

AS IN '72, HOST NATION'S BEST CHANCE FOR GLORY WILL COME IN SKI JUMPING JAPAN SAVORS ITS ONLY GOLD

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HAPPO'ONE, Japan – He stood about 5-foot-6, no more than 150 pounds, and despite his 54 years his hair was jet black. His ski boots clumped as he walked unhurriedly across the carpeted floor, and his parka shed snowflakes with each step.

There was nothing about Yukio Kasaya's appearance or demeanor that set him apart from the other diners at the Shiroikoya, a ski lodge set among the trees on Happo'one, the mountain being used for some of the alpine skiing events at the Nagano Olympics.

But in the Japanese ritual that followed, a series of bows with the waiter that affirmed their social status, the waiter ended up almost doubled over.

"Of course when I go to a jumping competition, everybody knows who I am," Kasaya said later. "But not anymore in the shopping mall."

Kasaya's modesty was admirable, but others in the restaurant clearly held him in awe.

He is the reason more fans will attend the ski-jump competitions, which begin Wednesday, than other events at these Games.

Kasaya was the focus of an event Japanese remember years later by recalling what they were doing at the time. Most of the nation – minus the 100,000 people who saw it in person, including the emperor – watched it on television.

Under pressure

At the 1972 Sapporo Winter Olympics, Kasaya sailed off the 70-meter ski jump and flew more than 275 feet, far past the "critical point" of the landing hill. For the second and final jump, officials lowered the starting point on the ramp, and Kasaya still sailed nearly 260 feet.

His gold medal was the first won by a Japanese in the Winter Olympics, and it is still the only one.

The victory came under tremendous pressure for Japan to score a victory in the first Winter Olympics it hosted, and it came in heroic style. Kasaya's jumps not only were the longest of each round, but also two teammates, Akitsugu Konno and Seiji Aochi, accompanied him to the podium in a medal sweep on the final day of the Games.

"At the Sapporo Olympics, 90 percent of the spectators were Japanese," Kasaya said Sunday through a translator. "That was the first time I felt big excitement jumping with that amount of Japanese. That was my feeling at that time."

Japanese favored again

The stars in the ski-jumping galaxy again are aligned for a home-team sweep in 1998. Just as Kasaya did in 1972, Kazuyoshi Funaki won the three important European competitions leading into these Games. Funaki's teammate, 1994 Lillehammer Olympics silver medalist Masahiko Harada, is the season points leader. And Hiroya Saitoh was third in a Jan. 15 competition in Austria in which Japan finished 1-2-3.

This is the only topic during a 45-minute conversation that makes Kasaya openly emotional.

"The team of Harada and Funaki are a great team," said Kasaya, who will help judge the event. "They have the ability to get medals – as many as possible. Their chances have nothing to do with pressure," but something else.

"Kamikaze," he said.

God's wind. It will happen if it's meant to be.

"Of course I'm dying to get gold medals, but I would not be greedy. Even one medal I would have for the Japanese team."

He beams as he speaks, and he clasps his arms as if he were cradling a baby in an unintentionally symbolic gesture.

Because in many ways the Japanese ski-jumping program is Kasaya's baby. It produced a bronze medal at the 1980 Lake Placid Olympics (Hirokazu Yagi), a team silver in Lillehammer (Harada, Takanobu Okabe, Jinya Nishikata and Noriaki Kasai) and has contributed to the team Nordic combined gold medals Japan won at the 1992 Albertville and '94 Games.

There was ski jumping in Japan before Kasaya. His brother, eight years older, taught him to jump in their small town of Yoichi about 25 miles from Sapporo.

Kasaya, Konno and Aochi all grew up in the Sapporo area. They competed against one another as teenagers and together on national teams. They came to the attention of most of Japan with their pre-Sapporo success in Europe, but many in the crowd had come to see them because they were hometown boys.

Carrying the flag

Twenty-six years later they were honored for what they did at the Sapporo Games by being asked to carry the Olympic flag into the stadium at the opening ceremonies in Nagano. Many Japanese felt that Kasaya, not '92 Olympic silver medalist Midori Ito, should have ignited the cauldron.

But Kasaya handled the issue diplomatically.

"My gold medal is not just a single medal," he said. "This medal should have been seen together with gold, silver, bronze," referring to his countrymen who stood on the podium with him. "This is the meaning of the gold medal. This can't be separated. It exists only with three together. If we lit the light, it would have to be three people together. It would be almost impossible."

When asked to autograph an Olympic history book, Kasaya complied with a 30-second calligraphy demonstration with his name written vertically alongside a depiction of the medal and his name in script across the bottom.

For years Kasaya kept his medal in a special place in his home in Tokyo, where he is an executive with a whiskey distillery. He occasionally gets together with Konno and Aochi at competitions for a drink and to talk about old times.

Then, in 1987, he donated his medal, his uniform and the skis he used to the museum in Yoichi, where visitors come to see them and remember Japan's greatest Winter Olympic moment.

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