

This story comes from parts of book I wrote.

Arakawa Sakae

BLUE = Mr Masayuki Ohtsubo

Recently many people are talking about the “University of Aomori’s Mens Rhythmic Gymnastics (MRG) group performance” from the All Japan National Gymnastics Championships in 2009

Our MRG entertainment team name is “**Blue Tokyo**” which came from the team music “**Blue**”.

This is a very long story. This story is the real life story of Masayuki, Mr Nakata (coach) from the University of Aomori and me.

When I start talking about this story..... it’s very long.....but..... I want to tell everyone! I thought, maybe, it is too long to put this story into my blog. **BUT** I really want to tell everyone there was a Men’s Rhythmic Gymnast call Masayuki Ohtsubo.

Thank you so much for reading this.

Arakawa Sakae

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This story came from page 138 to 156 of “Rhythmic Gymnastics Boys” book. It has been modified slightly for his blog.

2009 University of Aomori

Posted to Blog by: The Coach of Aomori Yamada High School, Sakae Arakawa, on 7th October 2011.

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“The Hawk like Gymnast” Mr Masayuki Ohtsubo

On 24th July 2009, I was driving my car to attend a funeral in Iwate, Japan. I was thinking about one of the Men’s Rhythmic Gymnasts who was also a former student of mine, Mr Masayuki Ohtsubo. He was my dream.

He was one of my first students when I started coaching Men’s Rhythmic Gymnastics (MRG) at Takizawa Minami Intermediate School and at that time he was only a 1st year student. When I told him that I was going to be MRG head coach at Morioka Shiritsu High School, he decided to follow me, without question, to come and be coached at my school.

For the first two years, since I started coaching at Morioka Shiritsu High, there were unfortunately not many students who came to do MRG. I kept talking to them, encouraging them and promising them that next year we might have enough gymnast’s to do more in an effort to keep them involved. In the third year, Masayuki and his friends came and join my school team. Including them we had 6 gymnasts, just enough to make up our team and to qualify to go to the National Competition for the first time. I think that maybe because of that, I had very special feeling for this team.

Masayuki had had a problem with his tumbling since he was at Intermediate School. Due to this, I was often assisting him when he was practising tumbling. When students are running up to tumble, some of them have a very weak kick off when they start to jump. So I often use my hands to support their back and to lift them up in the air to help make their tumbling successful.

Students run across the floor, are jumping up, flipping and landing in front of me. Some of the student’s have excellent kick off skill, when they start tumbling. When they do it with the right timing, they can jump as high as my eye line. A few students had their turn, and then it was Masayuki’s turn. He had a long run up, to get speed up, before he kicked off for the start of his flip. Since he started high school, he suddenly started to grow taller, and before I realized, he was already 176cm tall and because of his height, when he running at speed towards me, he looked so powerful. Just before he reached me, he kicked off with both of his feet, with loud noise, and at the same time, I put my hands out to support his back and lifted him up into the air and he did successful flip! That kick off was roughly only my knee height sort of jump.

-----Ummmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm??-----

“Way too low. Do you know that?”

I was so surprised. Since he now has a large body, I was looking forward to seeing his very powerful and dynamic tumbling. However, I did assist him to do this then, still with a very low jump. If I didn’t assist him, there is possibility he couldn’t make it and would end up on the floor. One side of me I was so surprised about it but other side of me I was laughing. Masayuki was laughing.

“Ha ha ha.....”

until it ended up in the next door Women's Rhythmic Gymnastics floor. That was huge mistake.

In MRG terms, when an apparatus goes out of the floor area you loss 0.1 point, and when the gymnast goes out of area you loss another 0.1point as well as that, timing is interrupted and you loss another point. That means there is no way he can win!

“Oh dear..... Not again.....”

I dropped into deep thought. Unfortunately, he was often like this at competition. Even when he did perfectly at practise, he often made mistakes somewhere during competitions. For example, landing mistake when he tumble and end up falling on the floor or he would throw up his apparatus and when he would catch the perfectly but then shortly after drop them on the floor or something just like what happen at this competition. All different kinds of mistakes happened and every time I thought he is in his best condition for the competition, some reason, a mistake always happened.

When he came off from the floor with a disappointed face I always said

“.....Well done.”

What else could I say? But when he got changed from his leotard and came back to me he would always say...

“Ha haaaaaa! I did it again.”

As he said this he always smiled. This smile helped me recover from my disappointment and made me feel like he was teaching me rather than me coaching him. I would say to myself “Well.... keep working on coaching him again. Ha.”

The Beginning of the Dream

When I spoke to him about my dream to go Aomori, he said “I'll follow you and go to the University of Aomori.” When he graduated from Morioka Shiritsu High School he came and joined the University of Aomori's MRG team. He was a foundation member, one of first members of this club. Since high school, his performance had improved a lot. However, one thing hadn't changed at all... and that was his stage fright.

The other thing that hadn't changed since he was younger was, that he always said

“Ha haaaaaa! I did it again.” with smile when he made a mistake.

We also noticed that he had changed the way he dealt with other people. Until now he was always smiling to other people to help them calm down but since he had joined this club, the younger gymnasts looked up to him and he developed leadership skills as well as setting the atmosphere of the club.

He was always friendly and talking to new members when they come and visit for first time. He always had a chat with them and made little jokes to help them relax. He was very clever and learnt to do Magic tricks and he often did it them with pride at student hostel, to make everyone happy. He was always very positive, made others happy and was an excellent performer so everyone loved him so much. He had grown into a popular young man. Everyone was talking about him like this and no one said a bad thing about Masayuki.

As he became more of a personal friend, I started to talk to him about my dream. "In the future I'm thinking about sending MRG gymnasts to entertain the world."

"Entertainment???"

"Yeah---. I thought about it when we did the performance on the stage at Morioka. I suddenly realized this kind of entertainment performance could exist. This was big revelation and at same time I had full belief that MRG would be successful on the stage."

"Well..... an MRG stage performance.....?! That's a good idea! I want to do it."

"I'm sure you can do it. I think a stage performance will suit you. You can be a professional performer!!"

We were often talking about our dream and when doing so our eyes shone with happiness.

Just before Masayuki's University graduation he had a job offer. It was good timing and the offer came from someone who was looking for a performer to do something at an event in Tokyo. He agreed to give it to try.

It is easy to say the word performance but in the reality there are all different types and levels of performance jobs, these days. Some of them were performing for children at very small events in small towns and some of them were pre-entertainment performances for another stage performance. Most of them were small and it wasn't the main performance. But I was glad that he was able to do that. Being able to send Masayuki to the performance and entertainment industry made me feel like I had made the first step towards my dream.

About one year down the track, after Masayuki went to Tokyo as performer, we were talking on the phone he said:

"Recently I'm having funny headache."

"Well maybe you work too hard???"

"I'm not sure. Maybe?!"

I wasn't taking this conversation too seriously and also Masayuki wasn't talking at a serious level either. However, his headache was getting worse day by day and he started to think that something was wrong and finally visited the hospital. Soon after he got there, they started

examine him. They took a MRI scan of his head and it showed funny white shadow in his brain. It was brain tumour.

Considering he already knew he had a brain tumour when he called to tell me about this news, he was very normal and he was positive like any other call I'd had from him.

“Well actually I've got brain tumour. But they said they can do something with surgery.”

“..... Are you ok??”

“Well I guess I should be fine if it's removed.”

I took this news really seriously but the way Masayuki talk to me, on the phone, his voice sounded like a normal casual chat. It was just like he was talking about someone else.

He had the surgery straight way and all of tumour was successfully removed.

I broke down when I heard that.

Perhaps that happy moment didn't last on for long time as a few months down the track he developed the tumour again. Again he had surgery to remove it. Unfortunately, this time the surgeon couldn't remove all of it as his tumour was in funny difficult location. If surgeon did remove all of it, there is high risk of damaging the surrounding area, that meant there was high possibility of permanent damage and a severe disability therefore they left a part of the tumour rather than remove it all. Because he was young, the tumour grew rapidly and it wasn't long before Masayuki wasn't able to move.

When I heard he wasn't doing well, I was more than willing to go and visit him, except my team was working, very hard, towards a competition which was just around the corner and I couldn't leave. So, instead I asked my wife (ex-wife) Naomi to visit him, in Tokyo, for me.

On the way to the hospital Naomi got cell phone message.

“Naomi-san (Mrs Naomi), could you please bring over custard puddings for me?”

Soon after see that, since that message came with little picture, like he normally does, she started smiling and thought “Well he's not as bad as I think.” So she went to shop and bought plenty of custard puddings for him.

Masayuki said “Long time, no see!”

Soon after she saw him she realized that she didn't need to buy the custard puddings. He was lying on the bed with his head all bandaged up. It was painful to see him like this.

She said “Yeah--. How are you?”

When he opened his mouth to answer her question, he suddenly took washbowl straight way and vomited. That was from the side effects from the treatments he was having. It went on and on and it looked like he was not able to put anything into his mouth.

Normally he was a positive caring person. He never complained about anything, even the big mistakes he made during his gym performances or the coach shouting at him during practice or even when he got the bad news of having a tumour that requires surgery. He was always positive, always strong.

But this time he said “.....It’s hard.....”

When I heard this from Naomi, I felt like it hit me where it hurts most.

Shortly after this, he made surprising recovery. Maybe it was something to do with a drug adjustment that was success or just a respite; it was like he was back to normal. His health improved to a level where he could possibly start work although, unfortunately, he was unable to do high physical movement of performer anymore, so he started doing a stage lighting job instead.

Maybe, he was feeling all right. He came home to Aomori quite often and he would often visit the student hostel, even though he didn’t know anyone anymore, talking and chatting with the younger gymnasts and telling jokes or inviting them saying... “Come on. The Magic Show is starting!”, to show off his Magic skill. They had good fun together and again everyone loved him so much.

One day Masayuki visited me in Gym. He said

“Coach, let’s do the MRG stage performance. I believe only you can do this. This is my dream.”

One time Masayuki introduced his boss to me, when we were talking each other. We were talking about the fact that he recently got a prize, for best performance for new light man, and somehow we start talking about the stage performance.

“How about we make a story of Masayuki Ohtsubo? The story line could be, since I was little, you tricked me into to doing MRG and outcome is like this. Also this story is going to be humorous with lots of laughs and a few tears.”

He was laughing while we were talking about this so I answered him very casually.

“You’re an idiot. I’m a normal busy school teacher. Don’t you know that?”

Since then his health condition has deteriorated, falling into the worst condition ever. He couldn’t move and staying in bed for days. His tumour was still sitting in a difficult part of his brain so it was hard to tell if a third operation will able to remove it successfully or not.

At this time news of a new treatment method for him was discovered. It hadn’t been approved by the medical council but if we give the WT-1 vaccine to him that might work.

I got a phone call from his young wife Mika. She said “If they can’t operate on him then I’d like to give it a try.”

When she said this, I couldn’t say anything straight way. I just nodded my head to say yes.

I was talking to Naomi who was sitting in the passenger's seat and started re-writing my speech.

There were many very familiar face at his funeral service. Mr Nakata (coach) from University of Aomori, team mates from when he was at Intermediate school, High school and University, the former RG coach of Takizawa Minami Intermediate School Ms Hiroko Niwa who said to us "Don't teach them well" (to keep gym going rather than losing member) and former students and gymnasts as well as younger students and gymnasts from when he was school age. His friends from Morioka, Aomori and from Tokyo, as well. When I'm looking at everyone's who spend time with Masayuki, I suddenly realized how much time I time spent with him.

The funeral parlour was decorated with black and white all over. I felt that was bit plain for him. Even his coffin (which setting in the middle of this room) was bit plain, I felt this was inappropriate considering he was a nice warm person with lots of smiles. I was facing the audience with my back to him when I started my speech.

I started with "The 23rd of July, 10am, I got a call....."

This is totally different to what I was originally thinking of. Once I started talking about him emotions welled and I couldn't make up mind what to cut out. By the time I realized, my speech was a lot longer than normal. Many people said they had never heard such a long speech, I still felt like I didn't say enough to telling everyone about my feelings. During my speech I made one promised to him.

"I'll make your wish come true!"

I took vow to Masayuki and myself.

Performance made change of atmosphere

At Masayuki's funeral, University of Aomori MRG club were discussing "Shall we use his music to do our performance?" They were trying to modify Masayuki's individual gym routine music to make up University of Aomori's group routine to pay respect to him. But in reality it is not easy as at this stage, the school's group routine was already made and as well there is not enough time to do this before All Japan Inter-College competition coming up on the 15th August. Therefore we decided to do this at All Japan Gymnastic Championship coming up in October.

We choose the last music he used when he was in the University Gym competition. This song "Blue" came from D.F.O. This is one of the instrumental music, that music made us feel nice warm feeling also when we heard gentle violin sounds that to receive an impression of reminding Masayuki's nice smiley face and his wonderful personality.

Choosing the music was relatively easy but making up the routine to go with it.....that wasn't easy. We already had a routine for this October championship and now we needed to

make a big adjustment to fit it to Masayuki's music. We had difficulty matching the music and movement but most important thing was the team member's feelings towards the performance. Of course original routine wasn't made for Masayuki. Since we decide to use his music they need to focus their feeling towards him when they are performing. This was the biggest problem. It wasn't an easy task by any means to finalize routine. Consequently we made endless adjustments and by the time we finalized the routine it was just before championship day.

On 18th October, All Japan Gymnastic Championship held at Yoyogi Gymnasium 1 in Tokyo.

There was Junior, High school, University and Adult's top level gymnasts. All of them came to win this championship and become the national winner. I was there with my team, Aomori Yamada High School and Mr Nakata (coach) was there with his team University of Aomori.

I was looking after my team but same time I couldn't take my eyes off University of Aomori's final practice. University of Aomori MRG team had modified their routine so much and carried on until just before this competition. So that meant, they never actually achieved a perfect synchronized performance. There was always some mistake. That goes on again and again and again..... Mr Nakata is very dedicated coach and normally he is well prepare before he goes to any competition. He had never had a situation like this before.

I had a special feeling while I was waiting for their performance. I wasn't thinking about wishing for this team to win this championship or make no mistakes during their routine. I was wishing to see their successful performance for Masayuki.

Maybe a MRG competition has special atmosphere compared to other sports. Normally when there is a group performance, just before they do tumbling or other moves, they do special trick, other gymnast from that school say "Fight----- (Go...)". Also when they do triple back flip they say, "Sei! Sei! Sei! (Ha! Ha! Ha!)" with same timing and rhythm as when gymnast kick off to cheer them on. Most sports do a similar kind of thing. Of course when University of Aomori performs at competition they normally do this, except this year it was bit different. This year when they came onto the floor to start, there was silence. We could only hear the piano music. That sound was very gentle and nice. Then they started to move with music. One gymnast started moving, followed by the other five gymnasts who were lying on the floor started moving. They started with delicate movements and they changed to creating different themes with music. Some of the parts were very sharp and other parts were dynamic...

While watching their performance, I was remembering Masayuki's performance with this music. Now this team (six gymnasts) is performing for him. Parts of this routine is flexible like when you use whip, then burst into jumps..... Each movement was perfectly synchronized by all gymnasts. When they did MRG style handstand (when they do handstand, their legs need to make shape of deer horn and stay still for three seconds) everyone did in perfect timing and synchronizing. That was just like time stopped at that moment.

When they were jumping up in the air to do tumbling most of the spectators looked like they lost their breath. It felt like very nice, warm atmosphere was surrounding us. There was total silence except for the sounds of the gymnasts breathing. Their performance made this atmosphere naturally.

Soon after their performance finished everyone applauded and many people had tears in their eyes, even those who didn't know about Masayuki. Considering they were not able to do a perfect synchronized performance during practice, it was very surprisingly there were no mistakes. The University of Aomori team did a perfect performance and won this year's championship.