

# A Club for All Seasons

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## **Missed Chance?**

I remember when I was in junior high school, I decided to try something new. As I had never played a sport, I thought it would be exciting to join the basketball team. For weeks I practiced shooting baskets in our driveway and at the end of the summer vacation went to school to “try out”. In the US, schools have what are called tryouts and students interested in joining a sports team have to go to a number of practices where the coaches observe them and pick the best players for the team. It is the closest thing to passing an entrance exam that I know of in the US. The chosen players’ numbers are posted on the message board and students run to see if they made the team. I will never know if I did or not. On the day the results were announced, I never even went to look. I just knew somehow that my number wouldn’t be there and that was the closest I ever came to playing a sport in the US.

## **Important Lessons**

When I began to teach in Japan, I was shocked at how active all the students were in club activities. Even though I later found out that clubs were mandatory, I have always been impressed with these activities in Japan. I feel they really provide the students with lessons I never learned in school. As only the best players in the US can participate in sports, I missed out on playing at all. In Japan, if you join a club, no matter if you are the best or the worst player, you still get a chance to learn a sport and to find out what it is like to be on a team. I have no idea what it feels like to practice and practice with fellow club members nor what it feels like to win or lose a game. I can watch sports and cheer for a team, but it seems somewhat distant to me as I have no related personal experience.

Secondly, club activities in Japan really are a very special opportunity to develop leadership skills. Although a teacher is

assigned a club activity, there were many times when I saw a club practicing without a teacher nearby. Instead the students themselves think about how to practice, what they need to work on, and encourage each other to do their best. The fact that all of this takes place without a teacher watching over is quite impressive indeed. In the US, a teacher who works as a coach will get separate payment for that and thus is always supervising the students. There is little room for student input other than to follow the coach’s orders.

## **A Sport for a Season**

There are two other big differences between club activities in Japan and sports in the US. First, sports in the US are played for a season with football and volleyball in the fall, basketball and swimming in winter and baseball and track and field in spring. This means that the same student can play three different sports a year or just specialize in one. There are no year-long practices for any sport.

Team players can also take a referee test. For example, a soccer player could take the referee test and then as a part-time job, referee elementary school games. This provides a leadership opportunity for students and they can see the game not only as a player but as a referee too. Not only that, it gives students the chance to make a little spending money and serve as role models to the younger players.

While I doubt I would ever have become a “superstar” on the basketball court, I do feel I missed out on something special by never having played a sport. It seems to me that club activities in Japan really help a student to try something new and work together with their teammates to realize a dream. Even if the team loses the final match, they still have many precious memories of their junior high school days that will be with them forever and not just for a season.