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# The Japan Times **SPORTS**

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## Issues with weight followed 'Dokaben' Kagawa


BY [WAYNE GRACZYK](#)[ARTICLE HISTORY](#) | OCT 4, 2014

Sad news came last week with the death of Nobuyuki "Dokaben" Kagawa, the roly-poly rotund catcher of the 1980s Nankai Hawks. He died of an apparent heart attack on Sept. 26 in Fukuoka at the age of 52.

Kagawa looked more like a sumo wrestler than a baseball player. He played for the Hawks in Osaka from 1980 to 1988 and marked his final season with the Fukuoka Daiei Hawks in 1989 before retiring.

A high school star in the national tournament at Koshien Stadium, Kagawa was the Namisho (Osaka) High School teammate and battery mate of pitcher Kazuhiko Ushijima, who also went on to the pro ranks with the Chunichi Dragons and Lotte Orions and was later manager of the Yokohama BayStars.





Kagawa's pro career, though, ended after 10 seasons when he was just 28. He went on to become a radio and TV broadcast commentator for Hawks games, but was never able to lose the excess weight, and it caught up with him. Like many sumo wrestlers, his health deteriorated, and he died young.

Kagawa got his nickname from the character Taro Yamada, a catcher in a baseball cartoon magazine of the 1970s, which was later made into an animated TV series. Yamada liked to eat a bento lunch box called a dokaben.

"Dokaben" Kagawa is being remembered for his easy-going persona, his trademark grin and friendly manner when dealing with fans and the media. I knew him when he was a player and ran into him and his family once about 20 years ago on the shinkansen between Osaka and Fukuoka, and he was just as nice then as when he had been playing.

The late Don Blasingame was Kagawa's manager with Nankai in 1981-82. Blazer's son Kent grew up in Japan during his dad's playing, coaching and managing days in Osaka and Hiroshima and is currently scouting for the Softbank Hawks. Kent Blasingame recalls the relationship between the manager and his oversized catcher.

"I know my father thought fondly about (Dokaben's) personality. The weight issue did come up, but ... As far as my experiences with Dokaben go, he was very nice to me and always had a smile. He was one of my favorites, because I was a kid at that time and used to watch that Dokaben TV show," said Kent.

Don Blasingame, I recall, at first sometimes mispronounced Kagawa's nickname as "Dobaken," and then he and pitching coach Barney Schultz began referring to him as simply "Doke," and they tried to think of ways to help the young catcher lose some weight for his own good.

There is one account where the manager found out Kagawa consumed more than 10 bottles of cola a day and ordered him to stay away from the sugar-laden soft drinks and try to lose some of the excess kilograms. It seemed to have worked for a while, but the weight-reduction process was short-lived.

Minoru Ichihara was the Nankai team interpreter during those years and said, "It would have been OK maybe if he could drink diet cola, but it was not readily available 33 years ago as it is today, especially in the rural area where we opened our spring training camp."

He may have cut down or quit the cola, but Kagawa never seemed to be able to drop any pounds. His 1981 weight was listed as only 92 kg, but he was just 172 cm tall, and that imbalance made him appear obese. It would not have been unusual if someone guessed his weight to be about 230 pounds (105 kg).

Ichihara recalled Kagawa really loved to partake of high-calorie delights. "Dokaben was always attracted to things such as strawberry shortcake," he said.

"Blazer liked him, though, and thought his batting was OK and, as a catcher, he had a good sense for leading the pitchers. The manager always worried about Dokaben's size, though, and was concerned about whether or not he could carry the weight and maintain his skills as he got older," said Ichihara.

The former translator concurred with Kent Blasingame's description of Kagawa's character and charm. "He was so easy-going and always seemed to be smiling. It's a shame he was not able to overcome the weight problem, his career was cut short, and now he has died," said Ichihara.

Perhaps, if Kagawa had been able to diet and slim down, he might have extended his career and been more productive. But, then again, he may not have been the lovable Dokaben. For sure, he will always be remembered as one of the more interesting characters in Japanese baseball from a golden era three decades ago.

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