa added it is ideal that one learns the necessary skills by the mid-teens, because motor nerves finish developing around the time, whereas mental and body strength gradually improve in proportion to age and the amount of experience.
- 9) Snowboarding requires fewer muscles and less stamina, so it is relatively easy for teenagers to excel in the sport, he said. According to the professor, figure skating's scoring system, which tends to award high marks to jumps requiring advanced techniques, works to young competitors' advantage, in some instances, as well.
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haul : 獲得数 marvel : 驚く、驚嘆する hone : 磨きをかける tally : 記録する、得る on home soil : 母国で composed : 落ち着いた、冷静な detachment : 距離を置くこと、公平 shackles : 手枷、足枷、自由を束縛するもの、制限 fortitude : 不屈の精神 doldrums : 停滞状態 the age of reason : 思慮年齢 (善悪の区別がつけられるようになる時期) down to earth : 現実的な、実際のな motor nerves : 運動神経

★Ice breaker for active discussion★

1. Did you enjoy watching the Sochi Olympics? Who inspired you the most in the Olympics? What are the general information you know about the Winter Olympics?
2. What do you think is the difference between Olympics and the other sports competition? What makes it so special?
3. Do you agree with the analysis of the players mentioned in this article? What do you think made the athletes strong in this competition?
4. Athletes nowadays are said to be more composed in handling media interviews compared to the athletes in the past. Do you agree/disagree and why?
5. What do you think are the athlete' inspirations in doing their game better?
6. Who is your favorite player and what sport did he/she play? Why is he/she your favorite?
7. Make sentences using the following words : haul, marvel, hone, tally, composed, detachment, fortitude, doldrums, the age of reason and down to earth.

ソチ冬季五輪では、史上最大7競技98種目が17日間にわたり繰り広げられました。日本選手団のメダル総数8は海外での五輪では過去最多で、国・地域別では12位タイでした。ノルディックスキー男子ジャンプの41歳、葛西紀明や、スノーボード男子ハーフパイプの15歳、平野歩夢(あゆむ)が、冬季五輪史上日本人メダリストの最年長と最年少記録を其々塗り替え、ベテランと若手双方の奮闘が際立ちました。