

My elementary and junior high school days

I was born in Okayama city, Okayama prefecture. Okayama is in the Chugoku region, which is at the south end of the main island of Japan. It is between Hyogo prefecture, in which is situated the city of Kobe, and the prefecture of Hiroshima. Hiroshima prefecture is most famous for Hiroshima city which in turn is famous for the *Genbaku* Dome. The dome commemorates the nuclear explosion that occurred there at the end of World War II. Okayama is renowned for its peaches; the famous fairy tale *Momotaro* was created in Okayama, and *Momo* means peach. I love peaches and I loved eating them when I was a kid. The peaches grown in Okayama are called “White Peaches” because their insides are white. Usually one only gets a chance to eat them as a present when one is sick. However, because my home was a temple, we often received many expensive fruits such as white peaches and muscatel grapes as offerings and we could eat them anytime. We were very fortunate.

When I was an elementary school student, I practiced Kendo, the Japanese way of the sword, for 6 years. We had practice 3 days a week, Monday, Wednesday, and Friday and we had matches on weekends. I first became interested in Kendo after I saw the exercises in the gym of my elementary school. I thought the older students that did Kendo were super cool and I asked my parents to allow me to try it as well. They consented, and I began Kendo under the promise that I would not give it up before graduating from elementary school. When practicing Kendo, we use protective equipment such as *Men*, the mask that protects our faces, *Kote*, the gloves that protect our hands, and *Dou*, the armor that protects our bodies. Naturally, we also use a *Shinai*, which is a sword shaped stick made of bamboo for hitting the protective equipment. This equipment is very expensive and we could not easily replace it. I remember that

when I started to practice Kendo my equipment was a little bit oversized, so that I could grow into it. I toughened myself both physically and mentally because the training was very rigorous. It was very painful to be hit by a bamboo sword but after becoming accustomed to the exercise I didn't feel the pain. However, after I had gone home I would find that I had many blue spots all over my body. Mental toughness came from enduring the heat in the summer and the cold in the winter. In summer we were always sweaty and even worse we could not wash the equipment; the smell was terrible. In winter we always had pain on the soles of our feet. It was so bad that we would be tempted to just give up everything. The floor of the training hall was freezing cold, but even then we didn't wear anything on our feet. In winter we stood on wet rags which were used to prevent slippage until we got accustomed to the cold. We did this because those rags were warmer than the floor.

In the competitions, elementary students played against both boys and girls. I was very happy when I had a match with a pretty girl. Of course, before the match, we didn't wear our masks, so we used to check out the opposition and see who was pretty. The most painful moment in the sport is, naturally, the disappointment we feel when we lose a match, but mentally the most difficult thing that ever occurred to me was when I couldn't approach an opponent who smelled awful because of the stinky Chinese dumplings he had just eaten.

When I entered junior high I wanted to join the soccer club because I liked "Captain Tsubasa," a very popular comic book at the time. Unfortunately there was no soccer club at my school, so I joined the soft tennis club. Also, I started to become interested in girls, and I had a date for the first time. In addition, I started to study for entrance exams for the first time as well. I hated studying and my parents put me

under a lot of pressure. Looking back, I think it was natural because at the time many people thought that going to a good school was very important.