

An Ambitious Run in Hokkaido

We had not gone far when a sleek black Toyota sedan drew up beside us, something that had never happened before on our walks in countryside around Tokyo. The driver's window hummed down and to our relief we were offered a ride back to our hotel. The driver was a man in his 60s, well dressed with a high level of chatty English. We accepted with effusive bursts of *arigato gozaimasu*, much thanks, and in the course of the short journey he showed his knowledge of the environs, the local delicacies and the race. We were staying near the city of Chitose in Hokkaido, Japan's northern island. He described in detail the course the runners would follow. We did not realise then that we would find out the next day why he knew so much.

I was in Hokkaido to participate in a race and see more of Japan, a country I'd been living and working in for only a year. This adventure was serendipitously courtesy of Steve, one of the teachers at the English Language Education Council in Tokyo, the school where I taught. Steve had entered a travel magazine competition and won a free flight to the Chitose Marathon but was unable to go himself.

"Be ambitious" is the motto of Hokkaido University in Sapporo, the capital city. This motto originated from advice given to students by an American professor, William S. Clark on April 16th, 1877. He could well have been addressing the 3,600 runners gathered in nearby Chitose on June 9th, 1985, lined up to pit themselves against the challenges of the quarter, the half or even the full marathon of 42 kilometres.

Although something of a runner back home in New Zealand when I was younger, my ambitions on this occasion extended only to the 10-kilometre race with the additional desire of seeing as much of Sapporo and environs as a two day stay would permit.

My Kiwi partner and I had made the ambitious 6.00 a.m. start from Tokyo to arrive early enough to see some of this green and pleasant part of Japan, a sharp contrast to the concrete and rush of Tokyo. "Just like home," Beth declared as

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we headed by train for Lake Shikotsu, a large lake that featured on our map of Hokkaido, where we were eager to go rowing and picnicking. After suitably large doses of exercise, ozone, potatoes on a stick, real ice cream, and *Shiroi Koibito* (“white beloved ones”, or thin chocolate-filled cookies), we set off to walk the several kilometres back to our comfortable western-style hotel.

We enjoyed a healthy meal of fried tofu, stewed potatoes, *hoke* (a cold water fish found only in Hokkaido), mountain vegetables (*sansai*), and various raw salads such as shredded devil’s tongue root (*gobou*) and rich black sticky seaweed (*hijiki*) in a *nomiya*, or Japanese-style bar, that evening. After a good night’s rest, we were at the start early with the hundreds of competitors and lookers-on.

The long-distance runners took off with the sharp crack of the starter’s gun at 9.30 a.m. and thirty minutes later fifteen paraplegics crouched in their speedy wheelchairs, strong arms going like pistons. A resounding and heartwarming cheer went up as they sped off down the paved road. Then five minutes later it was the turn of the 1,416 less ambitious worthies in the 10-kilometre race.

The more ambitious of these, mainly younger, were right up front, champing at the bit, anxious to be off, chasing times in the heady regions of around thirty minutes. Many others, affecting nonchalance, were milling about at the back one hundred metres from the starting line. Their ambitions clearly ran merely to the camaraderie of having a good jaw along the way and eventually finishing. Maybe that’s why they tended to be in groups of three! Certainly not in groups of four, the number meaning death in Japanese. Some other bystanders were exhorting the *gaijin*, foreigners such as myself, with shouts of “Fightoh! Fightoh!” the Japanese way to encourage, but fortunately the recipients of this decided just to run.

A lovely day it was for it, too. A trifle on the warm side but with a balmy breeze wafting from the sea, keeping us cool as we raced through avenues of pine and birch. Generally it was crisp and fresh, compared to Tokyo’s sticky humid heat – there was a feeling that the trees had withstood the ice and snow of a long hard winter. I had to be careful not to step on fat furry caterpillars which had come out on to the roads to enjoy the warmth.

Anyway, to cut a long run short, all the starters, including the wheelchair racers, came in safely to noisy and enthusiastic ovations from the crowd. Bottles of Gatorade, a sweet lemonade concoction, were provided at the finishing line.

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Looking round for Beth I soon spotted her sipping a cool glass of orange in the VIP's tent, standing beside the Mayor of Chitose who turned out to be our kind driver yesterday.

That wasn't the only coincidence. At the Sapporo Brewery Beer Garden in Susukino, one of Hokkaido's best-known entertainment districts, we ran into an ex-teacher from our Tokyo School. He looked fit and well, and was delighted with his race time of an hour and 48 minutes for the half marathon. Coincidences abounded! He thought it remarkable that the number of his hotel room was the same as his placing in the race, number 408. In light of the hundreds of runners taking part he had good reason to be pleased.

Our visit to Hokkaido was all too brief. Perhaps it had been rather too ambitious to try to run a race and see some of the countryside and the city of Sapporo in two days, but we carried back to the Big Mikan memories of "natural life", the deep blue of volcanic Lake Shikotsu, Sapporo's wide Odori main street and Susukino, the fine fresh butter accompanying everything, tasty cheese, potatoes on sticks, Genghis Khan barbecue, melon chocolate, Shiroy Koibito, draft Sapporo beer, the good northern hospitality ... and meeting the Mayor of Chitose before and after the ambitious run.

Arigato gozaimasu, Steve!