

# SOCCER

**The 2014 World Cup**  
Japanese national team at  
the 2014 FIFA World Cup™  
in Brazil  
(Photo courtesy of KYODO  
NEWS)



## Introduction

In Japan, the sport known in most countries as *football* is typically referred to as *soccer*, mainly to differentiate it from American-style football, which also enjoys a limited following in Japan, particularly at the university and corporate level.

Japan's organized soccer body, the Japan Football Association (JFA), was established in 1921. In 1948, the national championship competition became known as the Emperor's Cup.

## J. League Professional Soccer

Japan's national soccer team invited Dettmar Crammer, from Duisburg, West Germany, to

be coach, and the team trained intensively from 1960 to 1963. Owing to the tenacious efforts of Crammer and the national team, the team won a bronze medal at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City.

In 1987, Mori Kenji, then chairman of the Japan Soccer League, determined that players should be allowed to register as professionals. In 1988, the Japan Soccer League (JSL) set up an action committee to discuss ways to reinvigorate the sport in Japan. The following year, the committee recommended the establishment of a professional league.

After nearly two years of planning, in January 1991, the Japan Football Association announced the basic structure of the new professional league. Shortly afterwards, the new league's 10 participating teams were announced, and by July of the same year, the name was announced: the Japan Professional Football League, or J. League for short.

### Youth soccer

Former Japan player Ihara Masami leads children in a coaching session. (Photo courtesy of Photo Kishimoto)



The J. League operates under the Japan Football Association. It is responsible for the organization of professional matches and the keeping of official match records; establishment of regulations; and training, certification and registration of players, coaches, and referees. It is also active in various other areas, selling television broadcast rights and overseeing sponsorships.

On September 5, 1992, the J. League Yamazaki Nabisco Cup kicked off as the new league's first official tournament. League competition play was inaugurated on May 15, 1993. In 1999 the J. League introduced a two-division system of J1 and J2 with a J3 ranking added in 2014. As of 2017, a system is in place in which teams at the top of the J2 and J3 divisions have an opportunity to move to the next higher division(i.e. from J2 to J1), while those at the bottom of J1 and J2 risk being dropped down. The original teams of the J. League are collectively known as the Original 10 and Ibaraki's Kashima Antlers have never fallen from the J1 rankings.

At its outset, the J. League's popularity was greatly bolstered by popular foreign soccer stars who came to Japan to play. Many outstanding performers in the J. League were famous foreign players who had once played on their countries' national teams, including Brazil's national player Zico, England's Gary Lineker, Italy's Salvatore Schillaci, and the former Yugoslavia's Dragan Stojković. The Japanese player Miura Kazuyoshi also boosted the popularity of the J. League after he returned to Japan from Brazil, where he began his professional career, to become a star player on the Japanese national team. The J. League went on to be bolstered by supporters in the various areas where clubs are located, based on a community-based approach featuring each club's proactive involvement in local grassroots activities, such as efforts to foster soccer players starting at the elementary school level.

The J. League has helped raise the level of play among Japanese players to the point where many of them, including Nakata Hidetoshi, Nakamura Shunsuke, and Honda Keisuke, have gone on to play on clubs overseas.



**J. League match** (Photo courtesy of J. LEAGUE PHOTOS)

## Long-awaited World Cup Appearance

Participating in the FIFA World Cup, the premier soccer tournament in the world, was the cherished hope of the Japanese soccer world ever since Japan's national team first participated in the qualifying round for the 1954 World Cup in Switzerland. The team nearly qualified for the 1994 World Cup in the United States, needing only to win the final match in the Asia qualifying round to advance, but the opportunity was dashed when the opposing team in that match scored an equalizing goal in injury time. The Japanese team did finally manage to qualify for the following World Cup, held four years later in France in 1998, after overcoming a string of difficulties that included the replacement of Japan's coach during the qualifying round.

**2002 World Cup**  
The Japan team celebrates a win during the 2002 World Cup. (Photo courtesy of Photo Kishimoto)



## The 2002 World Cup

Officially known as "2002 FIFA World Cup Korea/Japan," this was the first World Cup to be held in Asia and the first to be hosted by two countries. A total of 32 teams played matches in 20 stadiums, 10 in Japan and 10 in South Korea, over the period of May 31 to June 30. Many of the stadiums were newly built for the tournament. At this tournament, where Japan was playing on its home ground, the national team advanced to the Round of 16.

## The 2010 World Cup

At the 2010 World Cup in South Africa, Japan rode the momentum of its victory against Cameroon in the first match to reach the Round of 16 for the second time in its history, after defeating Denmark and only suffering a single defeat at the hands of the Netherlands.

## The 2018 World Cup

At the 2018 World Cup in Russia, Japan's national team made it to the Round of 16 for the third time in its history. Japan's world cup journey ended with a defeat at the hands of Belgium.

### The 2011 FIFA Women's World Cup

The Japanese national team took the crown for the first time at the 6th World Cup in Germany. (Photo courtesy of Photo Kishimoto)

## Breakthrough in Japan Women's Soccer

Japanese women were playing soccer as far back as the 1920s, but the sport saw a surge in popularity in the 1970s. Until that time there had been corporate or regional women's soccer teams, but in 1979 the Japan Women's Football Association was formed following an appeal from FIFA to try to popularize women's soccer. The following year, the first national competition was held.

In 1981, a national team was set up, and in 1989 a women's soccer league was established. In 1991, the national team played in the first FIFA Women's World Cup competition hosted by China. In 2011, the Japanese national team took the crown for the first time at the 6th World Cup in Germany. The team captain, Homare Sawa, also took the honors of top scorer and most valuable player.

The International Federation of Football Associations (FIFA) voted to pick Sawa Homare, the captain of the Japanese national team, as the Women's World Player of the Year, citing her outstanding performances in the World Cup.

