

## MESSAGE FROM CONSUL-GENERAL SASAYAMA TAKUYA

May 2023

Now into May, we have been enjoying sunshine and warm temperatures befitting the season.

On May 6, a ceremony was held in Queen's Park celebrating the coronation of His Majesty King Charles III in London.



The Toronto Marathon followed on May 7, and many participants were seen running on an early summer morning on the street in the front of my official residence. I understand many Japanese were among the participants.



## 1. B-girl Konatsu and B-boy Onton

This month, I would like to introduce B-Girl Konatsu (Ms. YAMASA Konatsu), an internationally celebrated breakdancer based here in Toronto.

Breaking is an official event of the 2024 Paris Olympics. Breakdancing or breaking, which arose from the youth culture of New York, has now developed as a sport, and apparently there are various “styles” around the world such as the Traditional New York style or the Toronto-thread style. Japan now has breakers who can compete with the best in the world.

B-girl Konatsu became interested in the Toronto-thread style and came here specifically to study it. She is now active in two groups: the SuperNaturalz, which boasts a 30-year history, and the Kuru Crew. Her husband, B-boy Onton (Mr. Onton See), is a core member of the Canadian national team and also serves as its coach.

Since its start, breaking has revolved around on one-on-one “battles”. The music for each battle is selected by the DJ without consulting the competitors. These matches require mastery of basic dance techniques, as well as improvisation and artistry. Though surprising given the intensity of the movements, breakers are said to peak at a relatively later age – between the ages of 35 and 40. Physically demanding techniques are important, but improvising to the music, creativity, and interplay with the opponent are the key factors that win battles. For this reason, considerable experience is needed to reach the pinnacle of international competition. Tournaments are constantly being held around the world, and in the midst of their full schedules, competitors must manage their physical condition, as well as conduct the necessary research on their opponents.

Breaking is likely to become even more popular as next year’s Paris Olympics draws closer. I would like to keep an eye on the interest in Toronto-style breaking, and on the Japanese players as they further develop their skills.

**B-girl KONATSU and  
B-boy ONTON**  
(Photo by Jahmal Nugent)



**B-girl Konatsu breaking.**  
(Photo by Jahmal Nugent)



**B-boy Onton flying.**  
(Photo by Jahmal Nugent)

## 2. Sakura Festival in Burlington

On May 13, I attended the Sakura Festival in Burlington, a city that enjoys a twinning agreement with Itabashi Ward in Tokyo. There is an Itabashi Garden in Burlington, as well as a road called Itabashi Way. The Itabashi Subcommittee of the Burlington Mundialization Committee was awarded Japan's Foreign Minister Commendation in 2020. The Subcommittee once again played a key role in organizing this year's Sakura Festival, which was attended by Her Worship Marianne Meed Ward, Mayor of Burlington. Blessed with good weather, the event was a great success with the audience overflowing from the venue on the day of the event.

Regretfully, because spring came early this year, the petals on the Sakura trees, donated by Itabashi and planted along Lake Ontario, had already fallen and scattered. However, demonstrations of karate and aikido, along with dance and taiko performances, made me appreciate the depth and spread of exchanges between regional municipalities.



## 3. Sakura Award

The Japanese Canadian Cultural Centre (JCCC)'s annual Sakura Awards honour individuals who have contributed to the promotion of Japanese cultural exchange and understanding of Japanese Canadian culture. In this way, it also contributes to Canada and its people's multicultural nation-building. Past recipients include former Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney and celebrated architect Raymond Moriyama, as well as such Japanese recipients as symphony conductor Seiji Ozawa and novelist Haruki Murakami. This year marks the 11<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Sakura Gala where the award is conferred. The event, which had halted during the pandemic, was held this year for the first time in four years and honoured three Canadian sports legends of Japanese descent.

The event began with remarks from His Excellency YAMANOUCHI Kanji, Ambassador of Japan to Canada, who had traveled from Ottawa for the occasion. The first award of the evening went to Mr. Nick Suzuki, a hockey player who has enjoyed a successful career with the Montreal Canadiens since 2018. Serving as team captain since 2022, he is currently one of the most influential players in Canadian ice hockey.

Receiving the next award was another hockey star, Ms. Vicky Sunohara, who was a member of the Canadian women's Olympic team three times. She won silver at the 1988 Nagano Olympics, followed by gold at both Salt Lake City and Turin. She played 16 games and scored 13 goals in total over the three Olympic Games.

In her acceptance speech, she said she learned much and matured through her experiences in hockey, Canada's national sport. She added she was proud to have contributed to the Canadian national team as a Japanese Canadian. She spoke passionately about her daily efforts to pass on this tradition to young people. (She is currently the head coach of the women's hockey team at the University of Toronto.)

Mr. Bill Hatanaka was a football player who scored a 79-yard touchdown in the 1976 Grey Cup – at a time when there were very few Japanese Canadian professional athletes. After retiring from sports, he turned to business and achieved great success in various fields, including finance. He has headed many non-profit organizations and is currently working in the health sector in Ontario.

Mr. Hatanaka's parents were of the generation who experienced internment during the Second World War. In his acceptance speech, he spoke of confronting persistent prejudices and discrimination in Canada and contributing to the development of a fair and diverse Canadian culture. Mr. Hatanaka has attended events at my official residence before, and even then he would kindly ask whether we were being treated properly in Canada and offer to lend an ear if we ever wanted to discuss any negative experiences.

The three award recipients this year would all be considered role models by both Canadians and Japanese alike. About 400 guests from all walks of life attended the event. I was deeply moved by how the JCCC shines spotlights on notable individuals each year and recognizes their contributions to Canadian society and Japan-Canada friendship.





#### 4. Toronto Bonsai Society

Japanese bonsai are quite popular here in Toronto. On May 13, I visited the exhibition that is held twice a year by the Toronto Bonsai Society.

The Society was founded in 1964, and currently has over 300 members – it apparently experienced an increase in membership during the pandemic. Nearly 1,000 people attended its spring exhibition, which was held over two days over one weekend. I have personally grown roses and phalaenopsis, but I have no experience with bonsai. I understand Canada is blessed with a lot of nature, which includes trees that are difficult to compare with those in Japan. Many outstanding bonsai by the Society's members were on display at the exhibit, which recently has also started showcasing pieces by children. There were also displays of decorative rocks (*suiseki*) that can be found in Canada's natural landscapes. Bonsai takes decades to nurture before it becomes a work of art. It is now also literally rooted in the Canadian environment.



## 5. A Celebrated Japanese Jockey in Toronto

Agriculture is one of Ontario's main industries, and this includes the thriving livestock sector. The province is also known for breeding racehorses, and horseracing is a very popular sport here. Woodbine Racetrack near Toronto's Pearson Airport is the epicentre of Canadian horseracing. The New York office of the Japan Racing Association is always observing horseracing in Ontario, always on the lookout for owners who are interested in competing in Japan. In particular, Northern Dancer, the famous horse belonging to the renowned owner and breeder E.P. Taylor, raised the stature of modern Canadian horseracing. I understand it is now difficult to find a notable racehorse that doesn't trace its lineage to Northern Dancer.

It is against such a backdrop that Mr. FUKUMOTO Daisuke, a jockey originally from Japan, is achieving success. He moved to Toronto on his own in 2015 at the young age of 17. He spent his early days here studying English while at the same time working hard to obtain his jockey's license. While studying English, he happened to overhear a Canadian racing official talking about the celebrated horse Deep Impact. Delighted that he could make out the words, Mr. Fukumoto engaged in the conversation which quickly became animated. (Incidentally, Deep Impact is also a descendant of Northern Dancer, a fact that made Mr. Fukumoto realize that he'd come to Canada for a reason.) Once Mr. Fukumoto began racing, he immediately started attracting attention, winning two major Canadian derbies in 2020. The following year, he dominated the international Group One races, riding the horse Town Cruise. Today, Mr. Fukumoto is one of Canada's representative jockeys.

I had an opportunity to meet Mr. Fukumoto on May 23. Compared to Japan's horseracing circles, multicultural Canada's seems to have a variety of groups interacting among themselves, he says.

Horseracing season is in full swing in May, and it's not unusual for jockeys to be racing 10 times a day, riding every half an hour. Besides Mr. Fukumoto, Mr. KIMURA Kazushi is also an active local jockey from Japan, although I was unable to meet him this time. I hope both racers will continue to succeed together, riding horses that grew up freely on vast Ontario ranches.



A lovely gathering on a sunny day in early summer.



The emblem of Mighty Heart, the one-eyed thoroughbred ridden by Mr. Fukumoto when they won the 2020 Queen's Plate. A gift from Mr. Fukumoto.

## 6. Mr. SORITA Kyohei Solo Piano Concert

A piano concert by Mr. SORITA Kyohei, who won 2<sup>nd</sup> place at the 2021 International Chopin Piano Competition, was held on May 24 at the JCCC. This was one of Mr. Sorita's first performances in Canada, with the Toronto concert taking place immediately after one in Vancouver.

He is an internationally sought-after pianist, but this concert was made possible by a Canadian member of the audience at the Chopin competition who urged him to perform in Canada. Besides his regular performances, Mr. Sorita is currently interested in orchestral work and is also studying conducting. I had a chance to meet him after the concert and talk about the history of the Toronto Symphony Orchestra, which was once conducted by Maestro Seiji Ozawa.



I think it would be marvelous if Canada can be a part of the international network Mr. Sorita is establishing, allowing for greater cultural exchange between Japan and Canada.

The JCCC's ability to host such events is truly invaluable. The Centre will celebrate its 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary and we can look forward to many more commemorative events in the future.

