

優良賞

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ベトナムに暮らしていたころ、結合双生児の Duc さんとの出会いと交流を通じて、人権や障害について考え、自分を見つめ直し、受け入れ、一步を踏み出すまでの経験を書きました。

Just a Man

Always worried and embarrassed about what people think of me, I couldn't be friends with the ball.

The sweltering heat in Vietnam distorted the air in the distance. The enemy in front of me. I had to beat him to a pulp somehow. As I had stylishly demonstrated during recess, I straddled the ball a couple of times, got my feet tangled up, and fell over. The rubber chips of the artificial turf bounced off into my mouth, which felt disgusting. I looked up to see my adversary smirking with a thin smile that held a touch of disdain.

"Embarrassing," I thought, "I'm done."

I wanted to run away already, so I quit the Japanese football club and joined a team with only Vietnamese players.

I crouched down between the messy protective netting, and it was a small futsal-size court. A red motorbike was perched at the foot of a lamppost outside. It was a large one, carrying what looked like iron bars on either side. A small man with a shaved head was carrying two twins in the red uniform of the Vietnamese national football team on a motorcycle. They were a father and his kids, very Vietnamese. However, the moment the man got off the bike and put his feet on the ground, my eyes were glued to his lower body. I could see the ground where his left leg should be. I realized the man was missing one leg. He was approaching me, flanked by crutches that I had earlier mistaken for iron bars on the bike's decoration.

"Nihonjin-desu-ka?" the man asked in Japanese. When I said yes, he smiled and said, "Nakata!"— a Japanese footballer from some time ago.

The man's name was Duc. He was one half of a conjoined twin, so he had only one leg. He became famous after undergoing surgery in Japan, which is why he could speak Japanese. When I was surprised by this unexpected encounter, he asked me to practice passing together.

“Nakata! Pass!” he laughed.

He stood confidently in front of the goal on crutches, and when I hesitantly kicked a soft pass to him, he slapped me with a powerful pass, as if to kick away my hesitation. I responded with a strong ball this time. As we exchanged passes, his face came alive. His passes were inevitably rough, but he didn't care about that—he simply loved the game. Seeing him happy made me feel ashamed of having been reserved toward him. Before he is disabled, he is just a man.

He bounced around on crutches, gamely chasing the ball and passing to me. His honest, powerful passes seemed to inspire me to be myself. I felt the impact of the ball through my ankles and across my body and thought, “I love football.”

When we finished practicing passes, he said, “I haven't had this much fun playing football in a long time, Nakata!” He then got on his bike and dashed back home with the twins.

Outside, where thousands of power lines were tangled, a horde of motorcycles roared in disorder, and he was among them. He was able to bring his children to this futsal court because, despite his missing leg, he was allowed to drive a motorcycle. In Japan, people are protected by regulations. But in Vietnam, this free-spiritedness allows people like Duc to live freely.

From that day on, we played football together every week.

Six years later, I'm in Japan now. I have retired from football, just as Nakata did. I have found something new that I like. You're the one who taught me to love something. Just the other day, I saw you again on the cinema screen in a film about your life. So, I'm writing this now because I can't help the memories from pouring out of me. You look a little older now, but you're smiling like you did then. Your twins, Fuji and Sakura, are much taller now. They grew up fine, didn't they? You must be a good dad.

Well, even in the cinema, you're still just a man to me. But hey, because of you, I can walk on these two legs today, Duc. [699 words]