

Do you Believe in Miracles?
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Team USA Captain¹

Do you Believe?

In 1980, the United States Olympic Hockey Team defeated the seemingly invincible Soviet Union Team on its way to winning the gold medal at the Lake Placid Winter Olympics. The United States Hockey Team's momentous victory over the Soviets led Al Michaels to ask a nation whether they "believe in miracles" and marked a moment in sports history known universally as the "Miracle on Ice." 26 years later, at the 13th World Kendo Championships (the "Championships") in Taipei, Taiwan, the United States Mens National Kendo Team ("Team USA") defeated Japan in the semi-finals on its way to our first-ever 2nd place finish. Upon being asked my thoughts moments after the Championships, the only words that came to mind were "I believe in miracles." However, the "miracle" I had envisioned was not a random, fortuitous event – but rather, an unbelievable, unimaginable moment created by eight kenshi who threw away their pride and sacrificed everything to chase a common dream.

The Road to Taiwan

My road to Taiwan started on July 2, 2005, where together with my first place finish at the United States National Kendo Championships I was selected as Captain of Team USA. Team USA had placed 3rd for the first time in 21 years at the 12th World Kendo Championships in 2003, and as Captain I had felt the pressure to maintain our position as one of the Top 4 in the world. With the selection of former Team USA Captain Yuji Onitsuka sensei ("Coach Onitsuka") as the Coach of Team USA, we established goals higher than our previous 3rd place finish, and by the end of the summer of 2005, began gathering kenshi for voluntary practices and trainings.

The members of Team USA were selected at the final eliminations in January 2006. Among the members of Team USA, five of the eight members had no previous experience with Team USA, with myself, Danny Yang and Fumihide Itokazu being the only three with previous experience at the Championships. Although there was a bit of concern as to the lack of experience of Team USA, this concern was diminished by the fact that none of the members of Team USA thought or spoke the word "impossible." Coach Onitsuka emphasized from the outset that "with immense effort and immense hardship, even the impossible becomes possible."

However, in order to reach our goals, we knew that we would have to make Team USA and the Championships our first priority over anything else. While each member of Team USA obviously had

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work, school or other obligations, we made a commitment to never make such obligations an excuse not to practice or train for Team USA. And thus we set out on our one-year journey to Taiwan and the Championships.

A Bond Borne Through Hardship

The road to Taiwan began with three months of intensive training focused on conditioning and increasing stamina. With the agreement that “everyone can wake up earlier,” the members of Team USA woke up one to two hours earlier every weekday morning to take part in individual training exercises apart from our training in the dojo. Kendo practices took place at night 3 to 4 times during the week, and every weekend the members of Team USA would get together for training camps or voluntary training sessions. Even at these training camps, these first three months consisted almost solely of suriashi, kirikaeshi, kakarikeiko and oikomi, and Coach Onitsuka soon got the nickname “Oni” or “Monster” for his semi-cruel weekly practices. Each Friday night we would physically and mentally prepare ourselves for these trainings, and just as the muscle aches would fade we would face another long weekend of hard keiko and training.

However, not once did a Team USA member skip or fail to give his 100% effort in these practices. Rather, it was during the toughest, most intense moments of these trainings that we were able to look at each other and exchange the slightest of smiles. I believe this smile was the product of a strong appreciation of being a member of Team USA, as well as the satisfaction of pushing ourselves above and beyond our perceived “limits.” Moreover, it was by overcoming these “Oni” trainings that a trust was borne between the members of Team USA, and a strong bond developed that would become the foundation for our achievements at the Championships.

Seize the Moment

Beginning in May of 2006 we began to incorporate kihon/basics and waza into our weekly trainings. Saturday nights were spent analyzing videos of our potential opponents at the Championships. As the Championships drew closer and closer, the trainings became more intense and extensive.

During these months, I personally began to shoulder a big concern. While being Captain of Team USA, I obviously continued my job as an attorney at my law firm, Latham & Watkins LLP. My average working week was 60 to 80 hours, and almost always included long nights and weekends. A typical work day would begin at six every morning with 90 minutes of training, followed by work at my law firm until about eight or nine in the evening, at which time I would sneak out to participate in night trainings/keiko, and then return to work at home or in the office until at least one or two in the morning. As Captain, there was no way I could skip training camps, let alone any one practice or training when every other member was giving their heart and soul to Team USA. However, I could feel the lack of sleep wearing me down,

and I could not see any noticeable improvement in my own kendo. At this rate, I was confident that I could not fulfill my role as Captain against opponents such as Korea and Japan.

One day in July as I was flipping through my Japanese calendar to count the days until the Championships, the following words screamed out at me: “*Ato jya dekinen-dayona. Ima no koto wa ima shika dekinu.*” Literally, this meant “Some things you cannot do later. Seize the moment.” These words embodied my favorite Japanese saying, *Ichigo Ichie*, or “One Chance, One Opportunity.” That afternoon, I submitted a Leave of Absence notice to my law firm, and decided to accept a temporary secondment assignment in Tokyo with GE Money Japan in order to train in Japan and improve my kendo. A week later, a letter arrived from Kakehashi-sensei, head of the Japan Metropolitan Police (Keishicho) saying “we welcome you to Keishicho.” My training in Japan had started.

Training for Taiwan

Moving to Tokyo in mid-August 2006, I began my daily trainings at Keishicho after attending the summer training camps at Tsukuba University and Fukuoka Ohori High School with Jason Brown and Simon Yoo of Team USA. Waking up at 5:30am every morning, by 6am I was running the 3km path from the train station to the Keishicho Dojo. Morning practice at Keishicho lasted only 40 minutes, but these 40 minutes were daily rituals of frustration, pain and at times, outright fear. However, watching the daily hardships endured by the world’s strongest kenshi in pursuit of their goals not only increased my utmost respect for these kenshi, but also provided immeasurable motivation for me to improve my kendo. After a couple months at Keishicho, I realized that I had finally found “my kendo” again.

Team USA and One Chance, One Opportunity

Starting in September, Team USA began to focus more on strategies in shiai, and we began to talk more and more about specific strategies for different opponents. I returned to Los Angeles every month thereafter to participate in these training camps and raise the intensity level and motivation of the Team USA members with stories of my experiences in Japan.

During this time, Coach Onitsuka reemphasized the importance of focus and psychological preparation at the Championships. In particular, we talked about our approach to the Team Championships. Rather than have each person go out and win each match, we spoke of the importance of linking each match to the next, and emphasized that “each person has a role on the team, and each person must feel responsibility with respect to his role.” This responsibility required, depending on the situation, the strength to be patient and protect a lead, the strength to be able to win when a teammate loses a match, and most importantly, the strength (as shown by Danny Yang and Marvin Kawabata) to be able to stand strong and answer the calling when the pressure and expectations of an entire nation falls on your shoulders. During this conversation, I spoke of my favorite words to the members of Team USA. One chance, one opportunity. I told them that we would never get another chance to chase this dream with

these members. In order to avoid bearing regrets for the rest of our lives, I called upon the members to practice like there was no tomorrow and leave for Taiwan in the best possible mental and physical condition.

Arrival in Taiwan

Team USA departed for Taiwan ten days before the tournament in order to get accustomed to the weather and time difference. In order to prepare ourselves for the Championships, we woke up before six every morning, did a series of running and stretching exercises for approximately 45 minutes before having breakfast, and then went to the Taipei City Hall facilities (which were rented out by Shikai-sensei) for two-hour kendo practices. After lunch, we held team meetings and video sessions to focus on our opponents and the Championships.

Coach Onitsuka and I also emphasized the importance of mental/psychological preparation upon arriving in Taiwan. One integral factor we focused on was “staying together” during the ten days in Taiwan. This meant each meal, each trip to the convenience store, even “free time” was spent together. The reason for this was twofold: to allow each member to forget the tense, nervous aura of the Championships, and to allow each member to realize once more how strong our bond had become after our one year together. A few days before the Championships, I told the team to “think about every sacrifice you made for Team USA over this past year.” Although each member may have had different thoughts come to mind, each member undoubtedly made countless sacrifices to become a member of Team USA. The next day, I told the team to “think about every person who supported you over this past year.” By revisiting certain emotions, such as the warmth of appreciation, as well as the pain of sacrifice, I wanted the members of Team USA to realize once more the significance of our one-year journey to the Championships. And in so doing, I believe the members of Team USA were able to enter the Championships with a certain confidence and strength unparalleled by any other United States National Kendo Team.

The Team Championships

On December 9, 2006, myself, Danny Yang, Simon Yoo and Jason Brown participated in the Individual Championships, and while we gave our best, we were not able to place within the Top 4 of the Individual Championships. However, after the Individual Championships, I told the team “the main event starts now.” That night, rather than watching kendo videos and analyzing our opponents, we watched the HBO Documentary “Miracles on Ice.” Like Team USA, the United States Hockey Team consisted of amateurs who were thought to lack the skills and strength to succeed at the 1980 Winter Olympics. In such an environment, the members of that United States Hockey Team bonded together as one team and went on to make sports history. I believe each member of Team USA could see the parallels between us

and the United States Hockey Team, and felt that, after watching the documentary, our own dreams did not seem so far out of reach.

December 10, 2006. The day of reckoning had arrived. After very challenging matches with Great Britain and New Zealand, our first true test came in the quarterfinals against Canada. I had previously joked to my teammates “not to bring it to the Taisho match,” but we had anticipated a very close match with Canada. We fought very hard, but Canada also brought out their best, and I was able to defeat the Taisho in the final match to advance (the score was 2-2, points 4-2) to face Japan.

Minutes before our match with Japan, the members of Team USA came together one last time, and I said the following words. “This is what we have been working for this entire year. We have one chance, one opportunity. This is our time. This is our dream.” We called out “USA!!” and then headed to finally face the match of our dreams.

During the senpo match, Sandy Maruyama did not back down an inch against Ryoichi Uchimura, the current All-Japan Champion. Although he did end up losing 0-2, his determination and kiai motivated the rest of the team. We desperately needed a win from Danny Yang, our jiho, in order to avoid falling into an insurmountable hole against the best in the world. Danny answered our hopes, scoring 2 points off of Susumu Takanabe, a member of the Kanagawa Police Department and a former All-Japan Police Individual Champion. This victory not only gave the rest of our team hope, but also lit a fire amongst the crowd, giving Team USA unimaginable support and strength. Fumihide Itokazu then faced Shoji Teramoto, a member of the Osaka Police Department, and although we had hoped to tie this match up, ended up ceding to Japan 0-2. It was then my turn as fukusho. Thinking back, Team USA was in a “must-win” position after being down 1-2 coming in to the fukusho match. However, the only thought that crossed my mind before facing Jun Nakata, the current captain of Keishicho, was that “I had to win.” After somehow scoring two points and evening up the match 2-2 (points tied 4-4), I turned and faced Marvin Kawabata and told Marvin to “bring it back to me.” However, Marvin Kawabata exceeded the hopes and expectations of not only the members of Team USA, but also every person at the Championships, as he went on to defeat Kouichi Seike 2-0 and create what many have said was the “first miracle” in kendo history.

Team USA went on to lose in the finals to Korea, resulting in the first ever 2nd place finish by USA. To beat Japan, the World Champion for the past 36 years, but then lose to Korea undoubtedly produced mixed feelings. However, I believe that these results, and the fact that you can never predict the outcome of any “shobu,” or competition, is the essence and beauty of kendo. After our final match, the members of Team USA huddled together, arm in arm, and revealed tears to one another for the first time ever. I believe these tears were a combination of the disappointment of our loss to Korea, the relief of finally reaching the end of our one-year undertaking, and the happiness of having attained a goal, a dream that nobody else thought was possible. To be in that circle, together with my brothers, my teammates, was perhaps the real “miracle” that I had long chased after.

Going Forward

It has been over a month since the Championships, and I have finally had the time to think over our achievements. Our victory over Japan is certainly a proud achievement that each member of Team USA will carry within for the rest of our lives. As I mentioned before, our achievement emphasizes the fact that the outcome of any one match can never be predicted. However, many people in Japan have asked “how will kendo change now that Japan has lost?” To that question, I have always answered, without hesitation, that I do not think anything will change or needs to change.

Since I started kendo 22 years ago, I have always idolized Japanese kendo and the kenshi that represented Japan. When I first traveled to Japan to learn kendo, I did not know a single sensei in Japan, and forced my way into a local kendo practice near my grandmother’s house in Tokyo. Fifteen years has passed since my first kendo trip to Tokyo, and I have trained at some of the top institutions in Japan, including Fukuoka Ohori High School, the University of Tsukuba and Keishicho. Everywhere I went, I was welcomed warmly, trained and pushed intensely, and was always treated with respect as a “kenshi.” I believe this symbolizes the “greatness” of Japanese kendo, and is the reason why not only myself, but kenshi around the world, look to Japan to improve and enhance their kendo.

Personally, I feel that the hardships and experiences during our road to Taiwan was much more significant and beneficial than the actual victory itself in shaping each of our hearts and character. However, I hope that our achievement symbolizes a belief that I have always told my students at Torrance Dojo – “if you give your heart and soul to chase a single dream, sometimes, even seemingly impossible dreams come true.”

I take great pride in the fact that I started kendo here in the United States and learned at Torrance Dojo under Tim Yuge sensei. Moreover, I was proud and honored to represent the United States at the World Kendo Championships, and hope that our success will invigorate a new generation of kenshi that aspire to represent the United States. I believe this achievement was not only the result of eight men coming together to chase a common goal, but also the product of a countless number of senseis, kenshi, friends, family and supporters, all from different dojos, different federations, different regions, and even different beliefs, coming together in support of Team USA and kendo in the United States. I believe this achievement epitomizes the power of unity, and I hope we can all continue to work together to contribute to the further success and growth of kendo in the United States.