

WELCOME



A Welcome from JRLO Chairman
Genichi Tamatsuka

Welcome to the 2024-25 season of Japan Rugby League One.

There is great excitement and a strong sense of anticipation in our country as we head into the fourth edition of Japan's club rugby showcase.

Not only has the public and player engagement with the competition continued to build – with last season seeing us surpass a seasonal attendance of more than one million for the first time – but we are also bucking the global trend on the participation front.

It is a measure of the success of the competition from its beginning three years ago, that the next edition of Japan Rugby League One features an additional three teams.

This comes at a time when many international leagues are contracting, with team participation numbers reducing.

We are grateful to the many international stars who are coming to play in Japan and spreading the word to their contemporaries, and fans, about the wonderful experience they have, the high standard of rugby, and the opportunity that exists for their countrymen to join Japan Rugby League One.

The number of players from the league who continue to play at the highest level for their national teams is indicative, both to the appropriateness of Japan Rugby League One as physical and mental preparation for test play, but also the quality of the competition our league provides.

That the competition is so even is illustrated by the fact that each of Japan Rugby League One's first three seasons has provided a different champion: a situation which stands alone compared to the state of play in each of the other major club competitions around the world for the same period.

It is recognition of the exciting nature of the play, and their desire to be entertained by some of the best players in the world, that our crowds continue to grow at a rapid rate. Last season's thrilling final which saw TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO pip SAITAMA PANASONIC WILD KNIGHTS at the National Stadium drew a crowd of 56,486 fans, which was 14,692 more people than attended the corresponding match a year earlier at the same venue.



This is something the league board, executive, and hard-working staff, are proud of: our mission when we started on this adventure four seasons ago was to grow knowledge and participation in the Japanese game, both domestically but also around the world. With crowds tracking upwards, and Japan Rugby League One games now broadcast in many countries, as well as live streamed on international websites, we have made good progress. But there is much more to do.

We understand that interest and participation in Japan Rugby League One – whether it is a spectator attending a match, or an international fan reading a story in their newspaper or online – remains as important for us today, as it was when we began. Their interest is a privilege for us, not a right.

As such we will continue to work with our clubs to grow the attractiveness of our league, for players, coaches and fans in Japan, and in the wider international rugby community, but also with you, the news media from around the world.

Thank you for your on-going support.

We are grateful for the interest you show, and your participation in helping us to 'sell' our story to fans around the world.

Our media staff, led by head of media Yusuke Kuwano, Wakako Sato and our international media adviser Matt McLraith, will work hard to meet your needs throughout the season ahead.

Kind Regards
Genichi Tamatsuka
Chairman
Japan Rugby League One

WELCOME



The Growth of Japan Rugby League One by Chief Operating Officer *Hajime Shoji*

One year ago, Japan Rugby League One had lift off.

After the challenge of the global pandemic in our first season, and consolidation in year two; we felt the league was ready to rise to the next level.

The third edition proved to be our most significant to date.

As well as providing another exciting finale in front of a record league crowd, the season saw attendance more than double on that achieved in the first two years.

Competition for a position in the Division One semi-finals was tight; the promotion/relegation Replacement Battles were keenly contested, and the stars continued to join, with a quarter of the players (13) who had participated in the 2023 Rugby World Cup final subsequently making their way to Japan to compete in League One.

They were part of a contingent of 25 international Rugby World Cup representatives who showcased their talent across the league, with representatives from each of the South Africa, New Zealand, Australia, Wales, Samoa, Fiji, Tonga and Namibia teams.

The most significant indicator as to the league's trajectory was provided by the decision we were able to make to allow three more teams to join for our fourth season.

Expansion is not without risk; it requires additional resourcing, additional responsibility on all the clubs as well as additional scheduling, with significant format changes being made to Division's Two and Three.

While Division One remains a 12-team section, with two Replacement Battles at season's end, the league's below have been amended, with eight teams to participate in Division Two.

Division Three membership has increased by one, with newcomers SAYAMA SECOM RUGGUTs, LeRIRO Fukuoka and Yakult Levins Toda joining the league's existing participants: Kurita Water Gush Akishima, MAZDA SKYACTIVS HIROSHIMA and Chugoku Electric Power Red Regulions.

The excitement created by the new members, and their willingness to meet the stipulations required to join, are a great sign as to the base the league is establishing, on the world rugby landscape, but also in the competitive Japanese sport ecosystem.

Anecdotal feedback suggests many of the newcomers to league games last season were

first time fans, drawn to rugby union by the promise of excitement, entertainment, and the chance to see some of the finest athletes in the world compete on Japanese soil.

This is a message we will continue to spread as we embark on our fourth campaign.

We have been grateful to our clubs and the proactive work they have undertaken in their communities to grow awareness of the game, as well as their development work towards encouraging the next generation of rugby players in Japan.

The role of the international stars at each of the clubs has been an important part of this, and I cannot thank these players enough for the important contribution they are making and the legacy they are leaving from their time in Japan.

On the field, our fourth season begins with a different champion having been crowned in each of the previous three competitions.

The benchmark set by past champions, SAITAMA Panasonic WILD KNIGHTS (2022), Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY (2023) and TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO, is high, with the subsequent recruitment of many of the other Division One clubs suggestive of a genuine determination to match the trio's achievement, or even go beyond.

The ambitions on show in recruitment by clubs is going beyond the playing field.

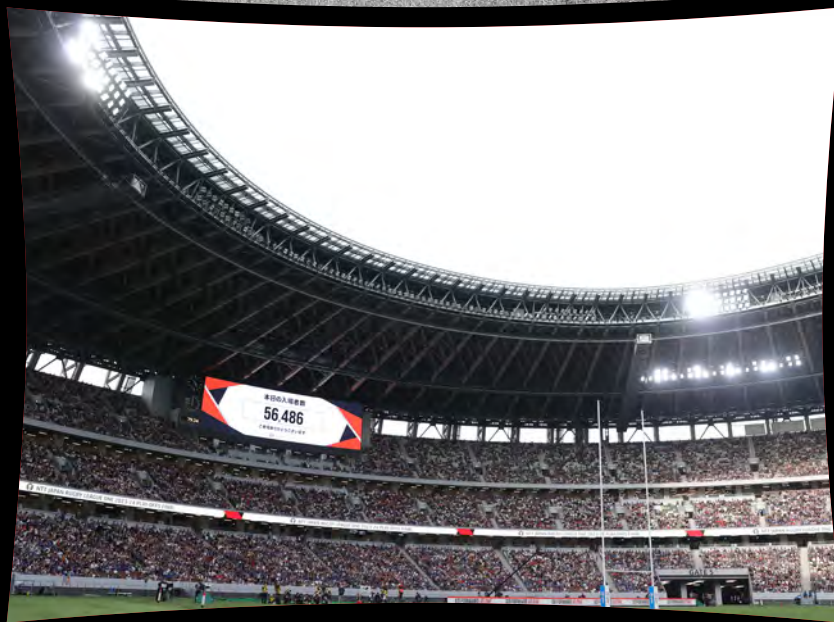
Last year's arrival of Dave Rennie (Australia), Wayne Pivac (Wales) and Kieran Crowley (Italy) brought to eight the number of test coaches associated with teams in Japan Rugby League One.

Three had been involved in success winning the Rugby World Cup.

Four other head coaches had success in Super Rugby, either winning the title or twice taking their teams to the final.

The injection of elite international coaching is playing a significant part in improving the playing standard, while also developing the next generation of Japanese coaches.

Their influence has raised the levels of professionalism among the players, while also helping to attract many international stars to Japan Rugby League One.



Why are international players coming to Japan Rugby League One?

Our clubs provide the players with financial security, and in some cases access to new post-rugby careers, but there are many more reasons why they come to Japan:

- The cultural experience we offer, which is very different to their home nations.
- The outstanding modern training facilities they encounter, and the excited and engaged crowds they play in front of.
- The huge emphasis the clubs place on their welfare, and that of their families. This is especially so for players with children. With games mainly played early afternoon, and travel made easy by Japan's world leading internal transport links, they can play their games and still be home in time to have dinner with their families and put their young children to bed.
- Physical conditioning for players is an important focus for clubs. Not only do they play less games than in most other competitions around the world, with several bye weekends for all teams incorporated into the schedule, but the players are also treated carefully in finely tuned individual management programmes.
- Many overseas stars who play in Japan say the larger recovery time between seasons, along with the carefully managed match schedule, has them at the physical peak of their careers. This has been highlighted by how many of them have performed so well representing their countries after playing in Japan Rugby League One.
- Japan-based players are also still able to compete at test level should their countries select them. Our clubs will never stand in the way of a players' international ambitions.

The more players from Japan Rugby League One who are representing their countries, the greater the reputational growth and player learning for our league. It is the desire of Japan Rugby League One, and our clubs, to become the competition of choice for the best players in the world.



So how does our foreign player quota system work?

Our system ensures Japanese players are not disadvantaged for selection but gives them the opportunity to play alongside the best players in the world and learn from this experience.

The quotas provide us with the perfect balance between the pursuit of international knowledge and the development of Japanese players.

They reflect the core values and experience we want Japan Rugby League One to bring to Japanese fans, and to players and fans from all around the world.

In Japan, we see ourselves as the entry point for rugby into the largest and fastest growing economic region in the world.

The growth potential of Asia is enormous.

For rugby, this is largely untapped.

By setting up Japan Rugby League One, we have created a vehicle that can help to drive this growth.

International support, in the form of cross-border competition, and the invaluable support you, the world media, are providing by bringing our message to a global audience, is critical.

We thank you for that and look forward to working with you again in the new season.

Regards

Hajime Shoji
Chief Operating Officer
Japan Rugby League One



An introduction to Japan Rugby League One

Now into its' fourth season, and continuing to grow quickly, Japan Rugby League One brings together the best of the international and Asian games.

This allows big name international stars to mix with Japanese and South Korean raised players, creating a unique product that draws on the best of both.

It is a similar concept to the massively successful Indian Premier League in cricket, where a large global audience watches regionally named teams featuring a selection of international stars, playing alongside the best of Indian talent, in an exciting round robin competition which builds up to a thrilling finals series. Japan Rugby League One is also unique from all other rugby club leagues in that its competitors are supported by some of the world's largest commercial entities.

The advent of the new league has seen the clubs mirror many of their western counterparts by taking on regional titles to reflect their locations and the communities they represent.

Two seasons on, teams are moving towards decreasing reliance on their corporate parent companies, but the individual structures of each club means that they, and their playing and coaching rosters, were cushioned from the Covid-enforced turbulence that claimed some of the game's most iconic clubs and threatened the operations of many others.

This highlights the future potential Japan Rugby League One has on the world stage.

It is here for the long term, with the job security adding to the attraction for big name players, and all the clubs financially sound.

With its commercial backing, and a level of attraction that saw 25 non-Japanese players who attended the Rugby World Cup playing in last season's competition – including 13 who featured in the final, 12 of whom started – it has the brightest future of any club league in the world.



Aaron Smith (Toyota Verblitz)

Season Four – What's New

The first expansion of League One since its inception sees the number of participants increase by three on the field that contested last year's competition.

Division One remains a 12-team section, although there has been a change to the finals system from previous seasons.

Six teams will now participate at this stage, with the top two on the final regular season standings going straight to the semi-finals, with a bye week before, while the teams ranked third to sixth will play a knockout game, with seedings based on their finishing order.

Unlike last season, there will be no mid-competition break for cross-border matches as these will not be taking place in the 2024-25 season.

Below Division One, the number of teams in the second and third tier has changed.

Three clubs, who have met the League's qualification conditions, have gained entry to Division Three.

Among the activities required by the clubs to qualify are an active development programme in their operating area as well as a commitment to community engagement.

The inclusion of the three new clubs has necessitated a re-ordering of Division Two, with the number of participants increased to eight teams after the winner

and runners-up from last year's lower tier, Hino Red Dolphins and Koto Blue Sharks, were both promoted.

Division Two will consist of two full rounds of home-and-away matches before a promotion/relegation series, known as The Replacement Battle, will take place at both ends of the table.

The changes in numbers will also see Division Three enlarged by one to a six-team competition, consisting of three full rounds followed by a final's series and Replacement Battle.

Division One – 12 teams. One full round robin (11 matches) followed by five more matches against the other sides in their conference. Six team finals series. Bottom two promotion/relegation series against top two from Division Two

Division Two – 8 teams. Two full rounds, one home, one away. Promotion/relegation series featuring the bottom two of Division Two, and the top two from Division Three.

Division Three – 6 teams. Three full rounds. Top two teams enter promotion/relegation series with bottom two of Division Two.



Yakult Levins Toda

The history of rugby in Japan

Rugby has been played in Japan for a longer time than it has been in many of the more well-known nations playing the game.

The first game of rugby was recorded to have been played in Yokohama in 1866, following the end to the country's international isolation 12 years earlier.

This was 43 years after William Webb Ellis picked up the ball and ran with it to create the game (1823), and four years earlier than the first recorded rugby game in New Zealand (1870), 10 before Australia (1876) and nine before South Africa (1875).

Rugby was introduced to Japan by the European and American traders who entered the country.

The game is strong in universities, with its' association with tertiary institutions dating back to 1899 at the famed Keio University, where Englishman E.B Clarke together with his Cambridge University friend and colleague Ginosuke Tanaka, began teaching students to play rugby.

Today, despite an aging population in the country, Japan has 91,000 registered players.

Importantly, the game is thriving among children who have been drawn to rugby by the increased exposure a more successful Brave Blossoms team is enjoying in Japanese society.

This has been added to by the development work carried out by the Japan Rugby Football union, and Japan Rugby League One clubs.

Japan was an invitee to the inaugural Rugby World Cup in 1987 and has represented the Asian region at all 10 tournaments, famously reaching the quarterfinals when hosting the competition in 2019. Semi-professional rugby began in 2003 with the creation of the Top League, which brought together

the leading clubs from the regional areas, who had previously played in their own localised tournaments. The Japan championship had pitted the best of the country's corporate and university clubs in an annual knockout format, but the Top league introduced a round robin structure for the leading clubs, with a promotion/relegation mechanism factored into the league at season's end.

The Top League ran from 2003 until 2021, beginning the attraction of Japan for major international names, from both playing and coaching ranks.

Japan Rugby League One was introduced in 2022 to extend community engagement by encouraging the clubs to take an even more proactive role in their local areas.

It also allowed teams to take control of their own commercial and marketing activities, raising both the profile of the game, but also the development of the next generation of players across the country.

Its' purpose was also to grow the understanding of Japanese rugby on the world stage, following on from the profile and goodwill the game received – both domestically and internationally – in the aftermath of the country's hosting of the Rugby World Cup in 2019.

This it is achieving, with last season seeing match attendance pass one million for a single season, which included 56,486 at the Division One final, an increase of 14,692 on the previous year.

The on-going competitiveness of the Brave Blossoms on the international stage has underlined the benefits the national side is gaining from the higher level of competition that Japanese players are exposed to in Japan Rugby League One.

How Japan Rugby League One compares to its international counterparts

Promotion/Relegation

The model in Japan Rugby League One with promotion/relegation between its three sections is one that has become increasingly rare on the international club landscape.

The Top 14 in France is the only other major club competition in the world that has consistently featured promotion and relegation, with the format having just returned in England's Premiership after being shelved when three of its clubs, who faced financial difficulties, were wound up as professional entities two years ago. Super Rugby, Major League Rugby and the United Rugby Championship do not feature promotion/relegation.

Local derbies

Derby matches are the bedrock of all competition and Japan Rugby League One is not short of them.

Among the highest profile of these are:

Saitama Panasonic Wild Knights v Tokyo Sungoliath

These two teams have dominated club rugby in Japan since the advent of nationwide competition in the Top League and then Japan Rugby League One, with 11 titles between them. This has created a fierce rivalry, with the Wild Knights having beaten Sungoliath in the finals of both the last Top League and the inaugural Japan Rugby League One.

Tokyo Sungoliath v Brave Lupus Tokyo

The Fuchu derby is a geographically based rivalry with the two sides close neighbours in western Tokyo, and regular opponents since the advent of the Top League, where each had time as the competition's leading force. Last year, while winning their sixth title to move one ahead of the number won by Sungoliath, Brave Lupus beat their fierce rivals three times, including in a hotly contested semi-final.

Ricoh Black Rams v Yokohama Canon Eagles

This match is often quaintly referred to as the 'Photocopy' match as both parent companies manufacture this product, creating the rivalry, which makes this contest the biggest each club plays in the regular season. Yokohama has dominated in recent seasons, reaching back-to-back semi-finals, while the Black Rams have been stuck among the lower echelons of the point's table, being sucked into last season's Replacement Battle. Still, rankings mean very little to the Ricoh-supported Tokyo-based outfit, when the Canon-led Yokohama Eagles are on the other side of the halfway line!

SkyActivs Hiroshima v Chugoku Electric Power Red Regulators

The battle of Hiroshima, this fiercely contested playoff saw the SkyActivs prevail in two of last year's three games. While both sides endured plenty of bumps throughout Division Three last term, success in the city derby will always be their ultimate prize.

Star overseas players – how does the system work?

Each club is allowed three players who have been capped internationally/played tests for nations other than Japan.

There can be up to seven others at a club who are foreign born but have not played test matches and could (in time) become eligible for Japan.

The exact number of these allowed for each club is dependent on the size of the team's playing roster, with the quota based on percentages.

Most players who have been capped by a foreign nation play for clubs in Division One, although clubs in Division Two and Division Three do have the same allowance and recruit such players too.

Many foreign capped players are still active for their national unions and join the clubs at the end of their international commitments, as is the case with the Rugby World Cup, after which 25 foreign players reported for their Japanese clubs.

That more than half of those were new to the league was testament to how the knowledge of, and attraction to, the club game in Japan is rapidly growing among the world's elite players.

The timing of Japan Rugby League One, which falls outside of the November and mid-year international windows, means that the integrity of the competition is guaranteed as far as the involvement of its

international test players is concerned.

This means that the international audience is exposed to the star foreign players who play their club rugby in Japan every week.

It also shows that the standard of play in Japan Rugby League One is appropriate for test preparation before the players play for their countries, as they go straight into test matches after the league finishes.

South Africa is a great example of this, with a large contingent of Springboks having made their test preparation in Japan before joining the national team, which has had huge success in the last four years.

This includes beating the British & Irish Lions and winning over the All Blacks by a record score in London in 2023, capturing a second consecutive Rugby World Cup a few months later, and this year taking out The Rugby Championship, beating New Zealand twice during the series.

The Springbok squad in The Rugby Championship featured eight players who were based in Japan, while three other regulars from Japanese clubs were unavailable due to injury.

Los Pumas were also led to their historic victory over the All Blacks in Wellington by Mie Heat's backrower, Pablo Matera.



Pablo Matera (MIE Honda HEAT)

The international star players for season four

(* denotes players who attended the 2023 Rugby World Cup in France)

Division One

Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY :

Malcolm Marx (South Africa*), Bernard Foley (Australia)

Saitama Wild Knights: Damian de Allende (South Africa*),

Lood de Jager (South Africa), Marika Koroibete (Australia*)

Yokohama Eagles: Faf de Klerk (South Africa*), Jesse Kriel (South Africa*), Matthew Phillip (Australia*)

Tokyo Sungoliath: Cheslin Kobe (South Africa*), Sean McMahon (Australia), Sam Cane (New Zealand*)

Brave Lupus Tokyo: Richie Mo'unga (New Zealand*), Shannon Frizell (New Zealand*),

Seta Tamanivalu (New Zealand)

TOYOTA VERBLITZ :

Aaron Smith (New Zealand*), Pieter Steph du Toit (South Africa*), Richie Gray (Scotland)*

Shizuoka Blue Revs: Kwagga Smith (South Africa*), Charles Piutau (New Zealand/Tonga*)

Black Rams Tokyo: Nathan Hughes (England), TJ Perenara (New Zealand), Liam Gill (Australia)

Kobelco Kobe Steelers: Brodie Retallick (New Zealand*), Ngane Laumape (New Zealand),

George Turner (Scotland*)

MIE Honda HEAT :

Pablo Matera (Argentina*), Tom Banks (Australia), Franco Mostert (South Africa*)

Sagamihara Dynaboars: Kurt Lee Arendse (South Africa*), Curtis Rona (Australia),

Jackson Hemopo (New Zealand)

Urayasu D-Rocks: Jasper Wiese (South Africa), Israel Folau (Australia/Tonga), Samu Kerevi (Australia)

Division Two

HANAZONO KINTETSU LINERS :

Quade Cooper (Australia), Will Genia (Australia), Akira Ioane (New Zealand)

NEC Green Rockets Tokatsu: Jake Ball (Wales), Rhys Patchell (Wales)

Toyota Industries Corporation Shuttles Aichi:

Taleni Sau (Samoa*)

HINO RED DOLPHINS :

Rory Arnold (Australia), Augustine Pulu (New Zealand)

SHIMIZU KOTO BLUE SHARKS:

Lima Sopoaga (Samoa/New Zealand), Murphy Taramai (Samoa)

Kamaishi Seawaves: Ben NeeNee (Samoa)

Division Three

SAYAMA SECOM RUGGUTs :

Cory Hill (Wales)

Star international coaches

Japan Rugby League One has proved a huge attraction for some of the most successful coaches of the professional era. This was so much so that in the final year of the Top League, the coaches involved in Japan had won more Super Rugby titles between them than the coaches who were still active in Super Rugby. The 2024-25 season will feature eight men who have coached at test level, three of whom have been involved in success winning the Rugby World Cup.

Major Titles Won by Coaches in Japan

Rugby League One

- 4 Rugby World Cups
(three men's, one women's)
- 2 Six Nations
- 12 Super Rugby
- 1 Pro 12
(forerunner to United Rugby Championship)

The involvement of these elite coaches, who have had success all over the world, has played a significant role in improving the playing and coaching standard across the board, which has flowed on into success for Japan at international level.

They have also played a part in attracting many international star players to Japan Rugby League One.



Wayne Pivac (Green Rockets Tokatsu)

The international star coaches for season four

(* denotes a position with a team when they were not the head coach)

Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY :

Frans Ludeke (Bulls South Africa)

Saitama Wild Knights:

Robbie Deans (Crusaders NZ, All Blacks NZ*, Wallabies Australia)

TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO :

Todd Blackadder (Tasman NZ, Crusaders NZ, Bath England)

TOYOTA VERBLITZ :

Steve Hansen (Canterbury NZ, Wales, All Blacks NZ); Ian Foster (Waikato, Chiefs, New Zealand)

KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS :

Dave Rennie (Chiefs NZ, Glasgow Warriors Scotland, Wallabies Australia);

Mike Blair (Glasgow Scotland*, Edinburgh Scotland, Scotland*)

MIE Honda HEAT :

Kieran Crowley (Taranaki NZ, Canada, Benetton Treviso Italy, Italy)

RICOH BlackRams Tokyo :

Tabai Matson (Canterbury NZ, Bath UK, Chiefs* NZ, Harlequins UK)

Mitsubishi Heavy Industries Sagami-hara Dynaboars :

Glenn Delaney (Canterbury NZ, Highlanders NZ*, London Irish England, Scarlets Wales)

Green Rockets Tokatsu: Wayne Pivac (Northland NZ, Auckland NZ, Fiji, Scarlets Wales, Wales)

International rugby relations with Japan

The lack of playing opportunities for Japan between the 2019 and 2023 Rugby World Cups due to the shutdown forced by Covid-19, was reversed this year when the new look Brave Blossoms, under returning coach Eddie Jones, played 10 test matches.

As well as participation in the Pacific Nations Cup, where Japan hosted the playoffs and qualified for the final, the schedule also included home tests against England and New Zealand, as well as visits to Twickenham and the Stade de France in November for tests against England and France respectively. A Japan XV also hosted the Maori All Blacks for two games in the midyear.

The increased schedule represented the start of a new era for the national team, as Jones looked to capitalise on the success of Japan Rugby League One as a development tool for future internationals, by ushering in the next generation of talent to the test environment.

Thanks to a Memorandum of Understanding with each of New Zealand Rugby and Rugby Australia, Japanese rugby is set to become a regular feature on the tier one international rugby circuit, with this exposure bolstered by the reinstatement of the Pacific Nations Cup tournament, which had been a feature of the international schedule in the late 90s.

The benefits of the Brave Blossoms' increased exposure on the test scene will flow onto Japan Rugby League One, generating further international interest from fans as clubs play more cross-border matches, both in friendship contests, but also by

participating in future global club competitions such as the proposed world club rugby championship.

While last season's The Cross Border Rugby – which saw the Wild Knights and Eagles compete against Super Rugby's (Waikato) Chiefs, while Sungoliath and the Spears hosted the (Auckland) Blues – will not be repeated in the new year, the exercise created a precedent which can be built on as competitive relations at club level expand.

International teams, especially from Australia, already play training matches in Japan as part of their pre-season, while most clubs in the league have formal high-performance relations with at least one international counterpart, especially in Australia and New Zealand.



Saitama Wild Knights v Chiefs in Cross Border Rugby

Ten things you didn't know about Japan Rugby League One

#1 Bigger is Better

While the number of teams in the section remains the same, the Division One programme has been enlarged by 14 games for the league's fourth edition, with each of the 12 clubs playing two more cross-conference matches.

The finals series has also been lengthened by a week, with the Division's top six now to feature.

Quarter-final weekend sees the third-placed finisher from the regular season face the side who ended sixth, while fourth plays fifth.

The two winners then advance to the semi-finals, with the lowest ranked of these to play the league's top qualifier, while other winner meets the second-placed side from the regular-season.

The new format allows the teams placed first and second after the regular season programme a bye

weekend prior to their entry into the playoffs.

With the increase to eight participants, Division Two will feature 56 games in a home-and-away format, while sides play each other three times in the six-team Division Three, with 45 games to be played in the section.

The post-season promotion/relegation series remains, although The Replacement Battle as it is known, will now only feature the bottom two sides from each section, and the top two from the division below. Previously three teams from each grade were involved.

The format for The Replacement Battle has not changed, with home and away matches played, and the winner decided on the overall aggregate of points scored in the series.



Black Rams Tokyo v Green Rockets Tokatsu in The Replacement Battle

#2 The Numbers Game

As well as the inclusion of three new teams, Japan Rugby League One's nationwide footprint also continues to grow, with matches to be played in 22 prefectures (regional/metropolitan administrative areas) in the new season; an increase of three from last term.

The Tochigi, Yamanashi, and Kyoto prefectures will each host a League One match for the first time.

The opening weekend of the competition sees matches held at 13 venues in nine regions across

Japan.

In total, the changes to the league's fourth edition – which also includes an extension of the Division One final series by a week – will see the number of games to be played increased by 47 from last year's championship.

There will be 209 matches played across the divisions in the regular season over a 21-week period, which includes bye weeks.

#3 The most competitive recent finals

It is an indicator as to how competitive club competition is in Japan at the top end of the table that the country's last four finals, three in Japan Rugby League One, have been decided by margins of five

points, six points, two and four points respectively. This is closer than any other premier club competition around the world across their last four finals.

Global Club Grand Final Winning Margins (Last 4 finals)

Japan Rugby League One: 5 points, 6 points, 2 points, 4 points (average 4.25 points)

Super Rugby: 16 points, 14 points, 5 points, 31 points (average 16.5 points)

England Premiership: 2 points, 3 points, 10 points, 4 points (average 4.75 points)

United Rugby Championship: 27 points, 5 points, 5 points, 5 points (average 10.5 points)

Top 14: 10 points, 19 points, 3 points, 56 points (average 22 points)

Major League Rugby: 14 points, 15 points, 1 point, 9 points (average 9.75 points)

#4 Saito and Tatafu's French Affair

Tokyo Sungoliath and Brave Blossoms pair Naoto Saito and Tevita Tatafu are flying the flag for Japan in the current Top 14 season in France, plying their trade with the top two sides from last year's competition. The starting number nine for the Brave Blossoms before his departure, Saito is sure to have learned plenty as understudy for Antoin Dupont once the

global superstar returned to club duty following his Olympic heroics.

One of the toughest adversaries for Toulouse promises to be the side it vanquished in last season's final, Bordeaux, who had Tatafu in the backrow for the decider.

#5 Top Boks

Japan provided plenty of fuel to the Springboks as they won this year's Rugby Championship tournament, with eight of the victorious South Africans Japan-bound to play in League One, alongside three other regulars who were injured and missed the competition.

Cheslin Kolbe, Jesse Kriel, Damian de Allende, Kwagga Smith, Pieter Steph du Toit and Malcolm Marx will all return to their Japanese clubs for the start of the new season.

In addition, winger Kurt Lee Arendse and backrower Jasper Wiese will gain their first experience of League

One.

Scrumhalf Faf de Klerk, and second rowers Lood de Jager and Franco Mostert, who were all forced to miss this year's four-nations tournament due to injury, will also be back for the league's fourth edition.

Fullback Willie le Roux, who featured for the Boks in the win over the All Blacks at Cape Town, had only just returned to the Bulls after two seasons at Toyota Verblitz.

Seven League One players featured for South Africa when it beat New Zealand 12-11 in the Rugby World Cup final.



Faf de Klerk (YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES)

#6 Sixty-two % All Black Tonnage

Former captain Sam Cane returns to Japan having recently played his 100th test for his country during the annual Bledisloe Cup series against Australia. In doing so, the Tokyo Sungoliath backrower has become the eighth All Black centurion to play in Japan. Only 13 players have played 100 or more tests for New Zealand since the All Blacks' inaugural test match against Australia in Sydney in 1903, with the latest addition meaning 62% of these centurions have played in Japan at some point during their careers.

Cane follows in the footsteps of Sam Whitelock, Aaron Smith, Beauden Barrett, Brodie Retallick, Kieran Read, Dan Carter and Ma'a Nonu, who each donned the jerseys of Japanese clubs. Smith (Toyota Verblitz) and Retallick (Kobelco Kobe Steelers) are saddling up for their clubs again, while 87-test scrumhalf TJ Perenara has returned, joining Black Rams Tokyo, after playing for Red Hurricanes Osaka in the final edition of Top League, four years ago.

All Black Centurions in Japan (Post Rugby Championship ranking for total All Black test caps)

- 1 – 153 tests, Sam Whitelock (Saitama Wild Knights)
- 4 – 130 tests, *Beauden Barrett (Tokyo Sungoliath, Toyota Verblitz)
- 5 – 127 tests, Kieran Read (Toyota Verblitz)
- 6 – 125 tests, Aaron Smith (Toyota Verblitz)
- 8 – 112 tests, Dan Carter (Kobelco Kobe Steelers)
- 9 – 109 tests, Brodie Retallick (Kobelco Kobe Steelers)
- 11 – 103 tests, Ma'a Nonu (Black Rams Tokyo)
- 12= – 100 tests, Sam Cane (Tokyo Sungoliath)

* Barrett was poised to move up to third in November, starting the All Blacks' tour of Europe just one appearance behind third-placed Keven Mealamu, while Cane was within three of Ma'a Nonu.

#7 The Coaches with the Most

Japan Rugby League One can undoubtedly claim to host star players, but the presence of many of the game's premier coaches has contributed just as much – and arguably even more – to the rapidly rising playing standard.

Such has been the attraction for elite mentors, the final year of the Top League involved men who had

won more Super Rugby titles between them than the coaches who were still active in the competition.

This year's cast includes two former All Black head coaches, two from the Wallabies, as well as former coaches of Wales and Italy, along with the Bulls and Crusaders from Super Rugby.

Major Titles Won by Head Coaches in Japan Rugby League One

- 3 Rugby World Cups
- 1 Six Nations
- 14 Rugby Championships (including Tri-Nations)
- 9 Super Rugby
- 1 Pro 12 (forerunner to United Rugby Championship)

The involvement of these elite coaches, who have had success all over the world, has played a significant role in improving the playing and coaching standard across the board, which has flowed on into success for Japan at international level.

They have also played a part in attracting many international star players to Japan Rugby League One.

The international star coaches for season four

(* denotes a position with a team when they were not the head coach)

Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY :

Frans Ludeke (Bulls South Africa)

SAITAMA Panasonic WILD KNIGHTS :

Robbie Deans (Crusaders NZ, All Blacks NZ*, Wallabies Australia)

TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO :

Todd Blackadder (Crusaders NZ, Bath England)

TOYOTA VERBLITZ :

Steve Hansen (Canterbury NZ, Wales, All Blacks NZ); Ian Foster (Waikato NZ, Chiefs NZ, All Blacks NZ)

Kobelco Kobe Steelers: Dave Rennie (Chiefs NZ, Glasgow Warriors Scotland, Wallabies Australia);

Mike Blair (Glasgow Scotland*, Edinburgh Scotland, Scotland*)

Mie Honda Heat: Kieran Crowley (Taranaki NZ, Canada, Benetton Treviso Italy, Italy)

RICOH BlackRams Tokyo :

Tabai Matson (Canterbury NZ, Bath UK, Harlequins UK)

Mitsubishi Heavy Industries Sagamiyama Dynaboars :

Glenn Delaney (Canterbury NZ, Highlanders NZ*, London Irish England, Scarlets Wales)

Green Rockets Tokatsu :

Wayne Pivac (Northland NZ, Auckland NZ, Fiji, Scarlets Wales, Wales)

#8 Tries, tries, tries

The public flocked to grounds around the country to see running rugby, and the third edition of Japan Rugby League One more than satisfied on that score.

The combination of largely decent weather, firm grounds, and an attack-minded philosophy, saw tries delivered at stunning rate. Across the 96 matches

played in the regular season in Division One, 848 tries were scored, one for every nine minutes of playing time.

Leading try-scorers, the Saitama Wild Knights, posted a whopping 106 tries in their 16 outings, scoring at an average of 6.6 tries per game.

#9 Gatland (jnr) the Great

The third edition of the competition might have featured two of the best flyhalves to have graced the All Black jersey in the modern era but that didn't prevent the pair being superseded by the son of the former British & Irish Lions and two-time Wales coach. Twenty-nine-year-old Bryn Gatland, an accomplished club performer in his own right with membership of two Super Rugby clubs on his CV, accumulated a top-ranking 217 points from his maiden season with Kobelco Kobe Steelers, where he occupied the jersey once worn for the club by his star countryman, Dan Carter. Warren Gatland's son led a table which also featured

Englishman James Grayson, who came in fourth after compiling 148 points from 14 games on debut for the Sagamihara Dynaboars. Like his Kobe counterpart, he is well related, with the ex-Northampton Saints pivot the son of the former England international, Paul Grayson. All Black and Brave Lupus flyhalf Richie Mo'unga was one place below Grayson in the rankings after finishing the regular season with 145 points to his name from 13 appearances. Baudeen Barrett came next, with the sixth-placed Toyota Verblitz star accumulating 107, also from 13 games.



Bryn Gatland (KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS)

#10 Crowded House(s)

Nowhere is the increasing popularity of League One better illustrated than in its' crowd numbers which broke through the seven-figure mark in just its third season, with 1,142,2994 fans streaming through the turnstiles.

This included 56,486 for the final between Brave Lupus and the Saitama Wild Knights, a rise of 14,692 on the 41,794 who witnessed the previous year's decider.

Competition Draw for the 2025 season

DIVISION 1

Round	Date	K.O.	Conference	Match		Prefecture	Venue		
1	12/21/2024	Sat	12:10	B	MIE Honda HEAT	v	RICOH BlackRams Tokyo	MIE	SUZUKA
	12/21/2024	Sat	14:30	A	SHIZUOKA BlueRevs	v	KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS	SHIZUOKA	YAMAHA
	12/21/2024	Sat	14:30	B	TOKYO SUNTORY SUNGOLIATH	v	SAITAMA Panasonic WILD KNIGHTS	TOKYO	AJINOMOTO
	12/22/2024	Sun	14:30	B	Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY	v	TOYOTA VERBLITZ	TOKYO	CHICHIBUNOMIYA
	12/22/2024	Sun	14:30	A	Mitsubishi SagamiHara Dynaboars	v	URAYASU D-Rocks	KANAGAWA	SAGAMIHARA GION
12/22/2024	Sun	15:05	A	YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES	v	TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO	KANAGAWA	NISSAN	
2	12/28/2024	Sat	13:00	B	RICOH BlackRams Tokyo	v	TOKYO SUNTORY SUNGOLIATH	TOKYO	CHICHIBUNOMIYA
	12/28/2024	Sat	13:05	A	URAYASU D-Rocks	v	SHIZUOKA BlueRevs	KUMAMOTO	EGAO Kenko Stadium
	12/28/2024	Sat	14:30	B	SAITAMA Panasonic WILD KNIGHTS	v	Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY	SAITAMA	KUMAGAYA
	12/28/2024	Sat	14:40	B	TOYOTA VERBLITZ	v	MIE Honda HEAT	GIFU	NAGARAGAWA
	12/29/2024	Sun	13:00	A	TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO	v	Mitsubishi SagamiHara Dynaboars	TOKYO	AJINOMOTO
12/29/2024	Sun	14:30	A	KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS	v	YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES	HYOGO	NOEVIA	
3	1/4/2025	Sat	12:00	A	URAYASU D-Rocks	v	YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES	FUKUSHIMA	J Stadium
	1/4/2025	Sat	13:00	B	RICOH BlackRams Tokyo	v	SAITAMA Panasonic WILD KNIGHTS	TOKYO	TBC
	1/4/2025	Sat	14:30	A	Mitsubishi SagamiHara Dynaboars	v	SHIZUOKA BlueRevs	TOKYO	CHICHIBUNOMIYA
	1/4/2025	Sat	14:30	B	TOKYO SUNTORY SUNGOLIATH	v	TOYOTA VERBLITZ	TOKYO	AJINOMOTO
	1/5/2025	Sun	12:00	B	MIE Honda HEAT	v	Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY	MIE	SUZUKA
1/5/2025	Sun	13:00	A	TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO	v	KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS	TOKYO	AJINOMOTO	
4	1/11/2025	Sat	12:00	A	TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO	v	URAYASU D-Rocks	KANAGAWA	U Todoroki
	1/11/2025	Sat	14:30	A	YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES	v	SHIZUOKA BlueRevs	KANAGAWA	NIPPATSU
	1/11/2025	Sat	14:40	B	TOYOTA VERBLITZ	v	RICOH BlackRams Tokyo	GIFU	NAGARAGAWA
	1/12/2025	Sun	14:05	B	TOKYO SUNTORY SUNGOLIATH	v	Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY	TOKYO	CHICHIBUNOMIYA
	1/12/2025	Sun	14:30	B	SAITAMA Panasonic WILD KNIGHTS	v	MIE Honda HEAT	SAITAMA	KUMAGAYA
1/12/2025	Sun	14:30	A	Mitsubishi SagamiHara Dynaboars	v	KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS	KANAGAWA	SAGAMIHARA GION	
5	1/18/2025	Sat	12:00	B	Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY	v	RICOH BlackRams Tokyo	TOKYO	EDOGAWA
	1/18/2025	Sat	13:00	A	SHIZUOKA BlueRevs	v	TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO	SHIZUOKA	YAMAHA
	1/18/2025	Sat	14:10	A	YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES	v	Mitsubishi SagamiHara Dynaboars	KANAGAWA	NIPPATSU
	1/19/2025	Sun	12:05	A	KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS	v	URAYASU D-Rocks	HYOGO	NOEVIA
	1/19/2025	Sun	12:10	B	MIE Honda HEAT	v	TOKYO SUNTORY SUNGOLIATH	MIE	SUZUKA
1/19/2025	Sun	14:30	B	TOYOTA VERBLITZ	v	SAITAMA Panasonic WILD KNIGHTS	FUKUOKA	MIKUNI	
6	2/1/2025	Sat	12:00	Inter	KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS	v	RICOH BlackRams Tokyo	HYOGO	KOBE UNIV
	2/1/2025	Sat	14:00	Inter	SHIZUOKA BlueRevs	v	TOKYO SUNTORY SUNGOLIATH	SHIZUOKA	YAMAHA
	2/1/2025	Sat	14:30	Inter	SAITAMA Panasonic WILD KNIGHTS	v	URAYASU D-Rocks	SAITAMA	KUMAGAYA
	2/1/2025	Sat	14:30	Inter	Mitsubishi SagamiHara Dynaboars	v	Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY	KANAGAWA	SAGAMIHARA GION
	2/1/2025	Sat	14:30	Inter	TOYOTA VERBLITZ	v	YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES	AICHI	TOYOTA
2/2/2025	Sun	12:10	Inter	MIE Honda HEAT	v	TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO	MIE	SUZUKA	

DIVISION 1

Round	Date	K.O.	Conference	Match		Prefecture	Venue		
7	2/8/2025	Sat	-	Inter	URAYASU D-Rocks	v	MIE Honda HEAT	TOKYO	CHICHIBUNOMIYA
	2/8/2025	Sat	-	Inter	YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES	v	Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY	KANAGAWA	NIPPATSU
	2/8/2025	Sat	-	Inter	KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS	v	TOKYO SUNTORY SUNGOLIATH	HYOGO	KOBE UNIV
	2/9/2025	Sun	-	Inter	SAITAMA Panasonic WILD KNIGHTS	v	TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO	SAITAMA	KUMAGAYA
	2/9/2025	Sun	-	Inter	Mitsubishi Sagami-hara Dynaboars	v	TOYOTA VERBLITZ	KANAGAWA	SAGAMIHARA GION
	2025/2/8 or 9	Sat or Sun	-	Inter	RICOH BlackRams Tokyo	v	SHIZUOKA BlueRevs	TBC	TBC
8	2/15/2025	Sat	-	Inter	Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY	v	KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS	TOKYO	EDOGAWA
	2/15/2025	Sat	-	Inter	TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO	v	TOKYO SUNTORY SUNGOLIATH	TOKYO	CHICHIBUNOMIYA
	2/15/2025	Sat	-	Inter	TOYOTA VERBLITZ	v	SHIZUOKA BlueRevs	GIFU	NAGARAGAWA
	2/16/2025	Sun	-	Inter	YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES	v	SAITAMA Panasonic WILD KNIGHTS	TOKYO	CHICHIBUNOMIYA
	2/16/2025	Sun	-	Inter	MIE Honda HEAT	v	Mitsubishi Sagami-hara Dynaboars	MIE	SUZUKA
	2025/2/15 or 16	Sat or Sun	-	Inter	RICOH BlackRams Tokyo	v	URAYASU D-Rocks	TBC	TBC
9	2/22/2025	Sat	-	Inter	RICOH BlackRams Tokyo	v	TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO	TOKYO	CHICHIBUNOMIYA
	2/22/2025	Sat	-	Inter	Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY	v	SHIZUOKA BlueRevs	TOKYO	EDOGAWA
	2/22/2025	Sat	-	Inter	KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS	v	TOYOTA VERBLITZ	OSAKA	HANAZONO
	2/22/2025	Sat	-	Inter	SAITAMA Panasonic WILD KNIGHTS	v	Mitsubishi Sagami-hara Dynaboars	SAITAMA	KUMAGAYA
	2/23/2025	Sun	-	Inter	MIE Honda HEAT	v	YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES	MIE	SUZUKA
	2025/2/22 or 23	Sat or Sun	-	Inter	TOKYO SUNTORY SUNGOLIATH	v	URAYASU D-Rocks	TBC	TBC
	2025/2/28 or 3/1	Fri or Sat	-	Inter	TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO	v	Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY	TBC	TBC
10	3/1/2025	Sat	-	Inter	Mitsubishi Sagami-hara Dynaboars	v	RICOH BlackRams Tokyo	TOKYO	CHICHIBUNOMIYA
	3/2/2025	Sun	-	Inter	SAITAMA Panasonic WILD KNIGHTS	v	KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS	SAITAMA	KUMAGAYA
	3/2/2025	Sun	-	Inter	TOKYO SUNTORY SUNGOLIATH	v	YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES	TOKYO	CHICHIBUNOMIYA
	3/2/2025	Sun	-	Inter	SHIZUOKA BlueRevs	v	MIE Honda HEAT	SHIZUOKA	TBC
	2025/3/1 or 2	Sat or Sun	-	Inter	URAYASU D-Rocks	v	TOYOTA VERBLITZ	TBC	TBC
	3/14/2025	Fri	-	Inter	URAYASU D-Rocks	v	Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY	TOKYO	CHICHIBUNOMIYA
11	3/15/2025	Sat	-	Inter	YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES	v	RICOH BlackRams Tokyo	TOKYO	CHICHIBUNOMIYA
	3/15/2025	Sat	-	Inter	SHIZUOKA BlueRevs	v	SAITAMA Panasonic WILD KNIGHTS	SHIZUOKA	TBC
	3/15/2025	Sat	-	Inter	KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS	v	MIE Honda HEAT	HYOGO	KOBE UNIV
	3/15/2025	Sat	-	Inter	TOYOTA VERBLITZ	v	TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO	TBC	TBC
	3/16/2025	Sun	-	Inter	Mitsubishi Sagami-hara Dynaboars	v	TOKYO SUNTORY SUNGOLIATH	KYOTO	TAKEBISHI
	3/22/2025	Sat	-	Inter	TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO	v	SAITAMA Panasonic WILD KNIGHTS	TOKYO	CHICHIBUNOMIYA
12	3/22/2025	Sat	-	Inter	Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY	v	YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES	TOKYO	EDOGAWA
	3/22/2025	Sat	-	Inter	SHIZUOKA BlueRevs	v	RICOH BlackRams Tokyo	SHIZUOKA	TBC
	3/23/2025	Sun	-	Inter	TOKYO SUNTORY SUNGOLIATH	v	KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS	TOKYO	CHICHIBUNOMIYA
	3/22/2025	Sat	-	Inter	MIE Honda HEAT	v	URAYASU D-Rocks	MIE	SUZUKA
	2025/3/22 or 23	Sat or Sun	-	Inter	TOYOTA VERBLITZ	v	Mitsubishi Sagami-hara Dynaboars	TBC	TBC
	3/29/2025	Sat	-	Inter	TOKYO SUNTORY SUNGOLIATH	v	SHIZUOKA BlueRevs	TOKYO	CHICHIBUNOMIYA
13	3/29/2025	Sat	-	Inter	Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY	v	Mitsubishi Sagami-hara Dynaboars	TOKYO	EDOGAWA
	3/29/2025	Sat	-	Inter	URAYASU D-Rocks	v	SAITAMA Panasonic WILD KNIGHTS	TBC	TBC
	3/30/2025	Sun	-	Inter	TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO	v	MIE Honda HEAT	HOKKAIDO	PREMIST DOME
	3/30/2025	Sun	-	Inter	RICOH BlackRams Tokyo	v	KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS	TOKYO	CHICHIBUNOMIYA
	3/30/2025	Sun	-	Inter	YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES	v	TOYOTA VERBLITZ	OITA	RESONAC

DIVISION 1

Round	Date	K.O.	Conference	Match		Prefecture	Venue		
14	4/5/2025	Sat	-	B	SAITAMA Panasonic WILD KNIGHTS	v	TOYOTA VERBLITZ	SAITAMA	TBC
	4/5/2025	Sat	-	A	YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES	v	URAYASU D-Rocks	TOKYO	TBC
	4/5/2025	Sat	-	A	SHIZUOKA BlueRevs	v	Mitsubishi Sagami-hara Dynaboars	SHIZUOKA	TBC
	4/5/2025	Sat	-	B	TOKYO SUNTORY SUNGOLIATH	v	MIE Honda HEAT	TBC	TBC
	4/6/2025	Sun	-	B	RICOH BlackRams Tokyo	v	Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY	TOKYO	TBC
	4/6/2025	Sun	-	A	KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS	v	TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO	HYOGO	KOBE UNIV
15	4/11/2025	Fri	-	B	MIE Honda HEAT	v	SAITAMA Panasonic WILD KNIGHTS	TBC	TBC
	4/12/2025	Sat	-	A	Mitsubishi Sagami-hara Dynaboars	v	YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES	NAGASAKI	KAKIDOMARI
	4/12/2025	Sat	-	A	TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO	v	SHIZUOKA BlueRevs	TOKYO	TBC
	4/13/2025	Sun	-	B	Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY	v	TOKYO SUNTORY SUNGOLIATH	TBC	TBC
	2025/4/12 or 13	Sat or Sun	-	A	URAYASU D-Rocks	v	KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS	TBC	TBC
	2025/4/12 or 13	Sat or Sun	-	B	RICOH BlackRams Tokyo	v	TOYOTA VERBLITZ	TBC	TBC
16	4/25/2025	Fri	-	A	URAYASU D-Rocks	v	TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO	TOKYO	TBC
	4/26/2025	Sat	-	B	SAITAMA Panasonic WILD KNIGHTS	v	RICOH BlackRams Tokyo	SAITAMA	TBC
	4/26/2025	Sat	-	B	Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY	v	MIE Honda HEAT	TOKYO	TBC
	4/26/2025	Sat	-	A	KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS	v	Mitsubishi Sagami-hara Dynaboars	TBC	TBC
	4/27/2025	Sun	-	A	SHIZUOKA BlueRevs	v	YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES	SHIZUOKA	TBC
	2025/4/26 or 27	Sat or Sun	-	B	TOYOTA VERBLITZ	v	TOKYO SUNTORY SUNGOLIATH	TBC	TBC
17	5/3/2025	Sat	-	B	Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY	v	SAITAMA Panasonic WILD KNIGHTS	TOKYO	TBC
	2025/5/2 or 3 or 4	Fri or Sat or Sun	-	A	Mitsubishi Sagami-hara Dynaboars	v	TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO	TBC	TBC
	2025/5/2 or 3 or 4	Fri or Sat or Sun	-	B	TOKYO SUNTORY SUNGOLIATH	v	RICOH BlackRams Tokyo	TBC	TBC
	5/3/2025	Sat	-	A	SHIZUOKA BlueRevs	v	URAYASU D-Rocks	SHIZUOKA	TBC
	5/4/2025	Sun	-	B	MIE Honda HEAT	v	TOYOTA VERBLITZ	MIE	SUZUKA
	2025/5/3 or 4	Sat or Sun	-	A	YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES	v	KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS	TBC	TBC
18	5/9/2025	Fri	-	A	URAYASU D-Rocks	v	Mitsubishi Sagami-hara Dynaboars	TOKYO	TBC
	5/10/2025	Sat	-	B	SAITAMA Panasonic WILD KNIGHTS	v	TOKYO SUNTORY SUNGOLIATH	SAITAMA	TBC
	5/10/2025	Sat	-	A	KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS	v	SHIZUOKA BlueRevs	TBC	TBC
	5/10/2025	Sat	-	A	TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO	v	YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES	TBC	TBC
	5/10/2025	Sat	-	B	TOYOTA VERBLITZ	v	Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY	TBC	TBC
	5/11/2025	Sun	-	B	RICOH BlackRams Tokyo	v	MIE Honda HEAT	TBC	TBC
PO1	5/17/2025	Sat	-	Quarter Final		v		TBC	TBC
	5/18/2025	Sun	-	Quarter Final		v		TBC	TBC
PO1	5/24/2025	Sat	-	Semi Final		v		TBC	TBC
	5/25/2025	Sun	-	Semi Final		v		TBC	TBC
PO2	5/31/2025	Sat	-	3rd Place		v		TBC	TBC
PO3	6/1/2025	Sun	-	Final		v		TBC	TBC

DIVISION 2

Round	Date		K.O.	Match		Prefecture	Venue
1	12/21/2024	Sat	14:30	HANAZONO KINTETSU LINERS	v	Toyota Industries Corporation Shuttles Aichi	OSAKA HANAZONO
	12/21/2024	Sat	14:30	Kyushudenryoku KyudenVoltex	v	NIPPON STEEL KAMAISHI SEAWAVES	FUKUOKA BEST DENKI
	12/22/2024	Sun	12:00	HINO RED DOLPHINS	v	SHIMIZU KOTO BLUE SHARKS	GUNMA OTA
	12/22/2024	Sun	12:00	RedHurricanes Osaka	v	NEC GREEN ROCKETS TOKATSU	OSAKA YANMAR
2	12/28/2024	Sat	13:00	NIPPON STEEL KAMAISHI SEAWAVES	v	NEC GREEN ROCKETS TOKATSU	IWATE KAMAISHI
	12/28/2024	Sat	14:30	SHIMIZU KOTO BLUE SHARKS	v	Kyushudenryoku KyudenVoltex	TOKYO YUMENOSHIMA
	12/29/2024	Sun	14:30	Toyota Industries Corporation Shuttles Aichi	v	RedHurricanes Osaka	AICHI KARIYA
	1/5/2025	Sun	12:00	HINO RED DOLPHINS	v	HANAZONO KINTETSU LINERS	TOKYO EDOGAWA
3	1/11/2025	Sat	12:00	Kyushudenryoku KyudenVoltex	v	Toyota Industries Corporation Shuttles Aichi	FUKUOKA MIKUNI
	1/11/2025	Sat	14:30	HANAZONO KINTETSU LINERS	v	RedHurricanes Osaka	OSAKA HANAZONO
	1/11/2025	Sat	14:30	NEC GREEN ROCKETS TOKATSU	v	HINO RED DOLPHINS	CHIBA KASIWA-NO-HA
	1/11/2025	Sat	14:30	SHIMIZU KOTO BLUE SHARKS	v	NIPPON STEEL KAMAISHI SEAWAVES	TOKYO YUMENOSHIMA
4	1/18/2025	Sat	12:00	Toyota Industries Corporation Shuttles Aichi	v	NEC GREEN ROCKETS TOKATSU	AICHI KARIYA
	1/18/2025	Sat	13:00	HINO RED DOLPHINS	v	Kyushudenryoku KyudenVoltex	TOKYO AGF Field
	1/18/2025	Sat	14:30	RedHurricanes Osaka	v	SHIMIZU KOTO BLUE SHARKS	OSAKA YANMAR
	1/25/2025	Sat	13:00	NIPPON STEEL KAMAISHI SEAWAVES	v	HANAZONO KINTETSU LINERS	FUKUSHIMA Hawaiians
5	2/1/2025	Sat	13:00	HINO RED DOLPHINS	v	NIPPON STEEL KAMAISHI SEAWAVES	TOKYO AGF Field
	2/2/2025	Sun	16:00	NEC GREEN ROCKETS TOKATSU	v	HANAZONO KINTETSU LINERS	CHIBA KASIWA-NO-HA
	2/8/2025	Sat	14:30	SHIMIZU KOTO BLUE SHARKS	v	Toyota Industries Corporation Shuttles Aichi	TOKYO YUMENOSHIMA
	2/9/2025	Sun	14:30	RedHurricanes Osaka	v	Kyushudenryoku KyudenVoltex	OSAKA YANMAR
6	2/15/2025	Sat	-	Toyota Industries Corporation Shuttles Aichi	v	NIPPON STEEL KAMAISHI SEAWAVES	AICHI KARIYA
	2/22/2025	Sat	-	NEC GREEN ROCKETS TOKATSU	v	SHIMIZU KOTO BLUE SHARKS	CHIBA KASIWA-NO-HA
	2/22/2025	Sat	-	RedHurricanes Osaka	v	HINO RED DOLPHINS	OSAKA YANMAR
	2/22/2025	Sat	-	Kyushudenryoku KyudenVoltex	v	HANAZONO KINTETSU LINERS	NAGASAKI KAKIDOMARI
7	3/1/2025	Sat	-	NEC GREEN ROCKETS TOKATSU	v	Kyushudenryoku KyudenVoltex	CHIBA KASIWA-NO-HA
	3/1/2025	Sat	-	Toyota Industries Corporation Shuttles Aichi	v	HINO RED DOLPHINS	AICHI KARIYA
	3/1/2025	Sat	-	HANAZONO KINTETSU LINERS	v	SHIMIZU KOTO BLUE SHARKS	OSAKA HANAZONO
	3/8/2025	Sat	-	NIPPON STEEL KAMAISHI SEAWAVES	v	RedHurricanes Osaka	IWATE KAMAISHI
8	3/15/2025	Sat	-	NIPPON STEEL KAMAISHI SEAWAVES	v	HINO RED DOLPHINS	IWATE IWAGIN
	3/15/2025	Sat	-	SHIMIZU KOTO BLUE SHARKS	v	HANAZONO KINTETSU LINERS	TOKYO YUMENOSHIMA
	3/15/2025	Sat	-	RedHurricanes Osaka	v	Toyota Industries Corporation Shuttles Aichi	OSAKA NAGAI
	3/15/2025	Sat	-	Kyushudenryoku KyudenVoltex	v	NEC GREEN ROCKETS TOKATSU	FUKUOKA HAKATANOMORI
9	3/22/2025	Sat	-	Toyota Industries Corporation Shuttles Aichi	v	SHIMIZU KOTO BLUE SHARKS	AICHI KARIYA
	3/22/2025	Sat	-	HANAZONO KINTETSU LINERS	v	NIPPON STEEL KAMAISHI SEAWAVES	OSAKA HANAZONO
	3/23/2025	Sun	-	HINO RED DOLPHINS	v	NEC GREEN ROCKETS TOKATSU	GUNMA OTA
	3/23/2025	Sun	-	Kyushudenryoku KyudenVoltex	v	RedHurricanes Osaka	KUMAMOTO EGAO Kenko Stadium

DIVISION 2

Round	Date		K.O.	Match		Prefecture	Venue
10	3/29/2025	Sat	-	NEC GREEN ROCKETS TOKATSU	v	NIPPON STEEL KAMAISHI SEAWAVES	CHIBA KASIWA-NO-HA
	3/29/2025	Sat	-	SHIMIZU KOTO BLUE SHARKS	v	RedHurricanes Osaka	TOKYO YUMENOSHIMA
	3/29/2025	Sat	-	HANAZONO KINTETSU LINERS	v	HINO RED DOLPHINS	OSAKA HANAZONO
	4/5/2025	Sat	-	Toyota Industries Corporation Shuttles Aichi	v	Kyushudenryoku KyudenVoltex	AICHI KARIYA
11	4/12/2025	Sat	-	NIPPON STEEL KAMAISHI SEAWAVES	v	Toyota Industries Corporation Shuttles Aichi	IWATE KAMAISHI
	2025/4/11 or 12 or 13	Fri or Sat or Sun	-	RedHurricanes Osaka	v	HANAZONO KINTETSU LINERS	OSAKA TBC
	2025/4/11 or 12 or 13	2025/4/11 or 12 or 13	-	Kyushudenryoku KyudenVoltex	v	HINO RED DOLPHINS	TBC TBC
	2025/4/12 or 13	Sat or Sun	-	SHIMIZU KOTO BLUE SHARKS	v	NEC GREEN ROCKETS TOKATSU	TBC TBC
12	2025/4/19 or 20	Sat or Sun	-	NEC GREEN ROCKETS TOKATSU	v	Toyota Industries Corporation Shuttles Aichi	TBC TBC
	2025/4/18 or 19	Fri or Sat	-	HANAZONO KINTETSU LINERS	v	Kyushudenryoku KyudenVoltex	OSAKA TBC
	4/20/2025	Sun	-	NIPPON STEEL KAMAISHI SEAWAVES	v	SHIMIZU KOTO BLUE SHARKS	IWATE TBC
	2025/4/19 or 20	Sat or Sun	-	HINO RED DOLPHINS	v	RedHurricanes Osaka	TBC TBC
13	2025/5/2 or 3	Fri or Sat	-	HANAZONO KINTETSU LINERS	v	NEC GREEN ROCKETS TOKATSU	OSAKA TBC
	2025/5/2 or 3 or 4	Fri or Sat or Sun	-	RedHurricanes Osaka	v	NIPPON STEEL KAMAISHI SEAWAVES	OSAKA TBC
	2025/5/3 or 4	Sat or Sun	-	Kyushudenryoku KyudenVoltex	v	SHIMIZU KOTO BLUE SHARKS	TBC TBC
	2025/5/3 or 4	Sat or Sun	-	HINO RED DOLPHINS	v	Toyota Industries Corporation Shuttles Aichi	TBC TBC
14	5/10/2025	Sat	-	Toyota Industries Corporation Shuttles Aichi	v	HANAZONO KINTETSU LINERS	AICHI KARIYA
	5/11/2025	Sun	-	NIPPON STEEL KAMAISHI SEAWAVES	v	Kyushudenryoku KyudenVoltex	IWATE TBC
	2025/5/9 or 10 or 11	Fri or Sat or Sun	-	NEC GREEN ROCKETS TOKATSU	v	RedHurricanes Osaka	TBC TBC
	2025/5/10 or 11	Sat or Sun	-	SHIMIZU KOTO BLUE SHARKS	v	HINO RED DOLPHINS	TBC TBC

DIVISION 3

Round	Date		K.O.	Match		Prefecture	Venue
1	12/21/2024	Sat	13:00	Chugoku Electric Power Red Regulions	v	MAZDA SKYACTIVS HIROSHIMA	HIROSHIMA BALCOM S
	12/22/2024	Sun	13:00	SAYAMA SECOM RUGGUTs	v	Kurita Water Gush Akishima	TOCHIGI ASHIKAGA Athletic
	12/22/2024	Sun	14:30	LeRIRO Fukuoka	v	Yakult Levins Toda	FUKUOKA KURUME Athletic
2	12/28/2024	Sat	12:00	Kurita Water Gush Akishima	v	Yakult Levins Toda	KANAGAWA OGINO
	12/29/2024	Sun	12:00	SAYAMA SECOM RUGGUTs	v	MAZDA SKYACTIVS HIROSHIMA	YAMANASHI JIT Stadium
	1/5/2025	Sun	13:00	LeRIRO Fukuoka	v	Chugoku Electric Power Red Regulions	FUKUOKA KURUME Athletic
3	1/11/2025	Sat	12:00	SAYAMA SECOM RUGGUTs	v	LeRIRO Fukuoka	TOCHIGI TOCHIGI GREEN
	1/11/2025	Sat	13:00	MAZDA SKYACTIVS HIROSHIMA	v	Kurita Water Gush Akishima	HIROSHIMA BALCOM S
	1/12/2025	Sun	12:00	Yakult Levins Toda	v	Chugoku Electric Power Red Regulions	TOCHIGI TOCHIGI GREEN
4	1/19/2025	Sun	13:00	Kurita Water Gush Akishima	v	LeRIRO Fukuoka	TOKYO AGF Field
	1/19/2025	Sun	13:00	MAZDA SKYACTIVS HIROSHIMA	v	Yakult Levins Toda	HIROSHIMA BALCOM S
	1/19/2025	Sun	13:00	Chugoku Electric Power Red Regulions	v	SAYAMA SECOM RUGGUTs	YAMAGUCHI Me-Life Stadium
5	1/25/2025	Sat	12:00	LeRIRO Fukuoka	v	MAZDA SKYACTIVS HIROSHIMA	FUKUOKA KURUME Athletic
	2/1/2025	Sat	12:00	Kurita Water Gush Akishima	v	Chugoku Electric Power Red Regulions	KANAGAWA OGINO
	2/2/2024	Sun	12:00	Yakult Levins Toda	v	SAYAMA SECOM RUGGUTs	GUNMA SHIKISHIMA
6	2/15/2025	Sat		SAYAMA SECOM RUGGUTs	v	Kurita Water Gush Akishima	TOCHIGI ASHIKAGA Athletic
	2/15/2025	Sat		MAZDA SKYACTIVS HIROSHIMA	v	Chugoku Electric Power Red Regulions	HIROSHIMA BALCOM S
	2/16/2024	Sun		Yakult Levins Toda	v	LeRIRO Fukuoka	GUNMA OTA

DIVISION 3

Round	Date	K.O.	Match	Prefecture	Venue
7	2/22/2025	Sat	Kurita Water Gush Akishima v MAZDA SKYACTIVS HIROSHIMA	TOKYO	AGF Field
	2/22/2025	Sat	Chugoku Electric Power Red Regulions v Yakult Levins Toda	HIROSHIMA	BALCOM S
	2/23/2025	Sun	LeRIRO Fukuoka v SAYAMA SECOM RUGGUTs	FUKUOKA	KURUME Athletic
8	3/1/2025	Sat	Yakult Levins Toda v Kurita Water Gush Akishima	TOKYO	AGF Field
	3/1/2025	Sat	MAZDA SKYACTIVS HIROSHIMA v SAYAMA SECOM RUGGUTs	HIROSHIMA	FUKUTSU
	3/2/2025	Sun	Chugoku Electric Power Red Regulions v LeRIRO Fukuoka	HIROSHIMA	FUKUTSU
9	3/8/2025	Sat	SAYAMA SECOM RUGGUTs v Chugoku Electric Power Red Regulions	TOCHIGI	ASHIKAGA Athletic
	2025/3/8 or 9	Sat or Sun	Yakult Levins Toda v MAZDA SKYACTIVS HIROSHIMA	TBC	TBC
	3/16/2025	Sun	LeRIRO Fukuoka v Kurita Water Gush Akishima	FUKUOKA	KURUME Athletic
10	2025/3/15 or 16	Sat or Sun	SAYAMA SECOM RUGGUTs v Yakult Levins Toda	TBC	TBC
	3/22/2025	Sat	Kurita Water Gush Akishima v Chugoku Electric Power Red Regulions	TOKYO	AGF Field
	3/22/2025	Sat	MAZDA SKYACTIVS HIROSHIMA v LeRIRO Fukuoka	HIROSHIMA	BALCOM S
11	3/29/2025	Sat	Kurita Water Gush Akishima v MAZDA SKYACTIVS HIROSHIMA	KANAGAWA	OGINO
	2025/4/5 or 6	Sat or Sun	SAYAMA SECOM RUGGUTs v LeRIRO Fukuoka	TBC	TBC
	2025/4/5 or 6	Sat or Sun	Chugoku Electric Power Red Regulions v Yakult Levins Toda	TBC	TBC
12	2025/4/12 or 13	Sat or Sun	MAZDA SKYACTIVS HIROSHIMA v SAYAMA SECOM RUGGUTs	TBC	TBC
	2025/4/12 or 13	Sat or Sun	LeRIRO Fukuoka v Chugoku Electric Power Red Regulions	TBC	TBC
	2025/4/12 or 13	Sat or Sun	Yakult Levins Toda v Kurita Water Gush Akishima	TBC	TBC
13	2025/4/19 or 20	Sat or Sun	MAZDA SKYACTIVS HIROSHIMA v Yakult Levins Toda	TBC	TBC
	2025/4/19 or 20	Sat or Sun	Chugoku Electric Power Red Regulions v SAYAMA SECOM RUGGUTs	TBC	TBC
	2025/4/19 or 20	Sat or Sun	Kurita Water Gush Akishima v LeRIRO Fukuoka	TBC	TBC
14	2025/4/26 or 27 or 5/3 or 4	Sat or Sun	Chugoku Electric Power Red Regulions v Kurita Water Gush Akishima	TBC	TBC
	2025/5/3 or 4	Sat or Sun	SAYAMA SECOM RUGGUTs v Yakult Levins Toda	TBC	TBC
	2025/5/3 or 4	Sat or Sun	LeRIRO Fukuoka v MAZDA SKYACTIVS HIROSHIMA	TBC	TBC
15	2025/5/10 or 11	Sat or Sun	MAZDA SKYACTIVS HIROSHIMA v Chugoku Electric Power Red Regulions	TBC	TBC
	2025/5/10 or 11	Sat or Sun	Yakult Levins Toda v LeRIRO Fukuoka	TBC	TBC
	2025/5/10 or 11	Sat or Sun	Kurita Water Gush Akishima v SAYAMA SECOM RUGGUTs	TBC	TBC

Promotion/Relegation Match

	ROUND	date	KO	Match	Prefecture	STADIUM
Promotion/Relegation Match1	D1/D2 Promotion/Relegation Match Round 1	5/23 or 24 or 25	-	D2 / 1st v D1 / 12th	TBC	TBC
		5/23 or 24 or 25	-	D2 / 2nd v D1 / 11th	TBC	TBC
		5/23 or 24 or 25	-	D2 / 8th v D3 / 1st	TBC	TBC
	D2/D3 Promotion/Relegation Match Round 1	5/23 or 24 or 25	-	D2 / 7th v D3 / 2nd	TBC	TBC
Promotion/Relegation Match2	D1/D2 Promotion/Relegation Match Round 2	5/30 or 31	-	D1 / 12th v D2 / 1st	TBC	TBC
		5/30 or 31	-	D1 / 11th v D2 / 2nd	TBC	TBC
		5/30 or 31	-	D3 / 1st v D2 / 8th	TBC	TBC
	D2/D3 Promotion/Relegation Match Round 2	5/30 or 31	-	D3 / 2nd v D2 / 7th	TBC	TBC

The 2023-24 Season in Review

Week One

The defending champions were given notice as to the perils of a title defence after being put to the sword 52-26 by Tokyo Sungoliath, for whom winger Seiya Ozaki scored an opening day hattrick.

Ozaki, who was the leading try-scorer in the second edition of the league with 18, and would finish with 14 this time, spearheaded an assault which saw Spears Funabashi Tokyo Bay – who were bidding for a fourth straight win over Sungoliath – out of business at halftime, by which time they trailed 35-7

Saitama Wild Knights, who had lost to the Spears in 2022-23's title game, also opened in ruthless fashion, running in eight tries as they dismantled their semi-final opponent from the previous season Yokohama Eagles, 53-12.

The closest contest of the maiden weekend saw Sagamihara Dynaboars edge Hanazono Liners by a

point thanks to an 80th minute penalty goal by English recruit James Grayson, while Toyota Verblitz and Brave Lupus Tokyo both came through tough battles hosting Black Rams and Blue Revs respectively. World Rugby Player of the Year Ardie Savea announced himself to the Kobe faithful by scoring twice on club debut in the Kobe Steelers 80-15 romp against newly promoted Mie Heat.

Recently demoted Green Rockets Tokatsu gave ex-Wales coach Wayne Pivac a winning introduction to Japan as they inflicted the first ever regular season defeat on Urayasu D-Rocks, with a penalty goal separating the sides in a 31-28 cliff hanger.

The newly promoted Red Hurricanes Osaka and Shuttles Aichi each made winning starts to their Division Two campaigns, while Red Dolphins were victorious on their return in Division Three.



Ardie Savea (KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS)

Week Two

All Black backrower Shannon Frizell scored the first of the 10 tries he would score in his maiden season in Japan as Brave Lupus flagged its titles credentials with a hard fought 26-19 win over Sungoliath in the Fuchu derby.

Despite scoring four tries-to-one, Brave Lupus struggled to shake off their gritty rivals, who stayed in the contest through the accurate boot of Mikiya Takamoto, with the young flyhalf kicking 14 points. The 23-year-old went on to score 157 points in his first full league season, finishing third on the rankings, above All Blacks Richie Mo'unga and Beauden Barrett, as well as Wallabies Bernard Foley and Quade Cooper.

A late try by All Black scrumhalf Aaron Smith was in vain as the Eagles pipped Verblitz 24-22, while Kobe needed a 73rd minute try by winger Kanta Matsunaga to get by Shizuoka Blue Revs 30-26.

The other Division One games saw Heat suffer again, as the Spears rebounded from their opening day defeat to score 75 unanswered points at Suzuka, with

Wallaby flyhalf Bernard Foley – the league's leading point-scorer in its second edition with 173 – helping himself to 25 points.

The Wild Knights also held their opponents scoreless, posting 49 without reply at Hanazono, with the game blowing out in the second half after the Liners had held the visitors to an 8-0 halftime lead.

The Dynaboars made it two-from-two in the section's other game, beating Black Rams Tokyo by eight, while normal service resumed in Division Two as D-Rocks hammered Kyuden Voltex 57-12.

On a high after the opening weekend, the Green Rockets returned to earth with a thud, being lowered 36-25 by the Shuttles, while Red Hurricanes scraped past Kamaishi Seawaves by two, despite the visitors putting up a heroic effort following the dismissal of veteran backrower Sam Henwood after just five minutes.

SkyActives Hiroshima opened their Division Three season by upsetting Water Gush Akishima 30-15.

Week Three

The Spears fell to their second defeat in three weeks after an injury time try by flyhalf Kenta Iemura got the Blue Revs over the line in a 23-19 thriller.

As the defending champions stumbled, the table began to take a shape that would remain for the season, with Brave Lupus and Wild Knights recording contrasting wins to remain unbeaten.

Saitama handed Black Rams their third defeat of the campaign, with skipper Atsushi Sakate and winger Ryuji Noguchi each crossing twice in a 44-17 win, while Brave Lupus stopped Kobe in its tracks on a remarkable afternoon for Shannon Frizell, where the All Black backrower marked Christmas Eve with four tries in a 46-39 victory.

Heat joined Black Rams in the winless column despite a much-improved showing in falling 34-16 to Sungoliath, while Hanazono were also left winless after Yokohama hooker Shunta Nakamura scored three tries as the Eagles piled on 66 points at the Liners' expense.

The newcomer ended his maiden season in

Yokohama as the competition's second highest scoring forward, claiming 11 tries.

Nakamura's former club Verblitz were also amongst the tries, posting eight as their match with the Dynaboars produced 94 points, with the home side prevailing 54-40 despite two tries from each of All Black Jackson Hemopo and Wallaby Curtis Rona for Sagamihara.

Elsewhere, the Shuttles remained the only unbeaten side in Division Two, thumping Red Hurricanes 71-12 to dramatically end the winning start made by Matt Cockbain's side, triggering a barren run which saw them lose six straight.

D-Rocks and Green Rockets were untroubled by the Seawaves and Voltex respectively, nor were Red Dolphins as they remained unbeaten in Division Three.

Red Regulons were the final team across the league to make an appearance, but their entry was a losing one, falling 34-19 against Shimizu Blue Sharks.



Shannon Frizell (TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO)

Week Four

Saitama, Sungoliath and Brave Lupus each made statement wins to solidify their positions at the top of the standings, with Robbie Deans once again getting the better of his former assistant at the Crusaders, Steve Hansen, as the Wild Knights stormed back from an 8-27 halftime deficit to stun Toyota Verblitz 43-27. The second half barrage came after Verblitz winger Viliame Tuidraki had scored a first half hatrick to set up his side's massive lead.

Mikiya Takamoto scored 19 points, while Springbok star Cheslin Kolbe scored his maiden League One try, with Sungoliath handing new Kobe boss Dave Rennie back-to-back defeats after the Fuchu-based side recorded an impressive 44-36 victory.

Brave Lupus Tokyo piled further pressure on Spears

Funabashi Tokyo Bay, claiming a 24-20 victory despite Wales fullback Liam Williams and All Black hooker Dane Coles being on the scoresheet for the defending champions with their opening tries in Japan.

Yokohama stayed in touch with the leaders thanks to a 40-35 win over Sagamihara, while there were wins for the Blue Revs and Black Rams in the other Division One matches; the latter claiming their first success of the season.

The three matches in the lower grades saw Red Dolphins remain unbeaten in Division Three and Water Gush Akishima record their first win, while Division Two's sole match saw Kyuden win at their fourth attempt, besting Kamaishi.

Week Five

A try one minute from time by South African centre Rikus Pretorius gave the Spears a much-needed boost, while plunging the Steelers into a mini crisis, as Kobe fell to its third straight defeat, losing 38-34 at Hygo.

Dane Coles scored two of the winner's tries while All Black teammate Ardie Savea got the third of his Japanese career, but the reigning World Rugby Player of the Year's side lost despite outscoring their rivals five-tries-to-four.

There were tries aplenty across the round with the Wild Knights, Verblitz and Brave Lupus collecting 25 between them in crushing victories over the Dynaboars, Liners and Heat respectively.

Saitama scored 12 on a remarkable afternoon at Sagamiyama where 11 different players scored tries for the winners, with only second rower Liam Mitchell crossing twice in the 81-21 victory.

Arguably the most pleasing was the 30th minute try scored by Springbok second rower Lood de Jager, who was making his return after being forced to miss

South Africa's successful Rugby World Cup defence due to the discovery of a rare heart condition.

Tokyo Sungoliath and Yokohama Eagles came through tough assignments, with Sungoliath scoring late to beat the Blue Revs by four, while the Eagles trailed at halftime before holding the Black Rams scoreless in the second half of a 24-8 victory.

The Division Two action was blighted by a lightning strike during the heavyweight clash between D-Rocks and Shuttles, with the former handed the victory due to leading 10-7 when the game was forced to be abandoned early in the second period.

After opening with two wins, Red Hurricanes Osaka dropped to their second straight defeat, overpowered by Green Rockets Tokatsu.

SkyActivs caused the second boilover of their Division Three campaign, upsetting the Blue Sharks 31-28.

The Red Dolphins remained unbeaten, picking up the points after Red Regulators were forced to withdraw from the game following a Covid scare at the club.

Week Six

Despite producing their best performance of the season to date, the Dynaboars missed out against Sungoliath, beaten by an 83rd minute try from centre Shogo Nakano after a thrilling contest where both sides scored five tries.

The home side had reason to believe the day would be theirs after they stunned the visitors with five tries in the opening 20 minutes to lead 29-0.

It was not to be with the All Blacks' Rugby World Cup captain Sam Cane among the try-scorers as Sungoliath completed a grand recovery to win 36-34. Black Rams Tokyo also missed out on an upset as the lead changed hands twice in referee's time during their match with Spears Funabashi Tokyo Bay. After an 80th minute penalty try gave the Black Rams a two-point advantage, a clutch penalty goal two minutes later by South African fullback Gehard van den Heever stole the game back as the Spears claimed an 18-17 win.

Kobe piled on 17 points in the last 10 minutes against Yokohama to prevail 31-27, with the win thanks largely to a 21-point haul by their former (Waikato) Chiefs flyhalf Bryn Gatland.

Richie Mo'unga won the battle of the All Black flyhalves as Brave Lupus toppled Beauden Barrett's

Verblitz 28-12 to stay unbeaten alongside Saitama.

The Wild Knights made it 151 points from 160 minutes after following up their 81-point rampage against Sagamiyama with a 70-12 win over Mie.

Test backs Dylan Riley (Japan) and Marika Korobete contributed twice to the Wild Knights' 10 tries, as did ex-Melbourne Rebels second rower Essei Ha'angana. Riley, who was the equal top try-scorer in the opening edition of the league, ended its third season joint second on the rankings with 14.

The other match in the topflight saw the Blue Revs claim their third win of the season, with winger Malo Tu'itama – whose 15 tries saw him end as the competition's leading try-scorer – crossing twice, as did their dual-international off-season recruit, Charles Piutau.

Urayasu D-Rocks won the first 'NTT' derby of the year, beating their stablemates from the company's Sports-Ex operation, Red Hurricanes Osaka, 45-15. Shuttles Aichi and Green Rockets Tokatsu also enjoyed comfortable wins in the section while the Blue Sharks and Red Regulators were successful in Division Three, with the latter winning a dramatic Hiroshima derby 22-21 after having trailed 21-0 shortly before halftime.



Bryn Gatland (KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS)

Week Seven

The eventual top four faced off, and the future finalists prevailed, with the Wild Knights edging Sungoliath 24-20 while Brave Lupus took down the Eagles 27-7.

Such was the dominance of Brave Lupus, the Eagles didn't score until injury time.

Saitama had to work harder, coming from behind after Sungoliath led 20-17 early in the second half.

Verblitz were far too strong for Heat, with winger Taichi Takahashi bagging three tries, while the Steelers and Spears saw off the Black Rams and Liners respectively.

The highest scoring game in the division yielded 98 points as the Dynaboars won a frantic 14-try contest against the Blue Revs 53-45, with the home side's English flyhalf the point of difference.

James Grayson tallied 28 points, which included two

tries and eight from 10 off the kicking tee.

There were 13 tries in the Division Two contest between Urayasu and Kamaishi although D-Rocks scored all but one of them, with winger Kai Ishii scoring a first half hat-trick in the 85-5 romp.

Red Hurricanes fell to their fourth consecutive defeat by losing to the Shuttles, who kept pace with D-Rocks and Green Rockets at the top-of-the-table, although the latter missed a bonus point in a hard fought 12-8 win over Voltex.

This left the top three all having lost just once as the section entered its sprint to the regular season finish line.

Red Dolphins remained unbeaten while Water Gush Akishima was victorious in Division Three.

Week Eight

Shizuoka had ended Saitama's 47-game unbeaten streak in 2023, but didn't get close in the re-match, outclassed 45-19, despite inform winger Malo Tuitama scoring twice in the opening 15 minutes.

Tuitama's effort was matched by Springbok second rower Lood de Jager, who scored the first of the two doubles he recorded for the Wild Knights during the season.

The 31-year-old finished the competition with six tries to his name.

Elsewhere, Yokohama, Brave Lupus and Kobe won high scoring encounters, with Ardea Savea scoring four tries against his former coach as ex-Wallaby coach Dave Rennie's Steelers beat ex-All Black coach Steve Hansen's Verblitz, 57-22.

The defending champions problems continued to mount, dropping their fourth game of the campaign, as they fell to sixth on the table, after two tries in the final 10 minutes gave the Dynaboars a deserved 34-28 win against the Spears in Tokyo.

Argentine veteran Nicolas Sanchez, who had been brought in as a replacement after the season-ending injury to Wales flyhalf Gareth Anscombe, made his debut off the bench in Sungoliath's 62-0 flattening of the Black Rams.

Sanchez replaced Mikiya Takamoto in the 62nd minute, but such was the level of the 23-year-old custodians' performance during the season, the Los Pumas legend only featured five times during his short stint in the league.

Urayasu again beat Red Hurricanes in their second derby of the campaign, with the Shuttles escaping by five against the improving Voltex, while the Green Rockets beat the Seawaves in a contest that was postponed.

The Red Dolphins continued their unbeaten run in Division Three, extending their record to six and zero, with the Blue Sharks remaining their nearest challenger, but eight points astern on the ladder, after their fourth win of the year.

Week Nine

The boot of Rikiya Matsuda proved crucial as Saitama became the last remaining unbeaten side in Division One following a hard fought 36-24 win over Brave Lupus.

The Brave Blossoms flyhalf kicked 16 points to hold the visitors at bay, despite Brave Lupus closing to five, with nine minutes remaining.

Sungoliath took advantage to close the gap following a 34-14 win over Hanazono Liners, while the battle for the fourth semi-final spot intensified with each of Kobe (fourth), Yokohama (fifth) and Toyota (sixth) securing wins.

Black Rams gained just their second win by beating the still winless Heat 24-14, despite being held scoreless in the second half by Kieran Crowley's men. The Red Dolphins and Blue Sharks were both winners in Division Three, although Shimizu scraped home by just a point against the bottom of the table Red Regulators.

Kamaishi Seawaves scored the eye-catching result in Division Two, successfully ambushing Kyuden Voltex 28-11 by the seaside, while Green Rockets Tokatsu comfortably beat Red Hurricanes in the other match.

Week Ten

Spears Funabashi Tokyo Bay's in-and-out title defence took another 'in' after a dramatic 29-26 win over Yokohama Eagles.

The away side scored 21 points in the final 16 minutes, including the match-winning try in the 79th minute, after having been reduced to 14 just before halftime when backrower Faulua Makisi was sent off.

There was further drama at Toyota Stadium where Sungoliath scrumhalf Naoto Saito scored in the fifth minute of injury time, with Mikiya Takamoto kicking the match winning conversion, to secure a 39-38 victory over a stunned Verblitz.

Wild scenes had greeted the 79th minute try by winger Shuhei Yamaguchi which appeared to have won Verblitz the match.

Not so, and a dramatic injury time period saw Verblitz prop Gaku Shimizu sent off for head contact before Saito's match-clinching intervention.

Robbie Deans won the battle of the ex-Wallaby coaches as unbeaten Saitama came from behind to beat Dave Rennie's Kobe 28-18, but the big news at the bottom of the table was a first win for promoted

Mie Heat, who survived a late scare to beat Hanazono Liners 20-19.

It was ex-Italy coach Kieran Crowley's first win since joining Heat and was achieved despite his side losing flyhalf Takuro Hojo to a red card after half-an-hour. Tojo's was the third red card of the weekend, although each of the Spears and Heat successfully overcame their numerical disadvantage.

All Black Shannon Frizell scored his seventh try in Brave Lupus's 41-19 win over the Dynaboars, although the 10th-placed Black Rams couldn't capitalise on their relegation rivals' defeat, with a 36-29 defeat by the Blue Revs meaning they remained in trouble, six points behind Sagami-hara in the contest to avoid the Replacement Battle.

D-Rocks cemented their candidacy for that series with a 19-14 win over the Shuttles, which dropped the Aichi-based side to third, five points behind Urayasu on the ladder.

The Shuttles' defeat allowed Green Rockets Tokatsu to move into second after a comfortable win on their trip north to Kamaishi.



Naoto Saito (TOKYO SUNGOLIATH)

Week Eleven

The repeat of the final from the league's second edition was no contest as Saitama exacted revenge by hammering Spears Funabashi Tokyo Bay 55-22. Such was the Wild Knights' dominance, they led 43-3 after an hour before stepping off the pedal over the final stages.

Defeat saw the Spears fall eight points behind fourth and left their staggering title defence as much at the mercy of other results, as it was a more consistent run in their results.

Toyota's semi-final hopes also took a near fatal blow after a dramatic afternoon where All Black flyhalf Beauden Barrett saw the first direct red card of his career – he had previously had one for two yellows in the same Super Rugby game – in the upset 24-8 defeat by Shizuoka.

Barrett's dismissal for head contact in a dangerous tackle contributed to a result that took the Blue Revs above Verblitz on the standings, and left Steve Hansen's side 10 points astern of the fourth semi-final position.

The most remarkable match of the weekend saw Sungoliath throw away a 25-point halftime lead as the Eagles recovered from 35-10 down to win a thriller 37-35, clinching the win with an 83rd minute penalty goal by Brave Blossoms veteran Yu Tamura.

The dramatic win took Yokohama to within a point of fourth-placed Kobe while narrowing Sungoliath's

margin for error, cutting the gap between themselves and fifth to six points.

There was also drama in Tokyo where Brave Lupus surrendered a 33-14 halftime lead, with twin yellow cards – one to All Black Richie Mo'unga – which allowed Black Rams Tokyo fightback to tie 33-33, before a late converted try by centre Taichi Mano saw Brave Lupus home.

Kobe retained fourth after a 60-17 win over Hanazono in the Kansai derby, while Sagami-hara pushed themselves nine points clear of the relegation zone after a hard fought 31-26 victory over Mie.

The lower grades saw the Green Rockets set up a title 'decider' against D-Rocks after beating the Shuttles 42-26, while the Red Hurricanes recorded their first win since week two, holding off the Seawaves 38-33. Free-scoring Urayasu D-Rocks were held to a single digit score for the first time in the club's two-year, 22-game, history, needing a converted try by South African hooker Franco Marais four minutes from time to beat a luckless Kyuden Voltex 7-6.

The Red Dolphins all but assured themselves of the Division Three title after humbling closest rivals Shimizu Blue Sharks 45-18, while Water Gush Akishima scored a vital 48-28 win over SkyActive Hiroshima to close the gap between the sides to two points in the race for the section's position in The Replacement Battle.

Week Twelve

The Steelers' playoffs hopes took a crucial hit, while the Spears suffered an almost fatal blow, on what proved to be the pivotal weekend of the regular season in both Divisions One and Two.

Kobe dropped out of the top four after Tokyo Sungoliath poured on 28 second half points, with hooker Kosuke Horikoshi again among the try-scorers for the visitors in their 36-27 win.

It was the Sungoliath skipper's 11th try of the season, six of which had come in the previous five matches. He added two more before the end of the campaign to finish as the competition's leading try-scoring forward with 13.

Kobe's defeat allowed the Eagles to re-enter the top four, with the 2022-23 season semi-finalists untroubled in a 31-12 victory over Black Rams Tokyo that lifted them four above their Kansai rivals on the point's table.

The Spears were undone in a frantic finish with Brave

Lupus, who prevailed 22-20 thanks to an injury time conversion from Richie Mo'unga after his former All Black and Crusaders colleague Seta Tamanivalu had scored in the last regular minute to tie the scores. With only a bonus point to show for their efforts, the Spears ended the weekend 11 points out of the semi-final positions in eighth.

Elsewhere, the Wild Knights, Blue Revs and Verblitz made light work of the Dynaboars, Heat and Liners respectively, with the wins by the Blue Revs and Verblitz retaining for each a glimmer of hope, albeit nine points behind the Eagles with four games remaining.

A dramatic finish to Division Two saw D-Rocks seal back-to-back titles, but only after an epic clash with the Green Rockets which was decided by a 77th minute penalty goal from flyhalf Hikaru Tamura. Unusually, the game ended with the scoreline the same as in their opening day meeting, only with the

scores the other way around, as Urayasu prevailed 31-28.

D-Rocks coach Johan Ackerman caused a sensation by including the injury plagued try machine Israel Folau, who hadn't appeared all season, in his line-up, and the dual code international predictably made an immediate impact by scoring the opening try of the afternoon.

His score, in what proved to be one of just two appearances in their promotion campaign, helped D-Rocks to a 22-18 halftime advantage, but the Green Rockets kept fighting, keeping the crowd on edge until the finish.

Shuttles Aichi beat Kamaishi Seawaves to finish the

round robin phase in third, while Kyuden Voltex beat Red Hurricanes Osaka 30-14 as both prepared for the bottom three playoffs.

Division Three saw South African veteran Conrad van Wyk grab 26 points in the Blue Sharks' 71-17 demolition of SkyActivs.

The performance started remarkable a run of scoring that would see the former Super Rugby player take 70 points from his final three outings – including six tries – to finish as the section's leading points (156) and try-scorer (11).

The other match saw the Red Dolphins drop points for the first time in the campaign as they were held to a surprise 26-26 tie by the Red Regulators.



Conrad van Wyk (SHIMIZU KOTO BLUE SHARKS)

Week Thirteen

The playoffs drama continued when the competition's leading point-scorer, Kobe flyhalf Bryn Gatland, missed an injury time conversion as the Steelers drew 40-40 with Brave Lupus.

The New Zealander had earlier twice succeeded with kicks that struck the right side of the goalpost, but this miss proved costly, with the shared log points leaving the Steelers' semi-final prospects on life support.

Despite the absence of key man Richie Mo'unga, who had returned to New Zealand after the death of his father, Brave Lupus capitalised on an error strewn Steelers performance to forge ahead 33-14 at the midpoint, before holding on for a draw in the face of the inevitable Kobe comeback.

Despite the Steelers playing as if their season depended on it – which it did – and scoring four second half tries, the damage had been done, both in the game, and to Kobe's season, which saw its last rights administered in week 14.

The thriller was the second of two on the weekend as the section – which had been without a drawn result all season long – saw two in 24 hours.

While their season was done, the Spears were on course to come away with their sixth win of the season at Shizuoka as they cruised to a 31-7 halftime lead, only to almost vanish in the second period as the Blue Revs held them scoreless while erasing the margin between the two sides.

Two of their five tries were scored by ex-All Black Charles Piutau, but it was winger Malo Tuitama's 15th and final try of the season, six minutes from time, followed in the second minute of injury time by second rower Vueti Tupou's try, which made the home side's day.

Perhaps mercifully, winger Keagen Faria missed the final conversion, at least allowing the Spears a share of the points for their part in an outstanding contest. With Brave Lupus dropping points, the Wild Knights all but ensured top spot for semi-final qualification,

stretching their lead to nine with three to play after a workmanlike victory in Tokyo against the Black Rams. Yokohama consolidated their hold on fourth, accounting for Hanazono in a high scoring contest in Osaka while Sungoliath put 60 points on Heat, and Verblitz surged to a 34-20 win over the Dynaboars in the last quarter, after the scores had been tied 20-20 with 19 minutes to play.

All Black Beauden Barrett, who was returning from a week's suspension, made up for the time away by scoring two tries.



Beauden Barrett (TOYOTA VERBLITZ)

Week Fourteen

Fresh off a draw with Spears Funabashi Tokyo Bay, Shizuoka Blue Revs drew again, this time tying Tokyo Sungoliath 31-31 in another thrilling contest where the lead changed hands five times before a penalty goal by Mikiya Takamoto four minutes from time ensured the sides couldn't be separated.

The tie meant the Blue Revs had been held to draws twice in each of the second and third editions of Japan Rugby League One.

Although Sungoliath failed to win, the weekend confirmed their semi-final qualification after the Spears ended Kobe's remaining hopes with a 39-29 win at the Sapporo Dome.

With Bryn Gatland – who finished the day with 19 points – keeping them in the game, Kobe were level

22-22 after an hour, despite having been out-scored three-tries-to-one.

The next 15 minutes saw the Spears score 17 points without reply to finish the contest, leaving both sides to count the cost of missed opportunities that had sabotaged their seasons.

Arguably the biggest surprise was at Suzuka where Brave Lupus were held scoreless until the 71st minute before scoring a try and penalty goal to scramble an 8-7 victory over a valiant Heat.

The dour contest was scoreless at halftime, and while disappointed to let the game slip, the bonus point ensured Heat didn't finish bottom of the table, leaving Hanazono with the task of tackling star-studded Urayasu in The Replacement Battle promotion/

relegation playoffs.

Avoiding that prospect had become a possibility for Hanazono when the Liners recorded their first win of the season, breaking the game open in the second period to beat the Black Rams 34-23 after the sides had been level 17-17 at halftime.

Hanazono had trailed 14-3 after the opening quarter but outscored their rivals 31-9 for the remainder of the contest.

This period included four tries without reply.

Hooker Shunta Nakamura bagged his second hat-trick of the season as the Eagles drew clear of the Dynaboars in the second half after the sides had been tied 19-19 at the break.

The Wild Knights confirmed top qualification for the playoffs for the fourth season running after hammering Verblitz 40-7, with internationals Marika Korobete and Lood de Jager each scoring twice. Having started the season slowly, the double was the

Wallaby winger's third in as many weeks, after scoring just twice in the 11 appearances prior.

The win was Saitama's seventh in a row against Toyota, and the fifth of the seven where they had hit 40 points or more against the Aichi-based side.

The Division Two Placement Round began with D-Rocks overpowering Shuttles Aichi while Red Hurricanes edged Kamaishi.

Red Dolphins won a 100-point, 14-try, extravaganza against Water Gush Akishima, but Blue Sharks needed an injury time penalty goal to prevail against Red Regulions as Division Three neared its close.

The win, in which Red Dolphins at one stage led 59-13 before it finished 59-41, sealed the section title with two games to spare.

Although unable to catch the title-winners, the Blue Sharks were also assured of automatic promotion to next season's expanded Division Two.

Week Fifteen

With the top four settled, the spotlight for the penultimate weekend of the regular season turned to the identity of the final entrant to the Replacement Battle. This was confirmed as Black Rams Tokyo, despite their defeat of Sagami-hara Dynaboars 31-24 in the clash of the ninth and 10th placed sides.

Cut adrift in 10th, the Black Rams needed to win and deny the Dynaboars a bonus point to keep their hopes of avoiding the promotion/relegation series alive. Success in this mission appeared on when they dashed to a 31-7 lead with 20 minutes left.

It proved false hope, with Sagami-hara 'rescuing' themselves with two tries in the remaining time, even securing what was ultimately a meaningless bonus point in the game's final play when James Grayson raised the linesman's flags for the fourth time to finalise a 31-24 defeat.

The win at least ensured the Black Rams would face the lowest qualifier from Division Two, whom they despatched comfortably after they were paired with Green Rockets Tokatsu.

It came too late, but Kobe showed what might have been when they put on a quality exhibition to thrash Shizuoka, running in nine tries – one each from All Blacks Ardie Savea and Brodie Retallick – during a blistering 63-19 win.

The eliminated Spears produced a similar performance in a 61-24 win over Mie, where they surprisingly trailed 17-0 after half and hour before blitzing their opponents with nine tries.

Wales fullback Liam Williams was among their

tryscorers, as was Wallaby fly-half Bernard Foley, who finished the afternoon with 17 points.

Verblitz winger Taichi Takahashi, one of their bright spots in an otherwise underwhelming campaign, scored his third try-scoring double of the campaign, alongside a hat-trick, to get his side over the line against Yokohama with his second try claimed in referee's time.

The 28-year-old, who'd scored four tries against Bristol Bears playing for the Barbarians in the off-season, finished the campaign with 13 tries, ranked fourth amongst the section's try-scorers.

Saitama coach Robbie Deans gave his back-up players a good workout, with the bulk of his first choice XV rested for the 33-24 win over Hanazono, who led 21-17 before being reeled in during the final 10 minutes.

Confirmed semi-final opponents Brave Lupus and Sungoliath squared off in the second Fuchu derby, with Todd Blackadder's men again prevailing despite a late rally from their west Tokyo opponents who scored the final two tries in a 36-27 defeat.

The Placement Round continued in Division Two with the Shuttles Aichi getting the better of Green Rockets Tokatsu for the second time in the campaign, winning 17-14 to secure an appointment with 11th-placed Mie Heat, while Kyuden Voltex condemned Kamaishi Seawaves to The Replacement Battle after a 42-32 win.

Water Gush Akishima took a crucial step towards a date with the Seawaves after beating the Red Regulions 31-23, to go above SkyActivs Hiroshima after their 38-30 loss to the already promoted Red Dolphins.

Week Sixteen

Four of the Division One sides whose seasons were at an end signed off positively, as each of the Kobe Steelers, Spears Funabashi Tokyo Bay, Sagamihara Dynaboars and Toyota Verblitz bowed out with a win, while the Wild Knights and Brave Lupus warmed up for their semi-final assignments with big wins.

Kobe needed a late try by hooker Takuya Kitade to see off a valiant Mie Heat 33-31 and while Bryn Gattland missed the conversion, his eight points from the afternoon saw him finish the regular season ranked as the number one individual point-scorer with 217, the highest to date after three editions of Japan Rugby League One.

Sungoliath had the worst possible preparation for their semi-final date with Brave Lupus, collapsing in the second half to lose 45-26 against the Spears, which meant they entered the playoffs winless from their last three outings.

The bonus point win allowed the Spears to claim sixth, one in advance of Verblitz despite the latter's comfortable 45-18 win over the Black Rams, which was highlighted by two tries from All Black scrumhalf Aaron Smith.

While Verblitz once again missed the playoffs, the failure was no fault of the former (Otago) Highlanders number nine, who showed his class throughout, with the 35-year-old's contribution including eight tries from 16 appearances.

James Grayson completed his maiden season in Japan with 21 points in his side's 46-36 win over Hanazono, with the haul lifting the Dynaboars flyhalf's tally for the campaign to 148.

With the positive end, Sagamihara finished ninth, one rung higher than in 2023, having won two more games.

The win on the final day was their sixth of the campaign.

A 43-14 battering of semi-final opponents Yokohama saw the Wild Knights complete the regular season

unbeaten, with their 16 wins topped by 11 try-scoring bonus points, and a final log tally of 75.

This was nine in advance of the 66 they collected to head the regular season standings in the competition's second edition.

Brave Lupus ended 10 behind after completing their 14th win from 16 courtesy of a surprisingly comfortable 59-20 win at Shizuoka, where the home side collapsed after a competitive first half which ended with just nine points between the teams.

The result, which meant the Blue Revs had failed to win any of their final four outings, left them eighth, the same ranking as in 2023.

While Richie Mo'unga's 19-point return after four games away on bereavement leave was a further boost for Brave Lupus ahead of the playoffs, such was the scale of their win, the two tries scored by winger Jone Naikabula – who was to have a major say on the title's destination – went almost unnoticed.

The Placement series concluded with Urayasu confirming a repeat of last year's Replacement Battle against Hanazono after a conclusive 48-28 win over Green Rockets Tokatsu, who were handed the trickiest promotion assignment (against Black Rams Tokyo) after their twin defeats in the round.

Red Hurricanes Osaka completed their season with a 22-12 win over Kyuden Voltex although both had already secured places in an expanded Division Two for the league's fourth edition.

While the Blue Sharks missed out on the Division Three title, they did have the last laugh by beating the Red Dolphins 38-26 on the final day, overturning a 26-14 halftime deficit in doing so.

The final order of business in the division saw ex-Wallaby backrower Wycliff Palu's Water Gush Akishima clinch a Replacement Battle tie with Kamaishi after beating SkyActives Hiroshima 38-33 to secure third position in the section.

The Replacement Battles

Division One versus Division Two

After having been soundly defeated by Hanazono Liners at the same point in their opening season, D-Rocks made the most of home advantage second time around to secure a slender advantage from the home leg, before finishing the job on a tense afternoon in Osaka.

D-Rocks had had their promotion hopes all but wiped out in the corresponding tie the previous year, outclassed 36-14 in the first leg by a Hanazono outfit inspired by the mercurial Quade Cooper.

The Wallaby veteran's influence was curbed this time, with the home side overcoming the concession of two first half tries and a 12-7 deficit to secure a 21-12 victory.

It proved enough even though the Liners had wiped out the nine-point gap after 55 minutes of their home leg when they went ahead 23-11.

Any hope Hanazono had of retaining their status went out the door in the following 20 minutes as Urayasu scored three tries, and 24 points, to finish off the tie, despite a late try by the Liners which closed the margin to 35-30 at fulltime.

The two-time Division Two champions were the only side from the section to win promotion in the series, with Green Rockets Tokatsu failing to trouble Black Rams Toyko, blown away 55-0 in the second leg, after the Division One side had returned to home base with a 19-point advantage from a 40-21 win in game one. Shuttles Aichi, who saw their playoff hopes killed off in the first leg of the previous series when they conceded 59 points and a 38-point deficit, suffered a similar fate as Mie Honda Heat took an 18-point advantage after a 57-39 win at Nagoya on the back of a hatrick by their star backrower Pablo Matera. Although the Shuttles threatened to pull off a remarkable reversal in the second leg, at one point clawing back all but one of the 18-point deficit they needed to overcome, another Matera try sparked the Heat recovery, with a late penalty goal closing the final gap on the day to nine.

It was enough for Mie to retain their position in Division One even though the Shuttles ended a much-improved season with a 24-15 win.



URAYASU D-Rocks

Division Two versus Division Three

After succeeding in dramatic circumstances 12 months earlier against the same opponents, when they had at one point trailed 18-3 in the home leg before rallying to draw the first tie and go on to win the second in Tokyo, Kamaishi Seawaves had an easier ride against Water Gush Akishima a year on.

The Seawaves pulled away in the second half of the home leg, turning a one-point lead into a convincing 37-19 victory, and the Division Three third-placed getter never threatened after that. Kamaishi was always in charge of the return contest which it won 41-26.

Division One Semi-finals

As far as omens for the championship game went, it wasn't bad for Brave Lupus Tokyo. Tokyo Suntory Sungoliath had lost three times to its near neighbours Spears Funabashi Tokyo Bay on the latter's run to its maiden national title in the league's second edition.

Todd Blackadder's men were bidding to achieve the same, and duly prevailed in the year's third Fuchu Derby, erasing a 10-point deficit after 24 minutes to shake off their rivals in the second half.

While Sungoliath trailed by just one at the 54th minute mark, tries from two of Blackadder's most influential performers, backrower Shannon Frizell and winger Jone Naikabula within 10 minutes, broke the game open, establishing a 15-point gap Sungoliath never looked like bridging.

Even though ex-Queensland Reds second rower Harry Hockings did cross for Sungoliath's third try with six minutes to play, Brave Lupus comfortably managed the final moments to earn a 28-20 victory, and a date with Saitama Wild Knights.

Champions for three of the last four years, the Wild Knights continued the remarkable run of coach Robbie Deans in professional club semi-finals, completing a season hatrick of their own by beating Yokohama Eagles 20-17 to give their mentor his 16th win from 18 attempts at the penultimate stage of a club competition.

After two heavy defeats earlier in the year against an opponent they had not beaten in 15 encounters since 2013, Yokohama gave this one a real crack, forging to a 17-13 lead in a 10-minute stretch after halftime, where they had trailed 13-3.

A try by the experienced Springbok inside centre Damien de Allende regained the lead, with the Wild Knights relying on their big game 'nous' to preserve the slender advantage during an at times nervous but scoreless final quarter.

After finishing third in the second edition of the league, Yokohama swapped positions with the side they had beaten to that ranking in 2023, falling 40-33 to Sungoliath in the playoff for third and fourth.

Division One Final

History was made in front of 56,486 people at the National Stadium in the capital as Brave Lupus Tokyo won the club's sixth nationwide league title, but first since the 2009-10 season.

The 24-20 win over the Saitama Wild Knights, which represented the first title for Todd Blackadder after two decades as a professional coach, came in dramatic fashion following intervention from the Television Match Official.

It looked like the three-time Japan Rugby League One finalists had made the match-winning score, only for Wild Knights' winger Tomoki Osada's finish to be ruled out by the TMO in one of the last movements of the game for what was deemed to be a forward pass in the build-up.

Cruelly the hairline call was ruled against a pass made by retiring Saitama and Brave Blossoms legend Shota Horie, in what proved to be the final act of his storied career, which included over 150 games for the Wild Knights, four Rugby World Cups, and 76 tests for Japan.

A thrilling contest, in what was the first final appearance by Brave Lupus since they lost 27-26 to the Wild Knights in the 2015-16 decider, saw the new champions weather a dominant first half by Saitama, before capitalising on their chances to sneak a 10-6 advantage at the game's mid-point.

The game's individual star, winger Jone Naikabula, taunted the league's premier defence, stunning the six-time champions with tries either side of the break

to give his side a 17-6 lead.

As usual, the Wild Knights didn't panic, mustering their customary fightback with two tries in five minutes to take a 20-17 lead into the game's final 10 minutes.

The response by Brave Lupus in the 74th minute was a title-winning one as inside centre Yuto Mori finished off another run by Naikabula which had fractured the

Wild Knights' defence, scoring a try that All Black Richie Mo'unga crucially converted to take his side's lead beyond the margin of a penalty goal.

The drama that followed around the 'try' that wasn't was worthy of the league's third epic grand final showpiece, which have been won by margins of six (2022), two (2023) and four (2024) points respectively.



Shota Horie (SAITAMA WILD KNIGHTS)

Results/Tables from the 2024 season

DIVISION 1

ROUND	date		DIVISION	KO	Match	Prefecture	STADIUM	audience			
1	12/9/2023	Sat	A	D1	12:00	KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS	80 v 15	MIE Honda HEAT	HYOGO	KOBE UNIV	11,419
1	12/9/2023	Sat	B	D1	13:00	Mitsubishi Heavy Industries Sagamihara Dynaboars	30 v 29	HANAZONO KINTETSU LINERS	KANAGAWA	SAGAMIHARA GION	7,852
1	12/9/2023	Sat	A	D1	14:30	TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO	43 v 30	SHIZUOKA BlueRevs	TOKYO	AJINOMOTO	11,553
1	12/9/2023	Sat	B	D1	14:30	TOYOTA VERBLITZ	15 v 8	RICOH BlackRams Tokyo	AICHI	PALOMA	9,059
1	12/10/2023	Sun	A	D1	14:30	Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY	26 v 52	TOKYO SUNTORY SUNGOLIATH	TOKYO	CHICHIUNOMIYA	18,110
1	12/10/2023	Sun	B	D1	15:05	SAITAMA Panasonic WILD KNIGHTS	53 v 12	YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES	SAITAMA	KUMAGAYA	12,582
2	12/16/2023	Sat	A	D1	12:10	MIE Honda HEAT	0 v 75	Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY	MIE	SUZUKA	3,351
2	12/16/2023	Sat	B	D1	13:00	RICOH BlackRams Tokyo	17 v 25	Mitsubishi Heavy Industries Sagamihara Dynaboars	TOKYO	KOMAZAWA	8,213
2	12/16/2023	Sun	B	D1	14:10	YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES	24 v 22	TOYOTA VERBLITZ	KANAGAWA	NISSAN	31,312
2	12/17/2023	Sun	B	D1	12:00	HANAZONO KINTETSU LINERS	0 v 49	SAITAMA Panasonic WILD KNIGHTS	OSAKA	HANAZONO	7,507
2	12/17/2023	Sun	A	D1	14:00	SHIZUOKA BlueRevs	26 v 30	KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS	SHIZUOKA	YAMAHA	12,841
2	12/17/2023	Sun	A	D1	14:30	TOKYO SUNTORY SUNGOLIATH	19 v 26	TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO	TOKYO	AJINOMOTO	31,953
3	12/23/2023	Sat	B	D1	12:00	SAITAMA Panasonic WILD KNIGHTS	44 v 17	RICOH BlackRams Tokyo	SAITAMA	KUMAGAYA	6,825
3	12/23/2023	Sat	B	D1	14:10	YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES	66 v 26	HANAZONO KINTETSU LINERS	KANAGAWA	NIPPATSU	6,641
3	12/23/2023	Sat	B	D1	14:30	TOYOTA VERBLITZ	54 v 40	Mitsubishi Heavy Industries Sagamihara Dynaboars	AICHI	PALOMA	7,958
3	12/24/2023	Sun	A	D1	12:10	MIE Honda HEAT	16 v 34	TOKYO SUNTORY SUNGOLIATH	MIE	SUZUKA	3,221
3	12/24/2023	Sun	A	D1	14:30	Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY	19 v 23	SHIZUOKA BlueRevs	OSAKA	YODOKO	6,719
3	12/24/2023	Sun	A	D1	15:00	KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS	39 v 46	TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO	HYOGO	KOBE UNIV	11,096
4	1/6/2024	Sat	B	D1	14:30	SAITAMA Panasonic WILD KNIGHTS	43 v 27	TOYOTA VERBLITZ	SAITAMA	KUMAGAYA	14,544
4	1/6/2024	Sat	B	D1	14:30	RICOH BlackRams Tokyo	41 v 14	HANAZONO KINTETSU LINERS	TOKYO	YUMENOSHIMA	1,783
4	1/6/2024	Sat	A	D1	14:35	TOKYO SUNTORY SUNGOLIATH	44 v 36	KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS	TOKYO	CHICHIUNOMIYA	18,867
4	1/7/2024	Sun	A	D1	12:00	MIE Honda HEAT	13 v 62	SHIZUOKA BlueRevs	MIE	SUZUKA	2,629
4	1/7/2024	Sun	B	D1	14:10	Mitsubishi Heavy Industries Sagamihara Dynaboars	35 v 40	YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES	TOKYO	CHICHIUNOMIYA	8,541
4	1/7/2024	Sun	A	D1	14:30	TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO	24 v 20	Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY	KANAGAWA	TODOROKI	10,456
5	1/13/2024	Sat	B	D1	12:00	Mitsubishi Heavy Industries Sagamihara Dynaboars	21 v 81	SAITAMA Panasonic WILD KNIGHTS	KANAGAWA	SAGAMIHARA GION	4,172
5	1/13/2024	Sat	A	D1	14:00	SHIZUOKA BlueRevs	25 v 29	TOKYO SUNTORY SUNGOLIATH	SHIZUOKA	YAMAHA	6,465
5	1/13/2024	Sat	B	D1	14:10	YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES	24 v 8	RICOH BlackRams Tokyo	KANAGAWA	NIPPATSU	7,010
5	1/14/2024	Sun	A	D1	14:30	KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS	34 v 38	Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY	HYOGO	KOBE UNIV	10,682
5	1/14/2024	Sun	B	D1	14:30	HANAZONO KINTETSU LINERS	14 v 47	TOYOTA VERBLITZ	OSAKA	HANAZONO	9,032

DIVISION 1

ROUND	date			DIVISION	KO	Match				Prefecture	STADIUM	audience
5	2023/12/9	Sun	A	D1	14:35	TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO	40 v 12	MIE Honda HEAT		TOKYO	CHICHIBUNOMIYA	7,367
6	2023/12/9	Sat	Inner	D1	14:00	Mitsubishi Heavy Industries Sagamihara Dynaboars	34 v 36	TOKYO SUNTORY SUNGOLIATH		KANAGAWA	SAGAMIHARA GION	2,742
6	2023/12/9	Sat	Inner	D1	14:30	SAITAMA Panasonic WILD KNIGHTS	70 v 12	MIE Honda HEAT		SAITAMA	KUMAGAYA	4,615
6	2023/12/9	Sat	Inner	D1	13:00	RICOH BlackRams Tokyo	17 v 18	Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY		TOKYO	KOMAZAWA	7,608
6	2023/12/10	Sat	Inner	D1	13:00	SHIZUOKA BlueRevs	50 v 12	HANAZONO KINTETSU LINERS		SHIZUOKA	YAMAHA	5,255
6	2023/12/10	Sat	Inner	D1	14:10	YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES	27 v 31	KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS		KANAGAWA	NIPPATSU	10,161
6	2023/12/16	Sat	Inner	D1	14:30	TOYOTA VERBLITZ	12 v 28	TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO		AICHI	TOYOTA	18,619
7	2023/12/16	Sat	Inner	D1	14:00	TOYOTA VERBLITZ	54 v 7	MIE Honda HEAT		AICHI	PALOMA	7,577
7	2023/12/16	Sat	Inner	D1	14:30	SAITAMA Panasonic WILD KNIGHTS	24 v 20	TOKYO SUNTORY SUNGOLIATH		SAITAMA	KUMAGAYA	12,030
7	2023/12/17	Sat	Inner	D1	14:00	Mitsubishi Heavy Industries Sagamihara Dynaboars	53 v 45	SHIZUOKA BlueRevs		KANAGAWA	SAGAMIHARA GION	3,010
7	2023/12/17	Sat	Inner	D1	14:05	TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO	27 v 7	YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES		TOKYO	CHICHIBUNOMIYA	13,581
7	2023/12/17	Sat	Inner	D1	14:30	HANAZONO KINTETSU LINERS	19 v 56	Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY		OSAKA	HANAZONO	3,606
7	2023/12/23	Sun	Inner	D1	13:00	RICOH BlackRams Tokyo	17 v 27	KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS		TOKYO	KOMAZAWA	4,231
8	2023/12/23	Fri	Inner	D1	19:00	MIE Honda HEAT	21 v 50	YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES		TOKYO	CHICHIBUNOMIYA	13,428
8	2023/12/23	Sat	Inner	D1	12:00	HANAZONO KINTETSU LINERS	32 v 50	TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO		OSAKA	HANAZONO	4,240
8	2023/12/24	Sat	Inner	D1	14:00	SHIZUOKA BlueRevs	19 v 45	SAITAMA Panasonic WILD KNIGHTS		SHIZUOKA	YAMAHA	6,792
8	2023/12/24	Sat	Inner	D1	14:05	TOKYO SUNTORY SUNGOLIATH	62 v 0	RICOH BlackRams Tokyo		TOKYO	CHICHIBUNOMIYA	10,428
8	2023/12/24	Sun	Inner	D1	14:30	Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY	28 v 34	Mitsubishi Heavy Industries Sagamihara Dynaboars		TOKYO	CHICHIBUNOMIYA	6,593
8	2024/1/6	Sun	Inner	D1	14:30	KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS	57 v 22	TOYOTA VERBLITZ		OSAKA	HANAZONO	14,387
9	2024/1/6	Sat	Inner	D1	12:00	Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY	27 v 31	TOYOTA VERBLITZ		OSAKA	HANAZONO	6,888
9	2024/1/6	Sat	Inner	D1	12:00	YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES	34 v 17	SHIZUOKA BlueRevs		OITA	RESONAC	5,315
9	2024/1/7	Sat	Inner	D1	14:30	TOKYO SUNTORY SUNGOLIATH	34 v 14	HANAZONO KINTETSU LINERS		TOKYO	CHICHIBUNOMIYA	8,098
9	2024/1/7	Sat	Inner	D1	14:35	SAITAMA Panasonic WILD KNIGHTS	36 v 24	TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO		SAITAMA	KUMAGAYA	13,389
9	2024/1/7	Sun	Inner	D1	12:00	MIE Honda HEAT	14 v 24	RICOH BlackRams Tokyo		MIE	SUZUKA	2,524
9	2024/1/13	Sun	Inner	D1	14:30	Mitsubishi Heavy Industries Sagamihara Dynaboars	14 v 43	KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS		KANAGAWA	SAGAMIHARA GION	6,156
10	2024/1/13	Fri	Inner	D1	19:00	YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES	26 v 29	Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY		TOKYO	CHICHIBUNOMIYA	8,910
10	2024/1/13	Sat	Inner	D1	13:00	RICOH BlackRams Tokyo	29 v 36	SHIZUOKA BlueRevs		TOKYO	CHICHIBUNOMIYA	5,301
10	2024/1/14	Sat	Inner	D1	14:30	TOYOTA VERBLITZ	38 v 39	TOKYO SUNTORY SUNGOLIATH		AICHI	TOYOTA	34,568
10	2024/1/14	Sat	Inner	D1	14:30	KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS	18 v 28	SAITAMA Panasonic WILD KNIGHTS		HYOGO	KOBE UNIV	12,036
10	2024/1/14	Sun	Inner	D1	12:00	HANAZONO KINTETSU LINERS	19 v 20	MIE Honda HEAT		OSAKA	HANAZONO	7,325
10	2024/1/20	Sun	Inner	D1	14:30	TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO	41 v 19	Mitsubishi Heavy Industries Sagamihara Dynaboars		TOKYO	CHICHIBUNOMIYA	5,923
11	2024/1/20	Fri	Inner	D1	19:00	Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY	22 v 55	SAITAMA Panasonic WILD KNIGHTS		TOKYO	CHICHIBUNOMIYA	9,491

DIVISION 1

ROUND	2024/1/27			DIVISION	KO	Match			Prefecture	STADIUM	audience
11	2024/1/27	Sat	Inner	D1	14:00	SHIZUOKA BlueRevs	24 v 8	TOYOTA VERBLITZ	SHIZUOKA	ECOPA	5,074
11	2024/1/27	Sat	Inner	D1	14:30	TOKYO SUNTORY SUNGLIATH	35 v 37	YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES	TOKYO	CHICHBUNOMIYA	12,890
11	2024/1/27	Sun	Inner	D1	14:30	TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO	40 v 33	RICOH BlackRams Tokyo	TOKYO	CHICHBUNOMIYA	6,418
11	2024/2/17	Sun	Inner	D1	14:30	MIE Honda HEAT	26 v 31	Mitsubishi Heavy Industries Sagami-hara Dynaboars	MIE	SUZUKA	1,626
11	2024/2/17	Sun	Inner	D1	14:30	KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS	60 v 17	HANAZONO KINTETSU LINERS	HYOGO	KOBE UNIV	6,450
12	2024/2/24	Sat	B	D1	13:00	RICOH BlackRams Tokyo	12 v 31	YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES	TOKYO	KOMAZAWA	7,454
12	2024/2/24	Sat	A	D1	14:00	SHIZUOKA BlueRevs	43 v 14	MIE Honda HEAT	SHIZUOKA	YAMAHA	4,452
12	2024/2/24	Sat	B	D1	14:30	SAITAMA Panasonic WILD KNIGHTS	53 v 12	Mitsubishi Heavy Industries Sagami-hara Dynaboars	SAITAMA	KUMAGAYA	8,322
12	2024/2/25	Sat	B	D1	14:40	TOYOTA VERBLITZ	47 v 30	HANAZONO KINTETSU LINERS	GIFU	NAGARAGAWA	7,390
12	2024/3/1	Sun	A	D1	14:30	Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY	20 v 22	TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO	TOKYO	CHICHBUNOMIYA	7,963
12	2024/3/2	Sun	A	D1	14:30	KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS	27 v 36	TOKYO SUNTORY SUNGLIATH	HYOGO	KOBE UNIV	11,792
13	2024/3/2	Fri	B	D1	19:00	RICOH BlackRams Tokyo	26 v 50	SAITAMA Panasonic WILD KNIGHTS	TOKYO	CHICHBUNOMIYA	8,547
13	2024/3/2	Fri	B	D1	19:00	HANAZONO KINTETSU LINERS	33 v 52	YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES	OSAKA	HANAZONO	3,937
13	2024/3/3	Sat	A	D1	14:00	SHIZUOKA BlueRevs	31 v 31	Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY	SHIZUOKA	IAI	6,423
13	2024/3/3	Sat	A	D1	14:30	TOKYO SUNTORY SUNGLIATH	60 v 10	MIE Honda HEAT	TOKYO	CHICHBUNOMIYA	8,240
13	2024/3/9	Sat	B	D1	14:30	Mitsubishi Heavy Industries Sagami-hara Dynaboars	20 v 34	TOYOTA VERBLITZ	NAGASAKI	KAKIDOMARI	6,517
13	2024/3/9	Sun	A	D1	14:30	TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO	40 v 40	KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS	TOKYO	CHICHBUNOMIYA	11,918
14	2024/3/9	Fri	A	D1	19:00	TOKYO SUNTORY SUNGLIATH	31 v 31	SHIZUOKA BlueRevs	TOKYO	CHICHBUNOMIYA	8,007
14	2024/3/9	Sat	B	D1	14:30	TOYOTA VERBLITZ	7 v 40	SAITAMA Panasonic WILD KNIGHTS	AICHI	PALOMA	9,129
14	2024/3/10	Sat	B	D1	14:30	YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES	43 v 19	Mitsubishi Heavy Industries Sagami-hara Dynaboars	TOKYO	CHICHBUNOMIYA	7,094
14	2024/3/10	Sun	A	D1	12:10	MIE Honda HEAT	7 v 8	TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO	MIE	SUZUKA	2,948
14	2024/3/15	Sun	A	D1	13:00	Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY	39 v 29	KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS	HOKKAIDO	SAPPORO	6,354
14	2024/3/16	Sun	B	D1	14:30	HANAZONO KINTETSU LINERS	34 v 23	RICOH BlackRams Tokyo	OSAKA	HANAZONO	2,479
15	2024/3/16	Sat	B	D1	12:00	Mitsubishi Heavy Industries Sagami-hara Dynaboars	24 v 31	RICOH BlackRams Tokyo	KANAGAWA	SAGAMIHARA GION	5,159
15	2024/3/16	Sat	A	D1	12:05	TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO	36 v 27	TOKYO SUNTORY SUNGLIATH	TOKYO	CHICHBUNOMIYA	13,147
15	2024/3/17	Sat	A	D1	14:30	KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS	63 v 19	SHIZUOKA BlueRevs	OSAKA	HANAZONO	6,908
15	2024/3/17	Sat	A	D1	14:30	TOYOTA VERBLITZ	35 v 31	YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES	AICHI	PALOMA	8,769
15	2024/4/27	Sat	B	D1	14:30	SAITAMA Panasonic WILD KNIGHTS	33 v 24	HANAZONO KINTETSU LINERS	SAITAMA	KUMAGAYA	10,700
15	2024/4/27	Sat	B	D1	14:30	Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY	61 v 24	MIE Honda HEAT	TOKYO	EDOGAWA	3,382
16	2024/5/4	Sat	A	D1	12:10	MIE Honda HEAT	31 v 33	KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS	MIE	SUZUKA	4,443
16	2024/5/4	Sat	B	D1	14:05	YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES	14 v 43	SAITAMA Panasonic WILD KNIGHTS	OITA	RESONAC	7,805
16	2024/5/4	Sat	A	D1	14:30	TOKYO SUNTORY SUNGLIATH	26 v 45	Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY	TOKYO	CHICHBUNOMIYA	13,829

DIVISION 1

ROUND	date		DIVISION	KO	Match			Prefecture	STADIUM	audience
16	2024/5/5 Sun	B	D1	12:00	HANAZONO KINTETSU LINERS	36 v 46	Mitsubishi Heavy Industries Sagamihara Dynaboars	OSAKA	HANAZONO	6,273
16	2024/5/5 Sun	A	D1	14:00	SHIZUOKA BlueRevs	20 v 59	TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO	SHIZUOKA	YAMAHA	13,814
16	2024/5/5 Sun	B	D1	14:35	RIKOH BlackRams Tokyo	18 v 45	TOYOTA VERBLITZ	TOKYO	CHICHIBUNOMIYA	16,951
PO1	2024/5/18 Sat	SF①	D1	14:05	SAITAMA Panasonic WILD KNIGHTS	20 v 17	YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES	TOKYO	CHICHIBUNOMIYA	15,464
PO2	2024/5/19 Sun	SF②	D1	14:05	TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO	28 v 20	TOKYO SUNTORY SUNGOLIATH	TOKYO	CHICHIBUNOMIYA	17,133
PO2	2024/5/25 Sat	BF	D1	12:05	TOKYO SUNTORY SUNGOLIATH	40 v 33	YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES	TOKYO	CHICHIBUNOMIYA	9,509
PO3	2024/ 5/26 Sun	FINAL	D1	15:05	SAITAMA Panasonic WILD KNIGHTS	20 v 24	TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO	TOKYO	KOKURITSU	56,486

NTT JAPAN RUGBY LEAGUE ONE 2023-24 DIVISION 1

Pos.	Team	Played	Points	W	D	L	PF	PA	+/-	T	G	PG	DG	FOULS
1	SAITAMA WILD KNIGHTS	16	75	16	0	0	747	275	472	106	74	22	1	137
2	TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO	16	65	14	1	1	554	373	181	81	58	11	0	172
3	TOKYO SUNGOLIATH	16	50	10	1	5	584	425	159	83	56	18	1	148
4	YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES	16	49	10	0	6	518	446	72	75	55	10	1	143
5	KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS	16	45	9	1	6	647	459	188	89	71	20	0	170
6	Kubota Spears	16	44	8	1	7	554	447	107	79	54	16	1	159
7	TOYOTA VERBLITZ	16	43	9	0	7	498	450	48	72	57	8	0	171
8	SHIZUOKA BlueRevs	16	33	6	2	8	501	513	-12	72	45	17	0	134
9	Mitsubishi Sagamihara Dynaboars	16	27	6	0	10	457	637	-180	62	48	15	2	175
10	BlackRams Tokyo	16	17	3	0	13	321	503	-182	46	29	10	1	175
11	MIE Honda HEAT	16	7	1	0	15	242	744	-502	32	23	12	0	184
12	HANAZONO KINTETSU LINERS	16	6	1	0	15	353	704	-351	51	37	8	0	201

DIVISION 2

ROUND	date	DIVISION	KO	Match			Prefecture	STADIUM	audience
1	2023/12/9 Sat	D2	14:30	NEC GREEN ROCKETS TOKATSU	31 v 28	URAYASU D-Rocks	CHIBA	KASIWA-NO-HA	5,066
1	2023/12/9 Sat	D2	14:30	Kyushudenryoku KyudenVoltex	22 v 26	RedHurricanes Osaka	FUKUOKA	HAKATANOMORI	3,370
1	2023/12/10 Sun	D2	13:00	NIPPON STEEL KAMAISHI SEAWAVES	7 v 52	Toyota Industries Corporation Shuttles Aichi	IWATE	KAMAISHI	1,245
2	2023/12/16 Sat	D2	14:30	URAYASU D-Rocks	57 v 12	Kyushudenryoku KyudenVoltex	TOKYO	EDOGAWA	2,462
2	2023/12/16 Sun	D2	14:30	Toyota Industries Corporation Shuttles Aichi	36 v 25	NEC GREEN ROCKETS TOKATSU	AICHI	PALOMA	1,716
2	2023/12/16 Sun	D2	14:30	RedHurricanes Osaka	27 v 25	NIPPON STEEL KAMAISHI SEAWAVES	OSAKA	YODOKO	8,586
3	2023/12/23 Sat	D2	12:00	NEC GREEN ROCKETS TOKATSU	41 v 24	Kyushudenryoku KyudenVoltex	CHIBA	KASIWA-NO-HA	2,555
3	2023/12/24 Sun	D2	12:00	NIPPON STEEL KAMAISHI SEAWAVES	22 v 52	URAYASU D-Rocks	FUKUSHIMA	Hawaiians	820
3	2023/12/24 Sun	D2	14:30	Toyota Industries Corporation Shuttles Aichi	71 v 12	RedHurricanes Osaka	AICHI	PALOMA	1,102
4	2024/1/6 Sat	D2	13:00	Kyushudenryoku KyudenVoltex	20 v 11	NIPPON STEEL KAMAISHI SEAWAVES	FUKUOKA	MIKUNI	2,858
4	2024/1/13 Sun	D2	12:00	RedHurricanes Osaka	13 v 48	NEC GREEN ROCKETS TOKATSU	OSAKA	YODOKO	3,012
4	2024/1/13 Sat	D2	14:30	URAYASU D-Rocks	10 v 7	Toyota Industries Corporation Shuttles Aichi	CHIBA	ZA ORIPRI	1,042
5	2024/1/28 Sun	D2	14:30	Toyota Industries Corporation Shuttles Aichi	52 v 19	Kyushudenryoku KyudenVoltex	AICHI	PALOMA	1,175
5	2024/2/3 Sat	D2	13:00	URAYASU D-Rocks	45 v 15	RedHurricanes Osaka	TOKYO	KOMAZAWA	1,175
5	2024/2/4 Sun	D2	14:30	NEC GREEN ROCKETS TOKATSU	61 v 17	NIPPON STEEL KAMAISHI SEAWAVES	CHIBA	KASIWA-NO-HA	6,039
6	2024/2/10 Sat	D2	14:30	RedHurricanes Osaka	15 v 24	Toyota Industries Corporation Shuttles Aichi	OSAKA	YODOKO	3,593

DIVISION 2

ROUND	date	DIVISION	KO	Match			Prefecture	STADIUM	audience
6	2024/2/17 Sat	D2	14:30	URAYASU D-Rocks	85 v 5	NIPPON STEEL KAMAISHI SEAWAVES	KANAGAWA	YAMATO	1,162
6	2024/2/24 Sat	D2	13:00	Kyushudenryoku KyudenVoltex	8 v 12	NEC GREEN ROCKETS TOKATSU	KAGOSHIMA	SHIRANAMI	2,279
7	2024/3/2 Sat	D2	14:30	Kyushudenryoku KyudenVoltex	10 v 15	Toyota Industries Corporation Shuttles Aichi	FUKUOKA	HAKATANOMORI	1,649
7	2024/3/3 Sun	D2	13:00	RedHurricanes Osaka	12 v 31	URAYASU D-Rocks	OSAKA	YODOKO	3,782
8	2024/3/10 Sun	D2	13:00	NIPPON STEEL KAMAISHI SEAWAVES	28 v 11	Kyushudenryoku KyudenVoltex	IWATE	KAMAISHI	3,947
8	2024/3/10 Sun	D2	14:30	NEC GREEN ROCKETS TOKATSU	60 v 15	RedHurricanes Osaka	CHIBA	KASIWA-NO-HA	2,715
7	2024/3/16 Sun	D2	12:00	NIPPON STEEL KAMAISHI SEAWAVES	26 v 63	NEC GREEN ROCKETS TOKATSU	IWATE	KAMAISHI	734
8	2024/3/17 Sun	D2	14:30	Toyota Industries Corporation Shuttles Aichi	14 v 19	URAYASU D-Rocks	AICHI	PALOMA	1,845
9	2024/3/23 Sat	D2	14:30	Kyushudenryoku KyudenVoltex	6 v 7	URAYASU D-Rocks	SAGA	EKIMAE	1,716
9	2024/3/24 Sun	D2	12:00	NIPPON STEEL KAMAISHI SEAWAVES	33 v 38	RedHurricanes Osaka	IWATE	IWAGIN	1,464
9	2024/3/24 Sun	D2	14:30	NEC GREEN ROCKETS TOKATSU	42 v 26	Toyota Industries Corporation Shuttles Aichi	CHIBA	KASIWA-NO-HA	8,682
10	2024/3/30 Sat	D2	12:00	Toyota Industries Corporation Shuttles Aichi	48 v 36	NIPPON STEEL KAMAISHI SEAWAVES	AICHI	PALOMA	1,810
10	2024/3/30 Sat	D2	14:30	URAYASU D-Rocks	31 v 28	NEC GREEN ROCKETS TOKATSU	MIYAGI	YURTEC	6,146
10	2024/3/31 Sun	D2	14:30	RedHurricanes Osaka	14 v 30	Kyushudenryoku KyudenVoltex	OSAKA	YANMAR	9,171

ROUND	date	DIVISION	KO	Match			Prefecture	STADIUM	audience
Placement match ROUND1	2024/4/19 Fri	D2	19:00	RedHurricanes Osaka	21 v 18	NIPPON STEEL KAMAISHI SEAWAVES	OSAKA	YODOKO	1,742
	2024/4/20 Sat	D2	14:30	URAYASU D-Rocks	57 v 20	Toyota Industries Corporation Shuttles Aichi	CHIBA	ZA ORIPRI	933
Placement match ROUND2	2024/4/28 Sun	D2	12:00	Kyushudenryoku KyudenVoltex	42 v 32	NIPPON STEEL KAMAISHI SEAWAVES	FUKUOKA	HAKATANOMORI	3,618
	2024/4/28 Sun	D2	14:30	NEC GREEN ROCKETS TOKATSU	14 v 17	Toyota Industries Corporation Shuttles Aichi	CHIBA	KASIWA-NO-HA	3,385
Placement match ROUND3	2024/5/5 Sun	D2	14:30	RedHurricanes Osaka	22 v 12	Kyushudenryoku KyudenVoltex	OSAKA	YANMAR	5,331
	2024/5/6 Mon	D2	12:00	URAYASU D-Rocks	48 v 28	NEC GREEN ROCKETS TOKATSU	IWATE	ISHINOMAKI	2,001

NTT JAPAN RUGBY LEAGUE ONE 2023-24 DIVISION 2

Pos.	Team	Played	Points	W	D	L	PF	PA	+/-	T	G	PG	DG	FOULS
1	URAYASU D-Rocks	10	42	9	0	1	365	152	213	54	40	5	0	95
2	GREEN ROCKETS TOKATSU	10	37	8	0	2	411	224	187	59	43	10	0	115
3	Toyota Industries Corporation Shuttles Aichi	10	34	7	0	3	345	195	150	51	33	8	0	96
4	RedHurricanes Osaka	10	12	3	0	7	187	389	-202	27	17	6	0	113
5	Kyushudenryoku KyudenVoltex	10	12	2	0	8	162	263	-101	21	12	11	0	110
6	NIPPON STEEL KAMAISHI SEAWAVES	10	7	1	0	9	210	457	-247	28	17	12	0	102

NTT JAPAN RUGBY LEAGUE ONE 2023-24 D2 Placement match

Pos.	Team	Played	Points	W	D	L	PF	PA	+/-	T	G	PG	DG	FOULS
1	URAYASU D-Rocks	10	42	9	0	1	365	152	213	54	40	5	0	95
2	GREEN ROCKETS TOKATSU	10	37	8	0	2	411	224	187	59	43	10	0	115
3	Toyota Industries Corporation Shuttles Aichi	10	34	7	0	3	345	195	150	51	33	8	0	96
4	RedHurricanes Osaka	10	12	3	0	7	187	389	-202	27	17	6	0	113
5	Kyushudenryoku KyudenVoltex	10	12	2	0	8	162	263	-101	21	12	11	0	110
6	NIPPON STEEL KAMAISHI SEAWAVES	10	7	1	0	9	210	457	-247	28	17	12	0	102

Pos.	Team	Played	Points	W	D	L	PF	PA	+/-	T	G	PG	DG	FOULS
1	RedHurricanes Osaka	2	8	2	0	0	43	30	13	5	3	4	0	17
2	Kyushudenryoku KyudenVoltex	2	4	1	0	1	54	54	0	8	7	0	0	27
3	NIPPON STEEL KAMAISHI SEAWAVES	2	1	0	0	2	50	63	-13	6	4	4	0	29

DIVISION 3

ROUND	date	DIVISION	KO	Match		Prefecture	STADIUM	audience		
1	2023/12/9	Sat	D3	13:00	SHIMIZU KOTO BLUE SHARKS	16 v 30	HINO RED DOLPHINS	TOKYO	YUMENOSHIMA	2,177
1	2023/12/16	Sat	D3	13:00	MAZDA SKYACTIVS HIROSHIMA	30 v 15	Kurita Water Gush Akishima	HIROSHIMA	BALCOM S	1,727
2	2023/12/23	Sat	D3	13:00	Chugoku Electric Power Red Regulions	19 v 34	SHIMIZU KOTO BLUE SHARKS	HIROSHIMA	BALCOM S	835
2	2023/12/24	Sun	D3	12:00	HINO RED DOLPHINS	37 v 24	Kurita Water Gush Akishima	GUNMA	OTA	1,122
3	2024/1/6	Sat	D3	13:00	MAZDA SKYACTIVS HIROSHIMA	17 v 61	HINO RED DOLPHINS	HIROSHIMA	BALCOM S	2,276
3	2024/1/6	Sun	D3	14:30	Kurita Water Gush Akishima	39 v 24	Chugoku Electric Power Red Regulions	TOKYO	AGF Field	548
4	2024/1/13	Sat	D3	13:00	SHIMIZU KOTO BLUE SHARKS	28 v 31	MAZDA SKYACTIVS HIROSHIMA	TOKYO	YUMENOSHIMA	1,775
4	2024/1/13	Sat	D3	14:30	HINO RED DOLPHINS	-	Chugoku Electric Power Red Regulions	TOKYO	AGF Field	-
5	2024/1/20	Sun	D3	13:00	SHIMIZU KOTO BLUE SHARKS	38 v 20	Kurita Water Gush Akishima	TOKYO	YUMENOSHIMA	1,152
5	2024/1/27	Sat	D3	13:00	Chugoku Electric Power Red Regulions	22 v 21	MAZDA SKYACTIVS HIROSHIMA	HIROSHIMA	BALCOM S	2,654
6	2024/2/10	Sat	D3	14:30	Kurita Water Gush Akishima	51 v 41	Chugoku Electric Power Red Regulions	TOKYO	AGF Field	496
6	2024/2/11	Sun	D3	14:30	HINO RED DOLPHINS	61 v 12	MAZDA SKYACTIVS HIROSHIMA	TOKYO	AGF Field	1,034
7	2024/2/24	Sat	D3	13:00	SHIMIZU KOTO BLUE SHARKS	41 v 19	Kurita Water Gush Akishima	TOKYO	KOMAZAWA	1,048
7	2024/2/25	Sun	D3	14:00	Chugoku Electric Power Red Regulions	20 v 25	MAZDA SKYACTIVS HIROSHIMA	HIROSHIMA	BALCOM S	2,421
8	2024/3/2	Sat	D3	13:00	MAZDA SKYACTIVS HIROSHIMA	27 v 40	SHIMIZU KOTO BLUE SHARKS	HIROSHIMA	FUKUTSU	1,272
8	2024/3/2	Sun	D3	13:00	HINO RED DOLPHINS	63 v 29	Chugoku Electric Power Red Regulions	TOKYO	AGF Field	597
9	2024/3/9	Sat	D3	13:00	Kurita Water Gush Akishima	21 v 52	HINO RED DOLPHINS	TOKYO	AGF Field	872
9	2024/3/9	Sat	D3	14:00	Chugoku Electric Power Red Regulions	21 v 22	SHIMIZU KOTO BLUE SHARKS	HIROSHIMA	BALCOM S	522
10	2024/3/23	Sat	D3	13:00	MAZDA SKYACTIVS HIROSHIMA	28 v 48	Kurita Water Gush Akishima	HIROSHIMA	BALCOM S	1,961
10	2024/3/24	Sun	D3	13:00	HINO RED DOLPHINS	45 v 18	SHIMIZU KOTO BLUE SHARKS	GUNMA	OTA	1,879
11	2024/3/31	Sun	D3	13:00	SHIMIZU KOTO BLUE SHARKS	71 v 17	MAZDA SKYACTIVS HIROSHIMA	KANAGAWA	SHIROYAMA	1,273
11	2024/3/31	Sun	D3	14:00	Chugoku Electric Power Red Regulions	26 v 26	HINO RED DOLPHINS	HIROSHIMA	BALCOM S	652
12	2024/4/6	Sat	D3	14:30	MAZDA SKYACTIVS HIROSHIMA	43 v 22	Chugoku Electric Power Red Regulions	HIROSHIMA	BALCOM S	4,944
12	2024/4/7	Sun	D3	13:00	Kurita Water Gush Akishima	22 v 46	SHIMIZU KOTO BLUE SHARKS	TOKYO	KOMAZAWA	1,608
13	2024/4/20	Sat	D3	13:00	Kurita Water Gush Akishima	41 v 59	HINO RED DOLPHINS	KANAGAWA	OGINO	523
13	2024/4/21	Sun	D3	13:00	SHIMIZU KOTO BLUE SHARKS	21 v 20	Chugoku Electric Power Red Regulions	KANAGAWA	SHIROYAMA	578
14	2024/4/27	Sat	D3	14:00	Chugoku Electric Power Red Regulions	23 v 31	Kurita Water Gush Akishima	HIROSHIMA	BALCOM S	1,132
14	2024/4/28	Sun	D3	14:00	MAZDA SKYACTIVS HIROSHIMA	30 v 38	HINO RED DOLPHINS	YAMAGUCHI	Me-Life Stadium	3,482
15	2024/5/4	Sat	D3	14:30	Kurita Water Gush Akishima	38 v 33	MAZDA SKYACTIVS HIROSHIMA	KANAGAWA	OGINO	582
15	2024/5/5	Sun	D3	14:30	HINO RED DOLPHINS	26 v 38	SHIMIZU KOTO BLUE SHARKS	TOKYO	MUSASHINO	1,075

NTT JAPAN RUGBY LEAGUE ONE 2023-24 DIVISION 3

Pos.	Team	Played	Points	W	D	L	PF	PA	+/-	T	G	PG	DG	FOULS
1	HINO RED DOLPHINS	12	49	10	1	1	512	272	240	77	59	3	0	139
2	SHIMIZU KOTO BLUE SHARKS	12	42	9	0	3	413	297	116	58	39	15	0	119
3	Kurita Water Gush Akishima	12	20	5	0	7	369	452	-83	51	39	12	0	168
4	SKYACTIVS HIROSHIMA	12	20	4	0	8	314	464	-150	47	29	7	0	130
5	Chugoku Electric Power Red Regulions	12	9	1	1	10	267	390	-123	32	25	19	0	120

CROSS-BORDER RUGBY

date	KO	Match	Prefecture	STADIUM	audience
2/3/2024	Sat	12:00 TOKYO SUNTORY SUNGOLIATH 7 v 43 Blues	TOKYO	CHICHIBUNOMIYA	13,278
2/4/2024	Sun	14:30 SAITAMA Panasonic WILD KNIGHTS 38 v 14 Gallagher Chiefs	SAITAMA	KUMAGAYA	7,561
2/10/2024	Sat	12:10 YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES 22 v 57 Blues	KANAGAWA	NIPPATSU	5,946
2/10/2024	Sat	14:30 Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY 30 v 35 Gallagher Chiefs	TOKYO	CHICHIBUNOMIYA	9,439

Promotion/Relegation Match

ROUND	date	DIVISION	KO	Match	Prefecture	STADIUM	audience
Promotion/Relegation Match1	2024/5/18	Sat	D1/D2	12:00 URAYASU D-Rocks 21 v 12 HANAZONO KINTETSU LINERS	TOKYO	EDOGAWA	5,004
	2024/5/18	Sat	D1/D2	12:00 Toyota Industries Corporation Shuttles Aichi 39 v 57 MIE Honda HEAT	AICHI	PALOMA	2,771
	2024/5/18	Sat	D1/D2	14:30 NEC GREEN ROCKETS TOKATSU 21 v 40 RICOH BlackRams Tokyo	CHIBA	KASIWA-NO-HA	5,062
Promotion/Relegation Match2	2024/5/24	Fri	D1/D2	19:00 HANAZONO KINTETSU LINERS 30 v 35 URAYASU D-Rocks	OSAKA	HANAZONO	7,883
	2024/5/25	Sat	D1/D2	12:00 MIE Honda HEAT 15 v 24 Toyota Industries Corporation Shuttles Aichi	MIE	SUZUKA	4,230
	2024/5/25	Sat	D1/D2	14:30 RICOH BlackRams Tokyo 55 v 0 NEC GREEN ROCKETS TOKATSU	KANAGAWA	SAGAMIHARAGION	2,523
Promotion/Relegation Match1	5/19/2024	Sun	D2/D3	14:30 NIPPON STEEL KAMAISHI SEAWAVES 37 v 19 Kurita Water Gush Akishima	IWATE	IWAGIN	949
Promotion/Relegation Match2	5/25/2024	Sat	D2/D3	12:00 Kurita Water Gush Akishima 26 v 41 NIPPON STEEL KAMAISHI SEAWAVES	TOKYO	AGF Field	1,197

NTT JAPAN RUGBY LEAGUE ONE 2023-24 D1/D2 Promotion/Relegation Match

Pos.	Team	Played	Points	W	D	L	PF	PA	+/-	T	G	PG	DG	FOULS
1	URAYASU D-Rocks	2	8	2	0	0	56	42	14	7	6	3	0	33
2	HANAZONO KINTETSU LINERS	2	1	0	0	2	42	56	-14	5	4	3	0	18

Pos.	Team	Played	Points	W	D	L	PF	PA	+/-	T	G	PG	DG	FOULS
1	MIE Honda HEAT	2	5	1	0	1	72	63	9	10	8	2	0	20
2	Toyota Industries Corporation Shuttles Aichi	2	4	1	0	1	63	72	-9	9	6	2	0	13

Pos.	Team	Played	Points	W	D	L	PF	PA	+/-	T	G	PG	DG	FOULS
1	NIPPON STEEL KAMAISHI SEAWAVES	2	5	1	0	1	72	63	9	10	8	2	0	20
2	Kurita Water Gush Akishima	2	4	1	0	1	63	72	-9	9	6	2	0	13

2023-24 Awards Ceremony Winners

As always, the Japan Rugby League One awards ceremony threw up several of the big names, although the fine performances of Japanese players were also acknowledged, with many of the local stars popping up among the various title winners. This included the Best Fifteen (Team of the Year), where eight of the selections either had, or were, eligible for the Brave Blossoms.

Japan Rugby League One Best Fifteen

Loose head Prop – Sena Kimura (Toshiba Brave Lupus Tokyo)

A key reason why Brave Lupus gave its test-laden opponents a torrid time in the final, 25-year-old Kimura overcame a mid-season injury, which saw him miss four matches, to land a winner's medal in what was just his second season at the club. Kimura made his debut for Brave Lupus in a 22-19 defeat by the Wild Knights on the opening day of the 2022-23 campaign. He has lost just four times since, featuring in 13 wins and a draw from 14 appearances in his second season.

Hooker – Mamoru Harada (Toshiba Brave Lupus Tokyo)

It has taken Mamoru Harada just two full seasons to cement himself with both Brave Lupus and Japan, finishing a stellar year with both a title and as the Brave Blossoms' starting hooker. The dynamic 25-year-old has missed just two matches in the competition's last two editions, having appeared just twice in the League's first year. It reflected his rising status in the Japanese game that he captained Brave Lupus, despite veteran Brave Blossoms skipper Michael Leitch being at the same club.



Mamoru Harada (Toshiba Brave Lupus Tokyo)

Tighthead Prop – Opeti Helu (Kubota Spears Funabashi Tokyo-Bay)

Selected for the third consecutive season, not even an early run of injury, which saw him sidelined for eight weeks, could keep Opeti Helu out of the Best Fifteen, such was the level he maintained once he returned. The Australian-educated 26-year-old has been a great acquisition for the Spears: he had not missed a match in Japan Rugby League One prior to the competition's third season, playing 38-straight before the run was finally ended. His influence is such that while the defending champions lost seven matches during a difficult campaign, only two of these occurred during the eight occasions on which Helu featured.

Lock – Warner Dearnis (Toshiba Brave Lupus Tokyo)

Included as a 20-year-old two seasons ago, Warner Dearnis made it three straight Best Fifteen selections after another dominant campaign where he was one of the spearheads of his side's title-winning run. Despite throwing his body around with gay abandon, the New Zealand-born second rower was a constant presence in the Brave Lupus pack, missing just one match in his best season yet.

Lock – Lood de Jager (Saitama Wild Knights)

Despite having to wait until the fifth weekend to return, after six months on the sidelines due to injury, Lood de Jager quickly made his presence felt, scoring two tries on return while adding further grunt to the Saitama's already dominant forward pack. Such was the big South Africans' influence, it was no coincidence that his loss due to a shoulder injury midway through the final evened up the forward exchanges, especially in the lineout where the Wild Knights really struggled in his absence.

Flanker – Shannon Frizell (Toshiba Brave Lupus Tokyo)

After arriving at Brave Lupus with a reputation as a hard nut, it took Frizell just three weeks to show he was more than that, scoring five tries, which included a remarkable four in the Christmas Eve demolition of Kobelco Kobe Steelers. The All Black backrower missed just one game of his maiden season, proving a rallying point for a Brave Lupus pack which grew in confidence as the season progressed.

Flanker – Ardie Savea (Kobelco Kobe Steelers)

Reigning World Rugby Player of the Year, Ardie Savea was always going to have a big impact on League One, and the 31-year-old duly delivered. While the All Black star couldn't get his side to the semi-finals, Kobe's climb from ninth to fifth was one of the most notable moves on the rankings. Savea played a big role in that, missing just one match, while contributing eight tries, half of which were scored against the side led by his former New Zealand boss, Steve Hansen's Toyota Verblitz.



Ardie Savea (Kobelco Kobe Steelers)

Backrower – Jack Cornelsen (Saitama Wild Knights)

Equally effective in the second row, as well as at the back of the scrum, Australian-born Cornelsen provided another excellent year's service for Saitama, despite the minor premier's eventual defeat in the championship game. Capped by Japan on 20 occasions, Cornelsen rarely gets injured, despite being ever present in the contact exchanges where the physicality is at its toughest. The only match he missed during the last campaign came when the entire first choice XV was rested, and he starts the League's fourth edition just two short of a half century of appearances.

Scrumhalf – Taiki Koyama (Saitama Wild Knights)

One of the pivots around whom the almost invincible Wild Knights machine operates, Koyama scored a try in the final and added to his two caps for the Brave Blossoms after another impeccable campaign where he featured 18 times. This included another try during the Wild Knights' dominant win over New Zealand's Chiefs in The Cross Border Rugby. The 29-year-old's rise after starting off his career as the understudy to retiring veteran Keisuke Uchida ensures that the Saitama number nine jersey remains in good hands.

Flyhalf – Richie Mo'unga (Toshiba Brave Lupus Tokyo)

The excitement when it was announced that Richie Mo'unga was headed to League One went far beyond the team he was joining, and the accomplished All Black flyhalf didn't disappoint the fans, ending as the Division One MVP. A central figure for Brave Lupus as the club won its first title in over a decade, the seven-time Crusaders champion collected 145 points from 13 outings, although the leadership and direction he provided was arguably even more important, especially in the final where his assured hand helped his side fend off a stirring finish by the star-powered Wild Knights. Mo'unga arrived in Japan a proven winner. By the time he had finished his first season's body of work, Brave Lupus were winners too.

Inside Centre – Damian de Allende (Saitama Wild Knights)

Widely regarded as one of the best midfielders in the world, Damian de Allende keeps showing why, underlining his class on a weekly basis for Saitama. The two-time Rugby World Cup-winner made the Best Fifteen again in combination with his midfield partner Dylan Riley after a campaign where he helped the Wild Knights look unstoppable up until the season's final few minutes. Went on to become a key figure for the Springboks as South Africa annexed the Rugby Championship for the first time in four seasons.

Outside Centre – Dylan Riley (Saitama Wild Knights)

A four-time Best Fifteen selection, Riley demanded inclusion again on the back of another dominant season in the Wild Knights midfield, combining again with his fellow selection, de Allende. After heading the try-scoring rankings in the maiden edition of the league, the South African-born centre was in amongst it again, finishing just one short of the top-of-the-table.

Wing – Malo Tuitama (Shizuoka BlueRevs)

Finishing as top try-scorer, and a Brave Blossoms representative after a try-scoring international debut in the Pacific Nations Cup, capped a career-defining season for Tuitama, whose deeds belied his position as part of a mid-table team. The 28-year-old was such an expert finisher on the Blue Revs flank, he wound up scoring 20 percent of his team's tries.

Wing – Seiya Ozaki (Tokyo Sungoliath)

While he was edged out by Tuitama as the competition's leading try-scorer, Ozaki wasn't far off claiming that ranking for a second straight season, with his 14 tries helping beat a strong field to gain selection in the Best Fifteen back-to-back. The 28-year-old opened the competition with a hat-trick and scored in each of Sungoliath's final six regular season games to get his side over the line into the semi-finals.

Fullback – Isaac Lucas (BlackRams Tokyo)

The linchpin of a team that battled for much of the season, the statistics show the quality of Isaac Lucas's performance, with the Black Rams fullback rating amongst the highest in many of the key statistical metrics players are measured on. Courageous under the high ball, and strong in contact, the Australian-born fullback was never afraid to take on opposing defensive lines, finishing the regular season as one of the competition's leading metre eaters.

Individual Performance Awards

Division One

Most Valuable Player – Richie Mo'unga (Toshiba Brave Lupus Tokyo)

Rookie of the Year – Mikiya Takamoto (Tokyo Sungoliath)

Top Point-scorer – Bryn Gatland (Kobelco Kobe Steelers)

Top Try-scorer – Malo Tuitama (Shizuoka BlueRevs)

Best kicker – Bryn Gatland (Kobelco Kobe Steelers)

Most Line-breaks – Seiya Ozaki (Tokyo Sungoliath)

Most Tackles – Pieter 'Lappies' Labuschagne (Kubota Spears Funabashi Tokyo-Bay)

Outstanding Coach – Todd Blackadder (Toshiba Brave Lupus Tokyo)



Todd Blackadder (Toshiba Brave Lupus Tokyo)

Division Two & Three

Most Valuable Player (Division Two) – Kai Ishii (Urayasu D-Rocks)

Most Valuable Player (Division Three) – Conrad van Wyk (Shimizu Koto Blue Sharks)

Outstanding Head Coach (Division Two) – Johann Ackerman (Urayasu D-Rocks)

Outstanding Head Coach (Division Three) – Yuji Sonoda (Hino Red Dolphins)

Other Categories

Referee of the Year – Katsuki Furuse

Lifetime Achievement Awards – Hiroshi Yamashita (Kobelco Kobe Steelers), Shota Horie (Saitama Wild Knights), Fumiaki Tanaka (Green Rockets Tokatsu)

Player's Choice Awards

Players voted on a separate category of awards, recognising excellence amongst their colleagues. 509 players across the three divisions participated in the voting process.

Player of the Season (Division One) – Richie Mo'unga (Toshiba Brave Lupus Tokyo)

Player of the Season (Division Two) – Lemeki Lomano Lava (Green Rockets Tokatsu)

Player of the Season (Division Three) – Conrad van Wyk (Shimizu Koto Blue Sharks)

Golden Shoulder (Division One) – Richard Goh Jones (Shizuoka BlueRevs)

Golden Shoulders (Division Two) – Daisuke Musha (Nippon Steel Kamaishi Seawaves)

Golden Shoulder (Division Three) – Kota Moriyama (Chugoku Electric Power Red Regullions)

Social Contribution (in the community) Award: Shizuoka BlueRevs, Hino Red Dolphins



Richard Goh Jones (Shizuoka BlueRevs)

DIVISION 1

Conference A



URAYASU D-Rocks
KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS
SHIZUOKA BlueRevs
TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO
Mitsubishi Heavy Industries
Sagamihara Dynaboars
YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES

URAYASU D-Rocks



Where:

Befitting its name, Urayasu D-Rocks are based in Urayasu City, which is in the Chiba prefecture of Tokyo, breasting Tokyo Bay. Given the star-studded nature of the club's playing roster, it's perhaps appropriate that Urayasu City also features Tokyo Disneyland as one of its star tourist attractions.

What's in a name:

With the host town of Urayasu at its' head, the 'D' in 'D-Rocks' represents the characteristics Dynamic, Dream, and Delight (joy) which are the ambitions that drive the team. Rocks contains the meaning of fighting with a strong will in a monolith. Rock also has the meaning of moving and surprising people.

Brave Blossoms squad members:

Shuhei Takeuchi, Samisoni Tua, Ren Iinuma

Non-Japanese test representatives:

Jasper Wiese (South Africa), Israel Folau (Australia, Tonga), Samu Kerevi (Australia)

The coach:

A member of the foundation Urayasu squad, having earlier started his career in Japan with the Shining Arcs, 38-year-old Greig Laidlaw steps up to the role as head coach after having begun his coaching journey last term as an assistant to Johan Ackermann. Laidlaw left his homeland for Japan four years ago after a career which saw him appear on 76 occasions for Scotland – a record 39 of them as captain – as well as touring with the British & Irish Lions and captaining his club Edinburgh to a semi-final of the European Cup. The youngest head coach in Division One, the Scot will be looking to consolidate Urayasu's standing by steering clear of the end-of-season relegation dogfight.

The coaching advisor:

While he has handed over the day-to-day running of the team to Laidlaw, Johan Ackermann remains an advisor to the club after finally cracking a personal milestone when he guided D-Rocks into the top tier at his second attempt. Twice the bridesmaid in Super Rugby with the Johannesburg-based Lions (2016, 2017), Johan Ackermann also coached in the Premiership with Gloucester (2017-2020). His first role in Japan was with the NTT Docomo (Osaka) Red Hurricanes, but the combining of that team's resources with the company's other rugby entity, NTT Communications Shining Arcs, in the Sports X operation, saw the South African appointed to coach the new enterprise for its first two seasons. During a playing career that spanned 13 years, Ackermann was the oldest ever Springbok at 37, when the veteran loose forward made an appearance against the Barbarians in 2007.

The main man:

The D-Rocks are armed with plenty of star power, but none can shine more brightly than Israel Folau, but they need to keep him on the field. Folau took Japan by storm when he arrived in time for the final Top League, thriving even as the Shining Arcs were relegated, by scoring 10 tries on debut. Such has been the impact of injury on the now 35-year-old's career in the time since, he has appeared just 22 times across the three seasons of Japan Rugby League One. This includes only two last term. With D-Rocks having gone up a grade, the club will need an increased output from the record holder for tries in the combined Super Rugby competition (when it included South African teams). Folau totalled 60 tries for the Waratahs from 96 appearances, and 37 tries in 73 tests for the Wallabies, and announced his arrival in Japan with two tries on debut against the Kobelco Kobe Steelers. Just two players – the Wild Knights' Dylan Riley and the Steelers' Rakuhei Yamashita – outsourced Folau in his debut season.

Local hero:

A regular fixture for the club since its creation, winger Kai Ishii has been a try-scoring banker, picking up 15 from 22 appearances in the first two seasons,



including nine last term when he finished as the leading try-scorer for the grade. A product of Tokai University, the 31-year-old's scoring prowess proved more than useful compensation for Folau's limited involvement in Urayasu's opening two campaigns.

Ins & outs:

Promotion to Division One, and the higher standard of play, has led to a major turnover at Urayasu, with 18 players and eight staff departing in a major recalibration of the personnel. Aside from the change in the coaching box, the arrival of the barnstorming South African backrower Jasper Wiese has necessitated the departure of the long-serving ex-Wallaby Liam Gill, with the Springbok taking up the club's third spot for foreign test players. As well as sharing in South Africa's win in this year's Rugby Championship, Wiese ended his final season in England's Premiership having made 16 percent of the total ball carries by Leicester Tigers players in the competition, the most by any individual for a team in the league. His go-forward is going to be a major asset against the stronger Division One forward packs. Ex-Brave Blossom forwards, second rower Uwe Helu and utility forward Hendrick Tui, have arrived from Spears Funabashi Tokyo Bay and Tokyo Sungoliath respectively, while well-travelled midfielder Luteru Laulala has joined from Yokohama Eagles. D-Rocks have secured two interesting acquisitions from the Southern Hemisphere with the Brisbane-born second rower Zephaniah Tuinona coming via Division Three champions Red Dolphins. Former Waikato midfielder Tana Tuhalakalana is a newcomer to Japan after having previously played in New Zealand's national

provincial championship. Aside from Gill, the other profile departures are South African hooker Franco Marais, utility backrower Tyler Paul and winger Larry Sulunga.

Friends with benefits:

Aware of the global ambitions of Japan Rugby League One, D-Rocks were proactive from their birth, locking in relations with clubs from around the world. The club-initiated partnerships with French club Lyon, Hyundai Globals from South Korea, Major League Rugby's Seattle Seawolves (USA) and the Western Force from Super Rugby. The relationship with Seattle helped facilitate the arrival of Irish-born Seawolves halfback Karl Keane, who has joined for the new season. The Australians have also capitalised on the friendship, with the Force holding pre-season training camps and friendly games against the D-Rocks at Urayasu Park.

Points, points, points:

If one feature above all others has symbolised Urayasu's first two years, it can be summed up in six words: points. Last season's promotion campaign saw D-Rocks run up an impressive 526 points from their

14 matches, at an average of 37.5 a game. As eye-catching as this body of work was, it was overshadowed by the return in year one, when the new team ran riot, averaging 49 points per outing, before surprisingly folding in The Replacement Battle where they were restricted to just 35 across 160 minutes of play. Although D-Rocks enter Division One under no illusion as to the size of the task ahead, their struggles against Hanazono Liners on the maiden voyage – their first exposure to a top-tier opponent – should serve as a handy reminder as they start their new journey.

Ross the boss:

A new acquisition in the coaching department, ex-All Blacks second rower Isaac Ross won't need too much showing around, having previously played for D-Rocks' forerunner, the Shining Arcs. The son of an All Black, Ross played eight matches for New Zealand himself, having made his name in Super Rugby where he debuted for the Crusaders under Saitama coach Robbie Deans, before moving on to the Highlanders and then the Chiefs. As well as his earlier stint in Japan, Ross also brings experience from the United States to his new post, having occupied player/coaching roles at each of Austin Gilgronis and San Diego Legion in Major League Rugby.

The special K:

While his fellow former Wallaby Folau was barely sighted, D-Rocks certainly received value for money from last term's big name signing Samu Kerevi. Australia's vice-captain from the 2019 Rugby World Cup in Japan missed just one match in his debut season for Urayasu after having ended a long association with Tokyo Sungoliath. The 30-year-old arrived on the back of Australia's disappointing showing at the 2023 Rugby World Cup but brought no baggage from the experience, quickly establishing himself as a key component as D-Rocks strolled to the Division Two title for the second straight season, before gaining revenge on Hanazono Liners in The Replacement Battle. The latter success was especially sweet with Kerevi's former Wallaby teammates Will Genia and Quade Cooper featuring for Hanazono.



Samu Kerevi

History:

NTT Communications, the Japanese telco giant and naming rights sponsor of Japan Rugby League One, previously operated two teams within domestic competition, with the Shining Arcs and the Red Hurricanes both playing under the NTT banner. Ironically the relegation of both teams from Division One after the maiden Japan Rugby League One season coincided with the company's decision to create a parent rugby business and sports company known as NTT Sports X, under whose umbrella one professional rugby team would operate. This resulted in the professional arms of the Shining Arcs and Red Hurricanes coming together as the re-branded Urayasu D-Rocks. The decision saw the Shining Arcs brand, which had featured on the Japanese landscape for 15 years, shelved, while the NTT Docomo Red Hurricanes Osaka continued as a semi-professional-based team in Division Three of Japan Rugby League One. Ironically, the Red Hurricanes won promotion in their first season, stepping up to Division Two where they twice lost to D-Rocks in the competition's newest 'derby'.

Last year:

Sports X president Masahiro Shimooko made it clear at the club's launch two years ago that the company's ambition is to see D-Rocks crowned as Japan Rugby League One champion in five years or sooner. While it took a year longer than anticipated, D-Rocks achieved the first part of its mission by gaining

entry to Division One at the second attempt, despite suffering the club's first defeat in the grade against Green Rockets Tokatsu on the opening day of the season. It was the last. Thirteen wins followed, the last two of which saw Urayasu avenge last year's defeat by Hanazono Liners in The Replacement Battle, winning both legs of a hotly contested series. Taking a nine-point advantage to Osaka following a 21-12 success in the home leg, D-Rocks appeared in trouble when the advantage was erased after 50 minutes of the return bout, with Hanazono working to a 20-8 lead, and a three-point buffer in the series. Not to be denied, Urayasu rallied to outscore the Division One side 27-10 in the final half-hour of the season, claiming a meritorious 35-30 victory and the accompanying promotion.

What to expect: The league might only be three seasons old, but if it has proved one thing, it's that retaining Division One status is a lot more difficult than achieving it. D-Rocks discovered that when they failed to unseat Hanazono in their maiden season, and the large post-promotion turnover at the club indicates a recognition that what's been before will not be good enough. The arrival of Wiese is an intriguing one, adding a ruthless edge to the pack, but it's hard to go past the involvement (or lack of) by Folau as the key question. With the regular presence of their star strike man, freshman coach Laidlaw stands a good chance of keeping the newcomers up. If Folau's body continues to betray him, all bets are off.



**URAYASU D-Rocks v HANAZONO KINTETSU LINERS
in The Replacement Battle**

KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS



Where:

Located on the southern side of Japan's main island, Honshu, the Steelers' home is the country's seventh largest city, and the third largest to host a major port, at the northern end of Osaka Bay. Kobe, which is 30km west of Osaka, is best known as the home of global steel giant Kobe Steel Group and is also the location of the sacred Ikuta Shrine, which has been a centre-point of the city's history. In more recent times, Kobe was associated with the tragic 1995 earthquake which inflicted major damage. According to the final estimates in 2005, 6,434 people were killed, while 300,000 were left homeless. Around 200,000 buildings and 120 of the 150 quays (wharfs built parallel to the shoreline) were destroyed.

What's in a name:

Given they are based in a city synonymous with the steel industry, the Steelers was the obvious choice for its' rugby team. The latest iteration combines the team's three main pillars: Kobe Steel Group as the main corporate supporter, Kobe as the town in which the team is based, as well as the Steelers nickname, which has long been identified with the club.

Brave Blossoms squad members

Seungsin Lee, Amanaki Saumaki, Kenta Matsuoka, Tiennan Costley, Junta Hamano

Non-Japanese test representatives:

Ngane Laumape (New Zealand), Brodie Retallick (New Zealand), George Turner (Scotland)

The head coach:

A two-time title-winning coach with the

Chiefs in Super Rugby, ex-Wallabies coach Dave Rennie made an encouraging start in his maiden season in League One, as he bids to return the 2018 champions Kobelco Kobe Steelers to the championship promised land. The Steelers won nine matches during Rennie's first season at the helm, four more than two years' ago when they finished ninth, and two more than in the inaugural edition of the competition in 2021, where Kobe came home seventh. Their improvement is not surprising given the pedigree of their coach who, despite an unsatisfying three years with the Australian national team, knows how to build a strong culture in (and around) a team, and even more importantly, maintain it; something that Rennie is not the only outstanding leader to have found a difficult assignment with the Wallabies. The hallmark of Rennie's Chiefs sides was strong player leadership. The coach is prepared to trust his players while providing the necessary guidance to give them the confidence to make the big decisions on the field. This is an approach that already appears to be bearing fruit for Kobe.

The main man:

A fine servant for the Steelers, Tongan-born Amanaki Saumaki quickly made himself a key figure in the Kobe forward pack after arriving in time for the inaugural Japan Rugby League One, following four

frustrating years at the Yokohama Eagles. The 27-year-old managed just seven appearances either side of the Covid shutdown at Canon (as the club was then known), but such was the level of impact at his new home that he soon became a forward leader, while also being recognised by selection for the Brave Blossoms. While injury has occasionally been a hindrance, the Tongan-born juggernaut has scored 14 tries in 39 appearances since joining Kobe, losing nothing in comparison last season with his backrow colleague, World Rugby Player of the Year Ardie Savea. With the All Black having returned to New Zealand, the challenge for Saumaki is to build on that performance to spearhead a Kobe side with title aspirations.

Local hero:

Widely touted since his debut for the club in 2021, 23-year-old Seungsin Lee is living up to the initial promise he showed when introduced to the team as a 19-year-old in the final Top League. The youngster played five matches in his maiden season, all of which the Steelers won, setting him up for a regular spot in the starting XV as League One got under way. Heading into his fifth campaign for Kobe, Lee has played 46 times, with his influence having grown to the extent that he will co-captain the side this term, alongside All Black second rower Brodie Retallick. While not always the first choice goalkicker, handing over the reins to Bryn Gatland when the ex-Super Rugby player joined, Lee has still proved a handy second string, collecting 230 points to date. His potential was recognised by Brave Blossoms coach Jamie Joseph, who gave Lee a test debut in 2022 before selecting him for the Rugby World Cup a year later. Lee retained his status as a test regular when Eddie Jones succeeded Joseph, scoring 20 points during Japan's 55-28 win over Canada in the inaugural Pacific Nations Cup. While born in Japan, Lee hails from a Korean family, and is one of the highest profile players with Republic of Korea connections in the Japanese league. Lee's club and test teammate, Jiwon Cu is another, with the front rower having been born in Seoul.

Ins & outs:



Dave Rennie

The arrival of 40-cap hooker George Turner headlines the Steelers' off-season business, with the Scotsman taking up the position in the foreign international quota that was vacated by Savea. Winger Inoke Burua is another exciting addition, with the former Fijian age-grade representative having run in 20 tries in the last two seasons for Yokohama, helping the Eagles to back-to-back semi-finals. The 25-year-old finished third on the try-scoring standings two seasons ago, picking up 13 tries from 15 appearances. Japan Sevens representative and utility forward Sosefo Fakatava is another pick up from Yokohama. Prop Kauvaka Kaivelata has come on board after two years with the (Waikato) Chiefs as well as Counties Manukau in New Zealand's national provincial championship. New Zealand-born but of Tongan heritage, the 22-year-old schooled at the same institution, south Auckland's Wesley College, that produced the game's most famous player of Tongan origin, All Black superstar Jonah Lomu. New forward coach Dan McFarland has replaced the ex-head coach Nick Holten, who has switched to Shuttles Aichi. A former England international, McFarland has joined after six years as head coach of Ulster in Northern Ireland.

A not so Costley gamble:

Australian-born but New Zealand raised,

Tiennan Costley has proved a great get, both for Kobe, and for Japan, after taking a punt and joining IPU International Pacific University's rugby programme five years ago. The 24-year-old backrower, who was schooled at Auckland's Westlake High School, chose Japan after missing out on a place in the prestigious Canterbury Academy in New Zealand, despite having shown prowess as a youngster. Joining a less prominent university programme, Costley thrived, helping the Okayama-based facility to a maiden appearance in the nationwide university championships. A contract with the Steelers followed, debuting towards the back end of the second edition of League One, and ending his maiden season with five appearances. Lapping up the opportunity to play alongside – and learn – from an All Black backrower, Costley didn't miss a match last term, with the level of his development playing alongside Savea subsequently earning him selection for the Brave Blossoms this year.

From Scotland with love:

The 'lowland' influence at Kobe continues to grow, with Turner the latest Glaswegian to renew an association with Rennie, from when the ex-Chiefs boss was head coach of Glasgow. Turner arrives off the back of the Glasgow Warriors' historic success in the United Rugby Championship where they



Inoke Burua

beat the Bulls in a memorable final, played at altitude in the South Africans' high veldt fortress, Pretoria's Loftus Versfeld. The 34-year-old has joined countryman Mike Blair, who hooked up with Rennie for the second time last season, having previously assisted the New Zealander at Glasgow. Blair subsequently became head coach at Edinburgh before resigning from that role after two seasons to sign up to assist at Kobe. Blair played 85 tests for his homeland, leading in 14 of those games, which included a Calcutta Cup win over England at Twickenham. He attended three Rugby World Cups (2003, 2007 & 2011), and played for Brive in France, and Newcastle in the Premiership (England) before returning to Scotland to finish with a stint playing under Rennie at Glasgow. Rennie has surrounded himself with former Glasgow personnel, with strength and conditioning coach Phil Healey also making the move after being on the Kobe coaches' staff when he was in Scotland.

Son of a gun:

The Gatland name might be synonymous with ex-British & Irish Lions coach Warren, but the Wales coach could do with some players who can do a job similar in effectiveness as his 29-year-old son Bryn has done since joining Kobe from New Zealand. Bryn, who played for both the (Waikato) Chiefs and (Otago) Highlanders in Super Rugby, ran up 217 points in his maiden League One campaign, finishing as the competition's leading scorer after the regular season. One of several recruits with Chiefs' associations at the Steelers, Gatland played for the Hamilton-based side on 32 occasions, scoring 176 points.

Defence, defence, defence:

They might be named the Steelers, but Kobe's defence has been everything but in the last two seasons, with the side conceding 30 points or more on 20 occasions – nine last term – which makes it hard to win matches. While scoring points wasn't a problem last time, with only minor premiers Saitama scoring more tries and points than Kobe, until they can tidy up the other aspect of the game, a semi-final spot will continue to be elusive. The Steelers

haven't enjoyed playoff rugby since they won their last title in 2018 when defence was a major part of their season, holding Tokyo Sungoliath to just five points in a one-sided championship game that they won 55-5.

History:

The Rugby club was founded in 1928 and initially contested local business leagues in the Kansai province, later extending this participation to the emerging national business leagues. In 1962, the club joined the local all-adult Kansai leagues, but it had to wait until 1984 for its first success in the hotly contested competition, beating Toyota in the final. Kobe's first title was the start of a rise which saw the club become the most dominant power in the Japanese game. Between 1988 and 1994, Kobe won the Japan championship for seven straight years, winning a remarkable 71 domestic games in a row through this time. While the 1995 earthquake understandably pushed rugby onto the backburner, the Steelers regained their championship-winning touch in 1999 and 2000 when the club took out its eighth and ninth Japan titles. Kobe was the inaugural winner of the Top League when it kicked off in 2003, edging the NEC Green Rockets in the final. The club did not win it again until the 2018-19 season when the side featured All Blacks Dan Carter and Andy Ellis, who captained the team, and had Wayne Smith as its Director of Rugby.

Last year:

Despite opening with contrasting wins over Mie Heat (80-15) and Shizuoka Blue Revs (30-26), the Steelers lost momentum after they suffered three straight defeats that pushed them outside of the top four for the rest of the season. Two of those losses were to eventual semi-finalists Brave Lupus Tokyo and Tokyo Sungoliath, but it was probably the third that proved the costliest, when Spears Funabashi Tokyo Bay scored in the last minute to steal a 38-34 win. The loss was the first of two Kobe suffered against the former champions, who finished one place below them on the ladder, with the points dropped in those matches proving the difference between a narrow miss and climbing above Yokohama to make the semi-finals. Ironically the Steelers beat the



KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS v Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY

Eagles 31-27 when the two sides met during qualifying. Kobe's fifth place finish was still a major improvement on the previous season's ninth, providing the 2018 champions with the springboard to mount a serious challenge this time around.

KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS v Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY

What to expect:
The rebuild is well and truly underway at the

2018 champions, and there were plenty of promising signs for coach Dave Rennie to digest as he prepares for his second season at the helm. Maintaining consistency is the next step, as is closing out the tight finishes, with both proving an Achilles heel as the Steelers fell a maximum point win short of the playoffs last time. On paper, Kobe have few weaknesses, and while Savea won't be back this season, even without the star All Black they still appear well placed to give the playoffs, if not the title, a shake.

SHIZUOKA BlueRevs



Where:

Based in the prefecture of Shizuoka, from which the team takes its name, the BlueRevs' home is approximately 140 kilometres (90 miles) south of Tokyo, sitting in the southern shadow of the iconic Mt Fuji (Tokyo is on the northern side of the mountain). The city is a haven for lovers of outdoor activities as it is surrounded by lakes, mountains, rivers, and parks, as well as the famed beaches of the Izu Peninsula.

What's in a name:

Formerly known as Yamaha Jublio, the team was rebranded as the Shizuoka BlueRevs for the start of Japan Rugby League One, adopting the name of their home city in line with the league's policy to align teams with their geographic regions. The blue maintains the club's primary colour from the Yamaha era, while the Revs refers to the team's

'mission' and is also in part associated with the club's automotive history, as to 'rev up' means to increase and accelerate engine speed; a goal to which the BlueRevs aspire on the field of play.

Brave Blossoms Squad Members:

Takayoshi Mohara, Eishin Kuwano, Malo Tuitama

Non-Japanese test Representatives:

Kwagga Smith (South Africa), Charles Piutau (Tonga)

The head coach:

Second-season coach Yuichiro Fujii brought an impressive CV to his new role in Shizuoka. The former outside centre began his coaching career in Japan's university system at Meijo University. He entered Top League in 2005 when he took over

at Munakata Sanix Blues. In more recent times, Fujii acted as general manager of the Sunwolves, before presiding over the fortunes of the Japanese national squad as the team's director. Under his charge, and the day-to-day stewardship of Jamie Joseph, Japan became the first Asian side to qualify for the quarterfinals during its home Rugby World Cup in 2019, beating both Ireland and Scotland along the way. The 55-year-old, whose duties with Japan ended after the 2023 tournament in France, brought with him the national team's former assistant coach Shin Hasegawa.

The main man:

While injuries to star players put paid to the semi-final hopes of several teams, arguably the biggest injury blow was landed on Shizuoka, who lost skipper and inspiration Kwagga Smith five games into the season. The all-action 31-year-old, who has represented his country at both Sevens and 15s, was cut down by adductor tendon injury during the 29-25 loss to Tokyo Sungoliath. After opening with two losses, the BlueRevs were just starting to get on a roll, having won their next two before they lost their star man. They were even ahead 15-5 against Sungoliath, when their Springbok backrower left the field. Without their 2023 Rugby World Cup winner, Shizuoka fell to defeat, with the result a pointer of what was to come. The BlueRevs were able to win on just four further occasions as they dropped out of the semi-final race, eventually finishing eighth. The size of the hole Smith's absence left is highlighted by the enormity of his contribution since he joined the league.

The South African featured in the team of the Tournament in each of the first two editions of Japan Rugby League One, also winning the Player's Player title in the second competition, an award voted on by his peers. He was the leading try-scorer among forwards in the maiden Japan Rugby League One with nine, adding six more in season two. Although allowed just five matches last season, Smith still scored four tries, taking his career league tally to 19 from 27 appearances.

Local hero:

Eligible for each of Japan, New Zealand and his native Samoa, winger Malo Tuitama chose the Brave Blossoms after achieving almost God-like status with the BlueRevs faithful last term during a remarkable season where he scored 15 tries from as many matches. The effort quickly brought him onto the radar of incoming national coach Eddie Jones, who successfully convinced the 28-year-old to throw his lot in with Japan. Tuitama scored two or more tries on five occasions, with his scoring headlined by a hatrick against Sagami-hara Dynaboars in a chaotic game that the BlueRevs ultimately lost 53-45.

Centre of attention:

After starring in Europe as a fullback, former New Zealand and ex-Bristol star Charles Piutau found himself at centre for much of his debut season in Japan. Not that the 17-test ex-All Black seemed to mind. The 33-year-old was an ever present for the side, missing just one match, and scoring five tries. Schooled



Kwagga Smith

at the famed south Auckland school Wesley College, the institution that will forever be remembered for producing the legendary Jonah Lomu, Piutau represented New Zealand between 2013 and 2015, but was overlooked for the defending champions' 2015 Rugby World Cup, before taking his talents to Europe. Making his name in the west country with the Bears, he became one of the individual stars of the (England) Premiership, and finally achieved his dream of attending a Rugby World Cup after switching allegiance to the red of the Ikaile Tahi (Tongan Sea Eagle). This allowed him to attend the 2023 event representing the country of his family. Using his Tongan christian name Salesi while playing for Tonga, Piutau has followed the path of his older brother Siale. A former captain of Tonga, Siale also played for Bristol and spent four years at Shizuoka earlier in his career. The older of the Piutau brothers has most recently been involved as a player/coach with Shimizu Koto Blue Sharks.

Ins & outs:

The exit of the influential Bryn Hall is Shizuoka's biggest news on the departures front, with the New Zealander one of two scrumhalves to finish. Long time servant Yuki Yatomi has also hung up his boots, although the face of the 39-year-old will be seen around the clubhouse for some time yet. After beginning an amazing 17-year career with the then Yamaha club in 2007, the veteran went on to wear the blue jersey 151 times, while also playing 16 tests with the Brave Blossoms. With that depth of experience, his knowledge is sure to be of huge value in a new role as an assistant coach. Following their headline creating success last season, when they won the race to the in demand Piutau, the BlueRevs were quiet in the international transfer market this time, with their major off-season recruit being utility back Jack Timu, who joins from Otago in New Zealand's national provincial championship. While still on his trainer wheels as a professional, the 20-year-old is from good stock, being the son of the 26-test former All Black winger John. The newcomer fills the gap left by the Mumbai-born winger Keagen Faria who has left to join Green Rockets Tokatsu.

History:

Founded by 26 employees of the Shizuoka-based Yamaha Motor Company in 1982, the club initially started as a recreational activity for staff at the company, with the first matches played against fellow workers at the nearby Suzuki and Honda Motor companies. Within six years, Yamaha had a dedicated home ground at Okubo and was beginning to play an active role in the Kansai region, eventually joining the official Kansai League in 1991. Working its way up from the C-league in Kansai, the club reached the region's A-league in 1997, while also making its mark on national affairs when it reached the quarterfinals of the Japan championship two years later. Inclusion as a foundation member of the Top League followed when the competition was established in 2003. Yamaha finished third in the inaugural season, and runner up a year later. The club had to wait a decade to feature in the Top League playoffs again, but while the side was pipped in the final by Panasonic, it bounced back to win the Japan championship, which was played separately after the Top League. After beating Toshiba in the semi-finals, Yamaha overcame Suntory Sungoliath in the final to win the



Malo Tuitama

championship for the first time. Yamaha subsequently won 12 in a row during the 2016 edition of the Top League only to fall at the final hurdle when beaten by Suntory.

An international 'player':

While most Japanese clubs have 'made friends' with overseas counterparts, Shizuoka have put themselves out there more than most. The BlueRevs last year signed a formal partnership with Bay of Plenty from New Zealand's national provincial championship, while this year saw backrower Takuma Shoji and fullback Futo Yamaguchi gain valuable experience in the New Zealand game while playing club rugby for the Harbour Hawks in Dunedin's (Otago) premier competition. The club's biggest coup though, is its relationship with French giants Toulouse, which this year saw the BlueRevs hold a joint training camp with the current European champions for elementary and junior high school students.

Why does this keep happening?

If there is one question the Shizuoka coaching staff must ask of themselves, it's why the BlueRevs consistently end up on the wrong side of the close results. Last term saw the side add a further three defeats by 10 points or less to the book, taking their record to 14 of 48 games having ended in that fashion since League One began. 12 of those have been lost by the concession of points in the 75th minute or beyond, including January's disastrous

four-point defeat by Sungoliath which cost them the services of Smith for the rest of the campaign. Remarkably, the BlueRevs added two draws to their report card last season as well, following up from the second edition of the league where they also shared the spoils twice. Even more remarkably, their latest split decisions were only six days apart, and incredibly by the same score, with the 31-31 against the Spears followed by a 31-31 with Sungoliath. In each instance, Shizuoka only had themselves to blame, missing a conversion in the last act of the game against the Spears before conceding a late penalty goal to Sungoliath, when they were ahead 31-28. The Spears and Sungoliath joined the Dynaboars and Eagles, who each had fought out draws with the BlueRevs in the second season of League One.

Last year:

Although a drop into the Replacement Battle was never a threat, another frustrating season went by without semi-final rugby. By winning six matches, the BlueRevs did at least surpass their five-win returns from the first two editions of the league, even if they wound up eighth for the third year running. Once the two draws are thrown into the mix, the record shows that Shizuoka were unbeaten in half of their matches. As admirable as that achievement was given the loss of their South African talisman so early in the campaign, the BlueRevs still finished 16 points behind the fourth-placed Eagles. After three seasons of League One, the semi-finals are not getting much closer.

What to expect:

Given the BlueRevs continue to flatter to deceive, it's hard to get too excited about their prospects, even though Piutau will be better for his first experience of the club game in Japan, while Smith should return looking to make up for lost time. The departure of the ever-present Hall is a blow and won't help as Shizuoka looks for the winning formula which will take them up the point's table. Whatever they come up with is going to be tested, given they will have to face each of the Spears, D-Rocks, Steelers, Wild Knights and Sungoliath twice.



Charles Piutau

TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO



Where:

Brave Lupus Tokyo's home base of Fuchu is a regional commercial hub as well as a residential area for commuters working in the centre of the great metropolis. The club's parent company Toshiba is amongst the area's large-scale manufacturers, with NEC and Suntory other rugby-related corporate commercial giants in the prefecture. Fuchu also hosts the Tokyo (Funabashi) Racecourse, the home of thoroughbred horse racing in Japan.

What's in a name:

Initially known as Toshiba Fuchu, the name was amended to "Toshiba Fuchu Brave Lupus" in 2003, the year the Top League kicked off. Lupus means wolf in Greek so the team are named 'Brave Wolves', meaning to bravely play as collectively organized wolves, attacking with precision

and wildness that breaks the opponent's will to fight back. The name changed to Toshiba Brave Lupus in 2006, becoming Toshiba Brave Lupus Tokyo when regional/city names were adopted by most teams for the start of Japan Rugby League One in 2022, and now simply Brave Lupus Tokyo.

Brave Blossoms squad members:
Mamoru Harada, Warner Dearn, Jone Naikabula, Michael Leitch, Takuro Matsunaga

Non-Japanese test representatives:
Richie Mo'unga (New Zealand), Shannon Frizell (New Zealand)

The coach:
Last season's maiden professional rugby title represented the culmination of a coaching journey begun in 2006 when

Todd Blackadder took over as boss of the Tasman province in New Zealand's national provincial championship. The former All Black captain graduated to Super Rugby in 2009 succeeding the coach he later beat to claim his first career title, Saitama Wild Knights coach Robbie Deans. Blackadder presided over the Crusaders – a team he had represented for six years as a player – for nine seasons, making finals in 2011 and 2014. The first of those was arguably Super Rugby's most remarkable campaign, after the team was denied a single match at their Christchurch base due to the impact of that year's earthquake which did irreparable damage to their home ground in the city. Blackadder moved to the west country in England at the end of his Crusaders' stint, taking Bath to sixth placed finishes in each of his two seasons. The famous club fell away dramatically following his departure, finishing last twice, before the recent renaissance that took them to last season's final. Last term was Blackadder's fifth at Fuchu, having steadily improved the fortunes of Brave Lupus, who made the semi-finals in his third season. This was the first time the club had featured in the playoffs since it finished runners up in the 2015-16 competition, while last season's title was the first Brave Lupus had won since the 2009-10 campaign. As a player, Blackadder was All Black captain

in 2000, after leading the Crusaders to a hatrick of Super 12 titles in 1998, 1999 and 2000. He later played in Scotland for Edinburgh. His son Ethan is a current All Black and plays with the Crusaders as his father did.

The main man:

The arrival of All Black flyhalf Richie Mo'unga always had the potential to be a game-changer, and so it proved as Brave Lupus advanced from the status of semi-final contenders to the title, Champions of Japan. Perhaps even more important than the 145 points the New Zealander scored from 15 appearances, Mo'unga brought with him a winning mentality which had seen the 30-year-old win seven Super Rugby titles with the Crusaders as well as playing a leading hand in notable All Black test victories over South Africa at Ellis Park, and against the number one ranked Ireland in the quarterfinal of the 2023 Rugby World Cup. The two-time Rugby World Cup attendee gathered 464 points from his 56 tests, as well as setting numerous records from 109 matches with the Crusaders, where All Black legend Dan Carter (1708) is the only player to have exceeded his tally of 1227 points.

Local Hero:

Widely touted as a Brave Blossoms captain



Mamoru Harada

in the making, hooker Mamoru Harada typifies his team's steady rise, having been a regular presence in the Brave Lupus front row since the advent of League One three seasons ago. Such is Harada's development, and his importance to the side, he was faced with two long-term Brave Blossoms hookers in the final – the Wild Knights' Atsushi Sakate and Shota Horie – and was trusted to combat the pair (who played 40 minutes each) for all but the final 13 minutes of his side's historic success. The 25-year-old's progress was recognized by national coach Eddie Jones, who handed him a test debut against England in June.

In & outs:

The return to the title promised land has resulted in the retirement of several long-term servants, led by second rower Kyosuke Kajikawa who has called it a day after 14 years of service at the club in a career that began in 2010. Three other departees had served nine years or more, among a total of nine players who have left. The highest profile 'name' to have departed is new Brave Blossoms international Nicholas McCurran. The New Zealand-born midfielder has switched to Verblitz.

Sizzling Frizy:

Prior to joining Brave Lupus last season, backrower Shannon Frizell wasn't noted for his try-scoring. The 30-year-old had scored eight tries in 33 tests for the All Blacks, and 19 in 68 games for the (Otago) Highlanders in Super Rugby. A bountiful Christmas Eve against Kobelco Kobe Steelers, where he presented his teammates with four five-point 'presents', changed all of that. By the time the campaign ended on the victory dais at the National Stadium five months later, Frizell had scored nine in the regular season alongside a try in the semi-final victory over Tokyo Sungoliath. This tied for third among forward try-scorers in the competition, alongside ex-England backrower Nathan Hughes. A product of Tasman in New Zealand's national provincial championship, Frizell debuted in Super Rugby for the Highlanders in 2018 and played his first test later that same year. In-and-out of the side over the next four years, he finally established himself as a first choice All Black in 2022 when he featured in the final eight

tests of that season, and the first three of 2023 before resting and injury brought that sequence to a halt. Shannon is one of two prominent rugby players in his family, with elder brother Tyson a long-time performer for Newcastle Knights in Australia's national rugby league (NRL) competition, and Tonga on the international stage.

Warner's world:

Few young players have made their mark on the Japanese club scene more quickly than Warner Dearn. Arriving in Japan in 2016, when his father Grant took up a strength and conditioning role at Green Rockets Tokatsu, Dearn completed his education at Ryukeidai Kashiwa High School in the Chiba prefecture, home of the Green Rockets. His promise was spied by Brave Lupus, who beat Green Rockets to his services, handing the 18-year-old a contract in his first year out of school. Strongly backed by Blackadder, Dearn made 15 appearances in his maiden season, which included two games in the playoffs. Such was the level of his performance; he was then selected by Japan, quickly establishing himself as one of the first names on the team sheet. Year two of his international career saw Dearn feature in all four of Japan's matches at the Rugby World Cup, scoring a try in the win over Chile.

Next level Naikabula:

In a season where several of the Brave Lupus cast took their games to the next level, winger Jone Naikabula rivalled Mo'unga as the key point of difference and was an uncontested man of the match in the final. While injury limited the Fijian-born flyer's involvement to nine matches, he scored nine tries in those, including arguably the two most important of the club's history (as well as making the team's third), during the dramatic four-point victory over the Wild Knights at the National Stadium. The 30-year-old, who attended Auckland's famed Kelston Boys' High School, as well as Setsunan University in Japan, made the Brave Blossoms squad for last year's Rugby World Cup, scoring a try during the win over Chile. Naikabula has contributed 53 tries in 59 matches since his arrival at Brave Lupus six seasons ago.



Richie Mo'unga

History:

The club was founded in 1948. After playing in the various local competitions, Toshiba quickly became a prominent player once national leagues were established, first winning the Japan Rugby Championship in 1996. Further titles were achieved in 1997 and 1998. The club's prominence continued when the Top League kicked off in 2003, breaking through for its first title in 2005-2006. The maiden championship began a stranglehold Toshiba enjoyed over its Top League rivals through five consecutive titles, the last of which was achieved in the 2009-2010 season. After some more difficult years in recent times, Brave Lupus showed signs of a resurgence in 2020 when Blackadder arrived, winning four of its six matches before the competition was cancelled due to the impact of Covid 19. After a step back in 2021, Brave Lupus was the most improved side in the maiden Japan Rugby League One, winning 11 matches to reach the semi-finals. Brave Lupus had finished 9th, 6th, 11th, and 9th in the previous four completed Top League seasons (2015, 2016, 2017, 2018) prior to its return to the playoffs. Blackadder's men had narrowly missed out on back-to-back semi-finals, when they finished fifth in the second edition of the new league, prior to

last season's title.

The captaincy connection:

The best-known Japanese players from Brave Lupus are both long-serving national captains: Hitoshi Ono, who earned 98 caps for the Brave Blossoms, played at the club for an incredible 19 years. While Michael Leitch can't match that record, the now 35-year-old did lead Japan at the 2015 and 2019 Rugby World Cups, attending his fourth tournament last year in France. Under Leitch's command, Japan caused one of the biggest upsets in Rugby World Cup history when it toppled South Africa in 2015, before becoming the first Asian nation to reach the tournament playoffs when the Brave Blossoms made the quarterfinals of their home World Cup four years later, beating Ireland and Scotland along the way. The Brave Lupus skipper, who has played over 100 league games in Japan, is suiting up for his 15th season in the league.

Last year:

The club's best season for 14 years, Brave Lupus made a statement on just the second weekend by beating Tokyo Sungoliath in a tight Fuchu derby. The win set the side on a path that would see just one defeat and a 40-40 draw with Kobe as blemishes on their 18-match campaign. The victory in round two

was the first of three Brave Lupus enjoyed against their Fuchu arch-rivals, with the season's only loss coming in their ninth outing when they fell to Saitama, a defeat that was avenged in the season finale. A thrilling finals series saw Brave Lupus twice hold their nerve, overcoming a halftime deficit to beat Sungoliath on the penultimate weekend, before coming from three points down after 70 minutes of the final to capture the title.

What to expect:

Defending the title is usually much harder than first winning it, as evidenced by the fact that the first three editions of Japan

Rugby League One have each ended with different champions. Brave Lupus undoubtedly have the weaponry to change that statistic, especially with the All Black stars Mo'unga and Frizell fully acclimatized to the requirements of Japan Rugby League One after their successful debut seasons. Blackadder also knows all about successful title defenses, as a three-time title-winning captain of the Crusaders. They will be wearing a target on their backs though, and with the margins in the semi-finals so slim – and others like Verblitz significantly strengthening – another compelling campaign awaits.



**TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO v
TOKYO SUNTORY SUNGOLIATH in the Fuchu Derby**

MITSUBISHI HEAVY INDUSTRIES SAGAMIHARA DYNABOARS



MITSUBISHI HEAVY INDUSTRIES SAGAMIHARA DYNABOARS

Where:

Based in Sagamihara City, in the Kanagawa Prefecture, the Dynaboars' home is the third most populous city in the prefecture after Yokohama and Kawasaki, and the fifth most populous suburb of the Greater Tokyo area.

What's in a name:

The Dynaboar name, which was bestowed on the team before its maiden Top League season in 2007, was determined out of 187 proposals from fans. The logo is a mix of human and animal characteristics, with the Dyna representing the active nature of man – and rugby players in particular – while the Boar represents the wild boar that roam the wilderness of Sagami, near where the team is based.

Brave Blossoms Squad Members:
Epineri Uluiviti

Non-Japanese test representatives:

Kurt Lee Arendse (South Africa), Jackson Hemopo (New Zealand), Curtis Rona (Australia)

The head coach:

Via Canterbury in New Zealand's national provincial championship, the Highlanders in Super Rugby, and Welsh club the Scarlets from the United Rugby Championship; Glenn Delaney took over from compatriot Greg Cooper two years ago to supervise the Dynaboars' return to Division One. While his maiden season was a tough ride, the New Zealander steered Sagamihara to safe waters, comfortably surviving in the Replacement Battle against Shuttles Aichi. Even though they only finished one place further up the table last term, the Dynaboars were still comfortably clear of the promotion/

relegation series. In winning six matches – two more than they had managed on their return to Division One 12 months earlier – the Dynaboars claimed ninth, 10 points ahead of the 10th-placed Black Rams on the log. Delaney, who was defence coach when Sagamihara won promotion in the maiden League One, guided Canterbury to a title in 2018 and supervised defence at the Highlanders for the following two years before replacing his All Black-bound compatriot Brad Mooar at the Parc y Scarlets stadium in Wales. With Covid-19 aborting the back end of Delaney's first year in charge, his one full season at the Scarlets saw a side in transitional mode finish 10th in the new expanded format which featured four entries from South Africa.

The main man:

It only took 80 minutes for English flyhalf James Grayson to show how important he was going to be to the Dynaboars' fortunes in the third season of League One. The newcomer was Sagamihara's match-winner on opening day, landing the 80th minute penalty goal that shot down Hanazono Liners 30-29, giving the home side exactly the start it needed in the quest to avoid a third straight appearance in the end-of-season Replacement Battle. Son of England flyhalf Paul, James had represented his

hometown at age-group level before taking the plunge and swapping Northampton for Sagamihara. Such was his impact in his maiden season, the 26-year-old finished fourth on the individual point's standings for the regular season, with his 148 from 15 games allowing him to finish above All Blacks, Richie Mo'unga (Brave Lupus) and Beauden Barrett (Verblitz) in the rankings. Grayson's total included a haul of 28, including two tries, against Shizuoka, as well as 21 in his final outing of the campaign against Hanazono.

Local hero:

In a squad of Japanese who largely fly under the radar, the arrival of Brave Blossoms training squad member Charlie Lawrence should further fire up fan interest in the local dynamic at the club. The 26-year-old midfielder, who was a member of Eddie Jones's first training squads, arrived after spending two years at Kobelco Kobe Steelers and four at Toyota Verblitz. Although born in Hong Kong, Lawrence is a former New Zealand age-grade and Sevens representative but is sure to have one eye on Brave Blossoms selection as he embarks on his journey in new surroundings.

Ins & outs:

While Springbok Kurt Lee Arendse and Lawrence lead the signings, the Dynaboars



James Grayson

have also picked up three front rowers to reinforce their stocks up front. Hooker Seunghyk Lee joins from Mie Heat, while a pair of props Changho Ahn and Rento Tsukayama, have arrived from Yokohama Eagles. The men up front will be looking forward to tutelage from Sagamihara's new scrum coach, the former All Black prop Ben Franks.

Hot stepping Kurt:

The fast feet of the tricky South African Arendse has the potential to set alight the Dynaboars attack after they were the fourth lowest point and try scorers last term, ahead of only the Replacement Battle-bound sides. Capturing the 28-year-old's signature was a major coup for Sagamihara, who need the spark the Springbok can provide, and he arrives after finishing as the fourth top try-scorer in last season's United Rugby Championship with 10. A former South African Sevens representative, having been first selected by the 'BlitzBoks' in 2019, Arendse made his Springbok debut three years later. He was part of last year's Rugby World Cup-winning squad in France, where he appeared five times, scoring twice. On loan from the Bulls, Arendse joins the Dynaboars after featuring as his side hosted the final of last season's United Rugby Championship and should relish the opportunity to play on hard Japanese grounds after slogging his way through soggy Northern Hemisphere turf for much of his last club season.

The brothers Franks:

Ben and Owen Franks have always been close, with their careers often overlapping, and this year in Japan is the latest example.

Younger brother Owen, who played for the All Blacks after featuring for the (Canterbury) Crusaders and (Wellington) Hurricanes in Super Rugby, was recruited by the Japan Rugby Football Union to serve as a scrum coach for the Brave Blossoms after Jones's appointment as head coach. At the same time Ben, who also played for each of the All Blacks, Crusaders and Hurricanes, has moved to the country to join the Dynaboars. Between them, the brothers played 155 tests, with the 36-year-old Owen ending his career as New Zealand's second-most capped prop with 108, having been the third youngest prop ever selected when he made his test debut as a 21-year-old in 2009. Ben, who is two years older than Owen, played the first of his 47 tests a year after Owen's introduction, with the pair becoming the first set of brothers to start a test for the All Blacks in the front row shortly after Ben made his debut. Both brothers were members of New Zealand's 2011 and 2015 Rugby World Cup-winning sides, with Ben retiring after the 2015 tournament, while Owen ended his career four years later.

History:

Prominent on the scene in East Japan since the early 1970s, the club had to wait four years to gain access to the Top League after that competition was formed, qualifying for the first time in 2007 after it had beaten Kintetsu Liners over two legs to finish second in the challenger series. While the team first took on the Dynaboars name for its entry into Top League, the step up proved too much, and they returned to the Top East league after just one season, having lost all 13 matches. A decade of play in the East league followed before the Dynaboars again won promotion, this time beating Shuttles Aichi in the playoff for the second promotion position. The club held onto its spot in the Top League until the final season of the competition in 2021, when it joined the Red Dolphins in slipping back to Division Two for the start of the new Japan Rugby League One.

Action Jackson:

Although his departure from the New Zealand game seemed premature, Jackson Hemopo has provided great value for his



Ben Franks

club since he arrived in Japan four seasons ago. The 30-year-old, who played five tests for the All Blacks – including the 69-31 win over the Brave Blossoms in 2018 – joined the Dynaboars in time for the final Top League in 2021, appearing on nine occasions during the truncated season. The backrower featured 12 times a year later in the maiden League One as the Dynaboars gained promotion, scoring his first two tries for the club, an action he repeated in the side's return to the top tier, when made 11 appearances. Hemopo more than doubled that tally last term, scoring seven tries from 13 matches. This was just one less than Sagamihara's top try-scorer for the campaign, Thai-born winger Ben Paltridge.

The Tongan tearaway:

Born in Tonga, but a product of Osaka's Hanazono University, winger Honeti Taumohapai has been a late bloomer, coming into his own on the Dynaboars' edge in recent seasons. In a side short on genuine attacking firepower, the 31-year-old has scored 15 tries in 21 games since the side returned to Division One, after playing a leading hand in their elevation from Division Two three years ago when he crossed six times in the promotion campaign. Taumohapai was on the roster at Spears Funabashi Tokyo Bay for the final two seasons of Top League, having made his professional debut for the club in the 2019-20 campaign where he was limited to four starts before the season was suspended due to Covid. His second year brought another six

appearances before he transferred to Sagamihara for the start of League One.

Last year:

Wins on the opening two weekends against Hanazono and Black Rams Tokyo (both of whom ended up in the Replacement Battle) helped calm the nerves, setting up a rewarding campaign for Sagamihara which yielded seven more points on the final table than was achieved the previous season. As well as their six wins, which included victories over the higher-placed Shizuoka Blue Revs, and defending champions Spears Funabashi Tokyo Bay, the Dynaboars were, in the main, competitive against the top sides. Sagamihara lost to a last minute try when beaten 36-34 by semi-finalists Tokyo Sungoliath, while also giving fourth-placed Yokohama a difficult afternoon during a 40-35 defeat.

What to expect:

After two seasons flirting with the drop, the Dynaboars will be aiming higher in their third season back in Division One, with a mid-table position the goal for last season's ninth-placed finishers. Delaney begins the season with a settled squad, with the hope that their new Springbok recruit can sprinkle some magic dust to aid their attack. Grayson should be better for his first season in Japan too, having already shown the value of the Dynaboars' investment in the young Englishman.



Jackson Hemopo

YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES



Where:

Originally based in Machida, Tokyo, the team relocated to Yokohama for the start of Japan Rugby League One and will play its' fourth season from its new home in the competition's 2024-25 edition. Yokohama is the second-largest city in Japan by population. It is the capital and most populous city in Kanagawa Prefecture, with a population of 3.8 million. The city lies on Tokyo Bay, south of Tokyo, in the Kantō region of the main island of Honshu. The name Yokohama means 'Horizontal Beach'. The current area surrounded by Maita Park, the Ōoka River and the Nakamura River have been a gulf divided by a sandbar from the open sea. This sandbar was the original Yokohama fishing village. Since the sandbar protruded perpendicularly from the land, or horizontally when viewed from the sea, it was called a "horizontal beach".

What's in a name:

Now known simply as the Yokohama Eagles, referencing the club's new home, it began life as Canon Rugby Club when founded in 1980, adding Eagles to the name 30 years later. The Eagle was an obvious addition as the traditional symbol of Canon, the club's majority corporate supporter, with the logo once used in the company's product design. The Eagle contains the strong will to "carry the ball with an eagle bite" and "go grab victory with eagle-like eyes and eagle-like claws". While the Canon company remains heavily associated with the club, the corporate name has been removed from its official title, in keeping with the league's goal of establishing a geographical focus.

Brave Blossoms Squad Member:
Takato Okabe, Yusuke Kajimura

Non-Japanese test Representatives:
Jesse Kriel (South Africa), Faf de Klerk (South Africa), Matthew Phillip (Australia)

The coach:

One of only three Japanese head coaches in the top division of Japan Rugby League One, Keisuke Sawaki boasts an impressive resume that includes seven tests for Japan as a flyhalf through to coaching the Japan Under-20s at the 2014 Junior World Cup, Sungoliath between 2016 and 2018, the Sunwolves in 2020, and the Eagles. Under Sawaki's guidance, Sungoliath won the Top League in each of the 2016-17 and 2017-18 seasons, going unbeaten through the first of those campaigns. To put the achievement in perspective, it is as many titles as Eddie Jones won when he was coaching the club. Sawaki has had a major impact at the Eagles as well, guiding the team to back-to-back semi-finals, finishing fourth last term, following a best-ever third the year before. Yokohama were sixth in the maiden Japan Rugby League One, after Sawaki had taken the side to the quarterfinals of the Covid shortened 2020-21 Top League in his first season.

The main man:

While it's inevitable that the blond mop of

scrumhalf Faf de Klerk features prominently on any of the Eagles' highlights reels, countryman Jesse Kriel has played an even bigger role in the club's recent success. This included last term, when he returned after nine weeks out with a broken thumb, to help get his side over the line and into the semi-finals. The rugged 30-year-old is a battle-hardened test warrior, this year setting a record for the most internationals played by a Springbok midfield combination, in partnership with the Wild Knights' Damian de Allende. Prior to last year's injury, Kriel had been the club's ironman, having missed just four games since League One kicked off.

Local hero:

Like a finely tuned clock, veteran flyhalf Yu Tamura keeps ticking along, running up points and adding to his legacy as one of the Japanese club game's all-time greats. Although the now 35-year-old started his career with Green Rockets Tokatsu in the 2011-12 Top League – from where he gained his first test call up in 2013 – the goal-kicking ace joined the then Canon club in 2017, by which time he had established himself as the Brave Blossoms first choice flyhalf. Tamura figured prominently for Japan at the 2019 Rugby World Cup, most notably in the wins over Ireland and Scotland. The Meiji University product also played 15 matches



Jesse Kriel

on the Sunwolves' maiden journey in 2016, eventually finishing with 31 appearances by the time the team's Super Rugby adventure was wound up in 2019 when the Covid crisis hit. After scoring 446 points from 76 appearances during his six seasons at the Green Rockets, and 81 from 31 outings with the Sunwolves, the 63-test veteran has been equally prolific wearing the Eagles jersey. It took a while though, with the Okinawan-born pivot accumulating just 183 points from 33 outings across his first four seasons for the club in the Top League, where he wasn't always the Eagles' first choice goalkicker. Japan Rugby League One has been kinder, with Tamura entering its fourth season having posted 300 points in 39 games for Yokohama. This places the veteran, who is embarking on his 14th season at Japan's highest club level, just 17 short of 500 for the Eagles, and needing only 71 more to chalk up 1000 points in the domestic leagues. Last term showed that he hadn't lost his touch for the big moment either, slotting an 83rd minute penalty goal from range to sink Sungoliath after the Eagles had trailed by 25 points at halftime.

Inns & outs:

Yokohama has been proactive in its transfer business, bringing in several foreign players to bolster their ranks, while maintaining the status quo with their international test stars. The incomings are led by the long-serving Maori All Black and (Otago) Highlander's backrower Billy Harmon. Fullback Brendan Owen has an unusual pedigree, joining from the Jersey Reds after the English championship club was wound up earlier this year. Irishman Cormac Daly is one of two acquisitions in the second row, signing on after previously representing his country at age-grade level, as well as gaining some experience with Australia's Queensland Reds. He will be partnered in the engine room of the scrum by well-travelled Australian Sam Jeffries, who was last year on the books of Red Hurricanes Osaka in Division Two. The debit side is headlined by the departure of try-scoring winger Burua Inoke, who has left for Kobelco Kobe Steelers. Springbok Rohan Janse van Rensburg, who was a mid-season injury replacement, is now with Bordeaux, while

forwards Mitch Brown, Max Douglas and Kobus van Dyk, and fullback SP Marais have also departed, the latter pair after five seasons. Utility back Luteru Laulala has moved to Urayasu.

Sensational Shunta:

In-form hooker Shunta Nakamura must not have wanted last season to end. The 30-year-old, who is a product of the famed Meiji University, couldn't stop scoring as the regular season wound down, collecting tries in each of the Eagles' final six matches before the playoffs. The run included his second hat-trick of the season against the Sagami-hara Dynaboars, after he had earlier scored three at the expense of the Hanazono Liners. The performance proved Nakamura an astute pick-up by Sawaki, both for his try-scoring prowess, but also durability. He had appeared on 28 occasions – scoring 10 tries – from 36 matches for former club Sungoliath during the first two seasons of League One. After not missing a game last term, Nakamura – who participated on the Barbarians' 2023 tour of the UK – starts the new campaign four matches short of raising a half century of appearances in the competition. He has scored 21 tries in those matches, 11 of which came last term.

Not so silly Billy:

After offering grand service in New Zealand, where he played 47 games for the (Otago) Highlanders, started his Super Rugby career playing 11 times with the (Canterbury) Crusaders, and arrives after skipping Canterbury in New Zealand's national provincial championship, backrower Harmon could be the buy of the season. Always under-rated in his homeland, sharp-eyed Eagles fans will recognise his name from the Maori All Blacks visit to Japan earlier in the year, where he led the tourists against a Japan XV in a series that was squared one apiece. Strong over the ball, and with a big engine which sees him cover plenty of ground, Harmon still has plenty of 'gas' in the tank and will add a lot of on-field leadership to the Yokohama cast.

History:

Founded in 1980 as Canon Rugby Club, the team initially focused on the local Kanto amateur leagues, winning the fourth division in

each of the 1985 and 1988 seasons, finally winning promotion after the second of those campaigns. Canon was relegated back to the fourth division in 1993 before being promoted again five years later. By 2003, the side had risen to the first division of the Kanto league, having taken out the third division in 2000 and the second two years later. After winning the Kanto first division for five straight years, Canon was promoted into the East Japan league, where it went unbeaten in 2010 and 2011 to gain admission to the Top League. A permanent member of Japan's top division in the time since, the Eagles achieved their highest finish in 2015 when sixth. This placing was repeated in the maiden season of Japan Rugby League One in 2022 and bettered a year later when the side qualified for the semi-finals for the first time, eventually finishing third. A second semi-final appearance followed last term, although Yokohama was beaten by Sungoliath in the playoff for third place.

Thrill a (last) minute:

Yokohama are a great watch but, be warned, heart pills and a pacemaker are required. A week before their own injury time miracle win against Sungoliath, the Eagles lost to a 79th minute try against a Spears; an occurrence that was to repeat twice more before the season was out, with both Verblitz and Sungoliath (in the third and fourth playoff) winning with scores in referee's time. Of the defeats, the Spears was arguably the most galling, with the Eagles having led 26-15 with just three minutes to play, and somehow managing to lose the game!

Last year:

While a second consecutive semi-final was a more than acceptable performance, stopping teams scoring points will have been a major work on at Eagles HQ during the off-season. Although their own scoring prowess meant it didn't prevent ascent to the playoffs, the Eagles conceded 30 or more points on eight occasions in 18 matches, a ratio that probably should have been terminal as far as their semi-final hopes were concerned. Defeats in each of their last four matches was a damp end, despite a brave performance in their semi-final re-match with Saitama. The Eagles had shipped 147 points in the previous three meetings against the Wild Knights, including the 2022-23 semi-final, but they fought back from a 10-point halftime deficit to lead last term's playoff 17-13, before the Wild Knights' greater experience of sudden death play got them over the line in a nervy final 20 minutes.

What to expect:

After recruiting smartly, and with a large core of the squad having competed in the last two semi-final campaigns, Yokohama loom as a major threat to the other title-contenders. They should be helped by the draw, which places them in what looks to be the weaker of the two conferences and will also have a relatively fresh de Klerk to lead their scheming. The Springbok scrumhalf has missed a lot of rugby in the last year, including the majority of last season's Rugby league as well as South Africa's Rugby Championship triumph, due to injury.



Shunta Nakamura

DIVISION

Conference B

Kubota Spears
Funabashi TOKYO-BAY
SAITAMA Panasonic WILD KNIGHTS
TOKYO SUNTORY SUNGOLIATH
TOYOTA VERBLITZ
MIE Honda HEAT
RICOH BlackRams Tokyo

KUBOTA SPEARS FUNABASHI TOKYO-BAY



Where:

Located in the Chiba prefecture, 20 kilometres from downtown Tokyo, the Spears' home base at Funabashi is a commuter district with an estimated 35 percent of the populace traveling out of the immediate area each day for work. The Spears play home matches at the Edogawa Athletics Stadium in the locality, but often have their big games hosted at Prince Chichibu Memorial Stadium in Tokyo itself.

What's in a Name:

Their moniker was adopted in 2003 for the start of the Top League era. The club took the name the Spears as it aspires to be a team with the attacking ability to sharply penetrate the enemy's defence. The Spear also reflects the team's will to have the defensive ability to cut off the enemy's attack with penetrating tackles.

Brave Blossoms Squad Members:

Keijiro Tamefusa, Faulua Makisi, Shinobu Fujiwara, Koga Nezuka, Harumichi Tatekawa (captain), Opeti Helu

Non-Japanese test representatives:

Malcolm Marx (South Africa), Bernard Foley (Australia)

The head coach:

A two-time Super Rugby-title winner with the Bulls in 2009 and 2010, Frans Ludeke scored a notable success two years ago when he steered Spears Funabashi Tokyo Bay to its maiden national title. That success came six years after the underrated South African had joined in 2016, previously having taken the Spears to three semi-finals in that time. This included back-to-back semis in the final Top League and the maiden Japan

Rugby League One, both times falling to the Wild Knights, whom they dethroned when winning the league's second edition. The title was a further achievement to go alongside Ludeke's status as the most successful South African coach of the country's Super Rugby era. While he won his titles in Pretoria, Ludeke also coached the Johannesburg-based Cats (the alternative name for the Lions) for a season in 2006.

The main man:

There will have been huge sighs of relief around Tokyo Bay when Malcolm Marx came through this year's Springbok exertions (largely) unscathed. While the star hooker was sidelined briefly by a nasty leg injury sustained against Ireland midyear, he made it back in time for the home double-header against the All Blacks in the Rugby Championship, before taking his place on South Africa's November tour. The Spears' talisman during the run to a historic title, last season's absence after he suffered a ruptured anterior cruciate ligament at the 2023 Rugby World Cup did incalculable damage to the team's hopes of going back-to-back. Marx has been devastating since he joined the Spears for the final Top League, scoring eight tries from just 10 appearances that season before adding seven from five games in the maiden Japan Rugby League One. The former (Golden) Lions player from Super Rugby upped that production in year two, finishing with 10 from 14 outings. He was equal second top try-scorer among

forwards in each of the first two editions of League One, while only winger Haruto Kida scored more in the Kubota jersey during the historic championship campaign.

Local hero:

Captain of the club's maiden title-winning side in 2022-23, Harumichi Tatekawa has enjoyed a late career flourish, with the League One success followed a year later by a recall to the Brave Blossoms, when he was appointed by Eddie Jones to lead the side in the inaugural Pacific Nations Cup and November tour. Given the veteran midfielder had featured sparingly for Japan since the Australian's previous tenure, appearing just nine times during the eight-year stewardship of Jamie Joseph – the last of which was an 11-minute cameo in 2021 – the 35-year-old might have had cause to believe his international career was over, having represented his country on 56 occasions. One of these was at Brighton against South Africa where he came off the bench in the famous 34-32 win. While in the wilderness internationally, Tatekawa has remained a loyal servant to the club, and is now limbering up for his 14th season after having first enrolled in 2012. Outside of his time in the Japanese domestic leagues, Tatekawa appeared 24 times for the Sunwolves during their Super Rugby journey. He also had brief stints in both Australia and New Zealand with the (ACT) Brumbies and Otago national provincial championship side respectively. While Tatekawa did not play for



Malcolm Marx

the Brumbies in Super Rugby, after being given the opportunity in Canberra on the recommendation of Jones, he played four matches for Otago in the 2019 season.

Something old, something new:

Faulua Makisi might be about to start his seventh season in west Tokyo, but his next journey begins as a first timer, having taken over the club captaincy. The 27-year-old, who has been at the core of Eddie Jones's new look Brave Blossoms this year, is a product of Tenri University, the same institution that produced his predecessor. Makisi has been in the national system for a long time, playing for each of Japan Schools and Japan Under-20 prior to his first call up for test duties. The Tongan-born backrower starts the fourth edition of Japan Rugby League One with 42 competition appearances to his name, including the competition finale two years ago, where he was one of the Spears' best in their historic 17-15 win over the Wild Knights which claimed for the club its first national title.

Ins & outs:

The biggest acquisition in the off-season has seen the ex-All Black defensive coach Scott McLeod join to fill the same role at the Spears. A former 10-test midfielder for New Zealand who played at Brave Lupus Tokyo towards the end of his career, McLeod was part of Ian Foster's coaching team, but also achieved recognition as a head coach in his own right when guiding the (Otago) Highlanders to victory over the British and Irish Lions in 2017, while leading the team in an interim capacity. The former (Waikato) Chiefs centre from Super Rugby is joined at the club by ex-Maori All Blacks scrumhalf Bryn Hall, who has arrived in west Tokyo after two years on the other side of Mt Fuji at Shizuoka. Russell Winter, who was coached by Ludeke in Super Rugby, has added to the South African 'flavour' on the club's coaching team, while countryman and backrower Tyler Paul has signed from D-Rocks further expanding the country's large influence at the Spears. Ex-Bulls second-rower Merwe Olivier is also through the door, as is versatile backrower Ollie Stoneham, who has jetted in from England. The 23-year-old was previously at European heavyweights

Saracens. New Brave Blossoms prop Keiji Tamefusa is also now on the books. With Marx fit again, last season's injury replacement, All Black hooker Dane Coles, isn't returning.

The arrivals hall:

After two seasons of excellent service for the Blue Revs, the Spears' new scrumhalf should be an excellent signing. The former Crusaders man missed just five matches during his time at Shizuoka, with Hall's commitment to the cause being such that he went into unfamiliar territory, both relocating to flyhalf and taking over the goalkicking, when needed. The 32-year-old returned to Japan, and his new home, after playing for North Harbour in New Zealand's national provincial championship.

The Foley figures:

The competition's leading point-scorer two seasons ago, when his 173 from 15 appearances played a big part in the club's title success, Bernard Foley still made an impact on the scoring charts despite injury cutting his involvement to eight matches last term. The veteran Wallaby returned 96 points from those games, surpassing double figures in five of them, including 25 during the 75-0 thrashing of Mie. Significantly, the 35-year-old scored five tries, which reinforced the attacking threat the Spears lost during his absence, alongside his radar-like boot. Foley was injured in the round three clash against the Blue Revs. By the time he returned nine matches later, the Spears' title defence was as good as over. The classy flyhalf was not the only star of the title-winning campaign whose light dimmed last term. Breakout winger Haruto Kida, who had scored 16 tries from 14 appearances, including the match-winner in the championship game, managed only a quarter of that tally this time, crossing the goal-line four times before being cut down by a season-ending injury nine weeks into the campaign.

Beware the Orange Army:

After injuries helped torpedo their title defence, the Spears went looking for 'reinforcements' from an unusual place, having put together a unique real-life

programme in the off-season for their loyal 'Orange Army'. The fan festival saw the public invited to experience all aspects of the professional game. This included a re-creation of the pre-game dressing room atmosphere and team talk, instruction in the art of try-scoring and post try celebrations, conditioning processes, and even the opportunity to ask players questions in a simulated press conference. The exercise was another example of the close connection the club has always had with the public due to its proactivity in the community. This contributed to a bumper crowd more than 44,000-strong, that attended their maiden title win at the National Stadium.

History:

Founded in 1978 by volunteers at the company's Tokyo headquarters who were keen rugby enthusiasts, rugby was adopted as an official company sport in 1990, with Kubota providing corporate support and ownership which allowed the team to expand. After becoming a major force in the East Japan leagues, Kubota was included as a foundation member of the Top League, a status it has since maintained for much of the professional era. Although the Spears were relegated from the league in 2010, the club quickly recovered, winning promotion after claiming the East Japan championship title two years later. While the Spears flirted with relegation after returning, narrowly avoiding the drop in 2014, the arrival of Ludeke raised the standard, with the South African turning the club into

a regular contender before they eventually landed the title.

Last year:

A late season run, which saw the Spears go unbeaten in the last four games, came too late to save their title defence after a season dogged by injuries and inconsistency. Although the arrival of Coles partially compensated for the loss of his Springbok counterpart Marx, the All Black hooker, along with his fellow internationals, Liam Williams and Foley, spent a significant chunk of the season in the casualty ward. By the end, the star trio had collectively missed 24 of the 48 matches. Having that level of experience on the sidelines for half of the season was always going to make it difficult. Even without them, the Spears still made a decent go of it, finishing only five points astern of fourth place, despite having won just once through the opening month.

What to Expect:

As last term showed, keeping their star players on the field is going to dictate the outcome of the 2022-23 champions achieve. Last season's sixth-placed finish hasn't helped, landing them in the same conference as the Wild Knights and Sungoliath both of whom they historically struggle with. While the roster remains consistent, a good start is going to be vital, after getting off the mark sluggishly last term gave up too much ground on the leaders they couldn't make up.



SAITAMA Panasonic WILD KNIGHTS



Where:

A relative newcomer to Saitama, the Wild Knights moved from their former base at Ota in the Gunma prefecture in time for the start of Japan Rugby League One, relocating after local authorities constructed a purpose-built training facility for the club at the Kumagaya sporting complex. The team was so well received at its' new home that 10,000 locals turned out for a victory parade after their success in the inaugural Japan Rugby League One. Saitama is 27 kilometers north-west of central Tokyo in the Kanto region of Honshu. The Wild Knights play their home matches at the Kumagaya Stadium, which hosted three matches in the 2019 Rugby World Cup and has a fully seated capacity of 24,000.

What's in a name:

The Wild Knights was chosen as the

Panasonic club's name and emblem after submissions from over 4000 people. The name is a symbol of dreams and chasers who continue to challenge dream realization with physical strength that overwhelms [opponents], and mental strength that cannot break no matter what happens on the field.

Brave Blossoms squad members:

Tomoki Osada, Dylan Riley, Shota Fukui, Ben Gunter, Atsushi Sakate, Taiki Koyama, Takuya Yamasawa

Non-Japanese test representatives:

Damian de Allende (South Africa), Lood de Jager (South Africa), Marika Koroibete (Australia)

The head coach:

One of the most successful coaches of the professional era, Robbie Deans arrived

at the Wild Knights after having coached each of the Crusaders and Wallabies. The former All Black fullback won five titles at the Crusaders (2000, 2002, 2005, 2006, 2008) with that mark only recently surpassed by one of his former pupils, All Black coach Scott Robertson. Saitama's victory in the maiden Japan Rugby League One was the fifth of Deans' association with the club, tying his title-winning record at the Crusaders, but a sixth has proved elusive, with the Wild Knights narrowly beaten in each of the last two finals. Deans experienced similar with the Crusaders, who lost the Super Rugby finals of 2003 and 2004, with the side going on to win back-to-back titles in 2005 and 2006, and three in four years when they won again in his last season in 2008. Australia's first foreign coach won the Wallabies' first Tri-Nations for a decade in 2011 and guided the side to third at that year's Rugby World Cup. He maintained the now eighth-ranked Australia's number two world ranking for most of his five-and-a-half-year tenure. Deans was on the All-Blacks' coaching staff in 2003 when they won the Bledisloe Cup back off Australia after a five-year absence. New Zealand has not lost the trophy since.

The main man:

The departure of fellow Brave Blossoms flyhalf Rikiya Matsuda to Verblitz has

heightened the responsibility to be carried by Takuya Yamasawa, who will now assume fulltime duties at number 10, after having been used largely as a fullback in recent seasons to accommodate his test colleague in the run on side. More of a try-scorer than his departed colleague, Yamasawa was man-of-the-match when the Wild Knights beat Tokyo Sungoliath to win the maiden Japan Rugby League One title, with a memorable try-saving tackle on All Black Damien McKenzie one of the key moments in a game his side won by six points. The 30-year-old's relocation to the front line may result in an even more attacking approach from Saitama; an ominous sign for the rest of the field given the Wild Knights were the only side in the league to exceed three figures in tries last term, finishing with 111; 20 more than next best, Sungoliath.

Local hero:

Cast in the shadow of Shota Horie for much of his career, fellow hooker Atsushi Sakate has forged a glittering career in his own right, captaining each of the Brave Blossoms and Wild Knights, leading his club to back-to-back titles in the last season of the Top League, followed by the maiden Japan Rugby League One. The 31-year-old has missed just five games since the new league began, starting the new campaign



Takuya Yamasawa



**SAITAMA WILD KNIGHTS v
Chiefs in Cross Border Rugby**

one short of a half century of appearances, after having accumulated 47 matches for the Wild Knights in the league's forerunner. This also leaves him four short of a century of appearances for the club as his ninth season at the Wild Knights begins.

Closing the door:

Between them, hooker Shota Horie, scrumhalf Keisuke Uchida and flyhalf Rikiya Matsuda took 33 seasons of collective on-field experience with them when they headed for the exit after defeat in last season's final. Horie, who played 166 matches across 16 seasons between 2008 and 2024, will remain involved in an off-field capacity, having been appointed as a club ambassador. Uchida has joined him in retirement, after having served for 10 seasons between 2014 and 2024. The third of the trio, Matsuda, had been with Saitama for seven seasons, but will try his hand occupying the jersey that was filled by All Black Beauden Barrett at Verblitz.

Ins & outs:

Undoubtedly the biggest news on the recruitment front has been the acquisition of former player Sam Whitelock, who returns to the club as an advisor. The most capped All Black in history, retiring last year after making 153 test appearances,

Whitelock previously spent a season at the Wild Knights while on sabbatical from New Zealand in 2020, playing five games before the competition was abandoned due to Covid-19. A quiet off-season among player transfers has seen Hanazono Liners' winger Joshua Nora the main signing. The departure of the trio of veterans aside, ex-Hurricanes second-rower Mark Abbott has also left, joining Mie Honda Heat.

The History makers:

The Wild Knights might once again have been denied the title as champions of Japan, but they showed that they could hold themselves in all company when they emphatically defeated the (Waikato) Chiefs during the inaugural Cross Border Rugby series. While the Super Rugby side were in pre-season mode, 13 of the players who made up their opening night squad for that tournament two weeks later, featured, as the visitors were outclassed 38-14 at Saitama, with the rampant hosts running in five-tries-to-two. The win made history, being the first time a side from the domestic Japanese league had beaten a New Zealand Super Rugby outfit. While the Sunwolves had had success against New Zealand teams during their stay in Super Rugby, they were a composite side representing the Japan Rugby Football Union, not a club from the

domestic league.

48 for three:

Such has been the Wild Knights' dominance of the regular season in Japan Rugby League One, they have been beaten just three times in 48 matches. And two of those defeats, in the maiden edition of the league – which they went on to win – were sustained without their even taking the field, being forced to default their first two scheduled matches in the new competition due to Covid. When they were felled 44-25 by Shizuoka Blue Revs last year at Kumagaya, it was the side's first on-field defeat since 2018, after 47 wins and a draw.

The Riley zone:

After finishing the inaugural edition of Japan Rugby League One as the equal-top try-scorer for the regular season with 11 (plus one on the final), Brave Blossoms centre Dylan Riley was back in the zone last term when his return was 14 tries from 15 matches, joint-second behind the Blue Revs' Malo Tuitama. This followed a strangely quiet 2022-23 campaign where despite featuring 13 times, the South African-born midfielder crossed the line just three times. A former Australian Under-20 rep, the 27-year-old has proven an astute pick up by the Wild Knights, having scored 43 tries from 70 appearances since he made his debut against Verblitz in 2019.

All aboard the Osada express:

After starting last season with just two appearances in Japan Rugby League One to his name, Tomoki Osada finished it with 14, including eight tries, and a test jersey to boot. One of the 23-year-old utility back's tries came in the final, although the five points were in vain as the Wild Knights went under by two. Osada's performance was made even more memorable by the fact he was both the team's leading try-scorer, and that he out-scored teammate Dylan Riley, who had been the competition's joint-leading try-scorer in the maiden Japan Rugby League One.

Luckless Lood:

It is said that tragedy describes what is, not what might have been. And while tragedy is

probably too emotive a term in describing Lood de Jager's misfortune, the 30-year-old Springbok would certainly have had cause to wonder why fate conspired against him on two counts in the 2022-23 season. After being signed by Saitama as a replacement for England second rower George Kruijs, who never lost a match during his two years at the club, de Jager's arrival coincided with a season where the Wild Knights suffered their first losses for five years. These included the final of the league, which the team had won in each of the previous two seasons. The 2019 Rugby World Cup winner's hopes of playing a part in South Africa's successful title defence were then torpedoed by injury, running out of time to make the squad after complications relating to a chest complaint which required a period of rest. After making an encouraging return last season, playing 12 times and scoring six tries, de Jager damaged his shoulder in the final, retiring just before halftime. The absence was a big blow to the Wild Knights, but even bigger for the South African who was subsequently forced to sit out most of the Springboks' successful test season and may be looking at another delayed start to the league as he completes rehabilitation of the injury.

History:

The club was founded in 1960, as a corporate rugby club of Sanyo Electric. Originally known as the Sanyo Wild Knights for the Top League, the name was updated after Sanyo became a subsidiary of Panasonic in 2009. The move to the Saitama prefecture resulted in a further name change, with the corporate moniker giving way to the region where the club is now based. The company remains the club principal with the players and staff all still Panasonic employees. A foundation member of the Top League, Panasonic finished seventh in the first season, and had been runner up four times before it broke through for its maiden title in 2010-11, which was achieved with an unbeaten season. By the time the Top League era ended in 2021, the Wild Knights had added a further four titles to the collection – 2013-14, 2014-15, 2015-16, 2021 – which the team then backed up in 2022 by taking out the maiden title for Japan Rugby League One.

Last year:

Wild Knights fans could have been forgiven for feeling a sense of Deja-vu as their side – for the second season running – fell short after leading entering the final 10 minutes of the championship game. The drama of the controversial no try call (for a borderline forward pass) in the final moments of the loss to Brave Lupus would further have added to the collective angst; having had the title ripped away after success had seemed all but preordained while they were sweeping through the regular season untroubled. The Wild Knights averaged 46.6 points per outing while romping through qualifying, scoring 747 points, 100 more than second-ranked Kobelco Kobe Steelers. They also boasted

the meanest defence, conceding a tick over 17 points per match, six less than Brave Lupus.

What to expect:

The departure of Matsuda creates questions, but despite reverses in the last two deciders, such has been the Wild Knights' dominance in the regular season that they remain the team to beat. A sense of injustice following the controversy of last year's decider may add further fuel, while a lighter than usual test representation since the return of Jones to the Brave Blossoms helm, should also benefit the Wild Knights, who will have a fresher squad, many of whom will have a point to prove.



Dylan Riley

TOKYO SUNTORY SUNGOLIATH



Where:

Located at Fuchu in western Tokyo, Sungoliath share this part of the city with Brave Lupus, adding spice to those clashes, with the rivalry particularly fierce in recent years. As well as being home to Tokyo Racecourse, the country's biggest and the venue of many of Japan's most important thoroughbred races, Fuchu also hosts the Bank of Japan's main computer operations centre.

What's in a Name:

The Sungoliath name is a compound of the club's commercial owner, Suntory Frucor, alongside Goliath, or Gorilla. The combination of Sun and Goliath illustrates the toughness and spirituality of the team.

Brave Blossoms squad members:

Kanji Shimokawa, Kai Yamamoto, Taiga

Ozaki, Mikiya Takamoto

Non-Japanese test representatives:

Cheslin Kolbe (South Africa), Sam Cane (New Zealand), Sean McMahon (Australia)

The Coach:

With Kiyonori Tanaka moving into a role as the team's General Manager after three years – which saw a final and two semi-final finishes – former Brave Blossoms representative Kosei Ono has taken up the reins as head coach with the aim of claiming the club's maiden Japan Rugby League One title. A former Sungoliath player, for whom he played 75 matches during eight years at the club, Ono is best known for his role at flyhalf in Japan's historic win over South Africa at the 2015 Rugby World Cup. Among the other members of the Brave Blossoms side on that occasion was fullback Kotaro

Matsushima who will now be coached by his former teammate. Although he was born in Aichi prefecture, Ono's family moved to New Zealand when he was aged three. He was educated at Dan Carter's old school, Christchurch Boys' High School, where he wore the All Black legends' former jersey while playing for its' first XV in 2004. Ono played alongside future All Blacks Colin Slade and Owen Franks in a team that went unbeaten that year. He was first selected by Japan in 2007, attending the Rugby World Cup in France, before being overlooked when ex-All Black John Kirwan took over as Brave Blossoms coach. Ono returned to the fold when Eddie Jones replaced Kirwan after the 2011 tournament, becoming the Australians' first choice flyhalf through until 2015 and the famous day at Brighton. Ono moved into player management and coaching after retiring at the end of the 2021 season. He returned to Sungoliath as an assistant where he worked alongside Jones



Kosei Ono

in the latter's capacity as the club's Director of Rugby. Ono filled the role of backs coach prior to his elevation as Tanaka's successor.

The Main Man:

In an inconsistent campaign last term, one aspect that was consistent was the level of performance, and try-scoring, of Sungoliath skipper Kosuke Horikoshi. The 29-year-old crossed the line 12 times to show the way for forwards in the competition as their leading overall try-scorer. The tireless hooker featured in all 18 league matches played by the side, although like many of his senior colleagues, he was rested from the Cross Border tie against the (Auckland) Blues.

Local Hero:

He might not have topped the try-scoring charts, as he did in 2023, but winger Seiya Ozaki continued to delight fans while keeping the number crunchers busy, as he scored 14 tries to tie Saitama's Dylan Riley for second place on last terms' rankings for the regular season. Kicking off with a hatrick against Spears Funabashi Tokyo Bay on opening day, the 29-year-old was held try-less just six times in qualifying, finishing off with tries in each of the final six games. A product of the famed Teikyo University, Ozaki has now scored 36 times from 49 matches since League One began. While less proficient on the try-scoring front, his younger brother Taiga continued to impress, earning a maiden call up to the Brave Blossoms for the mid-year tests.

Ins & Outs:

Rugby World Cup Brave Blossoms scrumhalf Kenta Fukuda has joined from Verblitz, along with ex-SkyActivs second-rower Lachlan Osborne, who makes the step up from Division Three. Steelers outside back Sione Tapu'osi and former Melbourne Rebels hooker Alex Mafi, who has swapped Super Rugby for League One, are other new recruits. Fukuda's arrival compensates for the loss of fellow Brave Blossoms scrumhalf Naoto Saito, while long-serving utility forward Hendrick Tui has left for Urayasu and veteran Los Pumas flyhalf Nicolas Sanchez is no longer required.

Can Kenta Cut It:

Honing his craft under the tutelage of All Black star Aaron Smith, and long-serving ex-Brave Blossoms scrumhalf Kaito Shigeno last season, might have seemed like a dream come true, but it was no surprise that Kenta Fukuda has taken his talents elsewhere to gain a starting berth. The bolter in the Brave Blossoms Rugby World Cup squad, where he became the first uncapped player to be selected for Japan's tournament team since 2007, the 28-year-old would have started last term with the ambition to play more than the five games he was able to, due largely to the competition on the Toyota scrumhalf roster. After four seasons with the Aichi-based club, the departure of long-term international Naoto Saito to French Top 14 giants Toulouse, has opened the door at Fuchu, providing an opportunity for Fukuda to prove he can emulate his predecessor's club and test heroics. Sungoliath are counting on it.

Aussie, Aussie, Aussie:

The respective entries of Mafi and Osborne brings to nine the number of Sungoliath players with Australian pedigrees, eight of whom are forwards. Props William Hay and Bradley Kuhn, Mafi, Osborne, fellow second-rowers Harry Hockings, Trevor Hosea and Callum MacDonald, and ex-Wallaby backrower Sean McMahon all hail or played part of their careers in Australia. Utility back Tony Alofipo flies the flag for Australia among the backs.

The Cane game:

After playing his 100th test for New Zealand in the second Bledisloe Cup game against Australia during the Rugby Championship, former All Black captain Sam Cane returns to Sungoliath for his second season, hoping

it goes more smoothly than the first. Thanks to injury, the two-time Super Rugby-winning Chiefs captain managed just six appearances in his maiden season in Japan, but his misfortune hasn't put the club off, with Sungoliath signing the 32-year-old up for a further three seasons. Cane is one of four players at the club who were schooled in New Zealand.

Mikiya the magnificent:

Crisis, what crisis? While the pre-season injury which scratched ex-Wales flyhalf Gareth Anscombe necessitated a phone call to 35-year-old Argentine Nicolas Sanchez, Sungoliath ultimately found that the answer had already been there, after rookie Mikiya Takamoto delivered big time. The 23-year-old featured 18 times in his maiden year, with the accuracy of his boot a revelation as he collected 175 points, 157 of which came in the regular season, to claim third position on the individual rankings, and a call up to the Brave Blossoms. Such was Takamoto's impact, Sanchez was required on just four occasions and has not returned.

Land of our fathers:

Injury might have scrubbed the arrival of the test flyhalf Anscombe, but Wales maintain a presence in Fuchu thanks to the club's Head of Medical, Simon Pope. The Welshman graduated from the University of Wales, and the College of Medicine UK, before finding his way to Tokyo and a role with one of the giants of Japanese rugby.

A Sky full of Stars:

Such is the pantheon of overseas stars who have previously worn the Sungoliath jersey, it is difficult to whittle the list down to a short summary. Australian legends George Gregan, George Smith, Matt Giteau, Mark Connors, and Peter Ryan 'lead the line' from the Wallabies, while Damien McKenzie, Beauden Barrett, Aaron Cruden, Stephen Donald, Simon Maling, Pita Alatini, current USA Eagles coach Alama Ileremia, and Cane highlight the club's All Black alumni. Former World Rugby Player of the Year Schalk Burger, Fourie du Preez, Danie Rossouw and last season's newcomer, Cheslin Kolbe, are the best-known South Africans to have played for the Sungoliath. Last season's



Kenta Fukuda

cameo appearance by Sanchez adds Los Pumas to the list and means 12 countries are now represented among the 64 foreign-capped test players who have played for the club, with these being Argentina, Australia, Canada, England, Fiji, India, Korea (South), New Zealand, Samoa, South Africa, Tonga, and the United States.

History:

Founded in 1980, Tokyo Suntory Sungoliath was affiliated with the Kanto region union, and played in the national business league, before making its debut in nationwide competition for all teams. The ambitious club quickly become a major player on the national front in the 1990s, ensuring it was a foundation team when the Top League kicked off in 2003, where it finished the inaugural season in fourth place. Consistently among the top sides, Suntory won the Top League on five occasions, firstly in 2007-08, and then in the 2011-12 season when Eddie Jones was head coach. The club successfully defended its title in the 2012-13 season when it won all 13 games, going unbeaten again in the 2016-17 campaign when it won its fourth title under the current Yokohama Eagles coach, Keisuke Sawaki. After having won its third title immediately after its second, Suntory repeated the feat

in the 2017-18 season, with its fifth title coming immediately after its fourth. Although Sungoliath has contested three finals in the time since, the club has been denied by Kobe (once) and Saitama (twice) in those matches. Sungoliath has exited in the semi-finals in each of the last two seasons.

Last Year:

The wild ride that was the team's season was best captured by two extraordinary finishes, a week apart, in March. First, an 85th minute try gave Sungoliath a 39-38 win over Verblitz, after having trailed by 14 points at halftime. Seven days later, they even more dramatically blew a 35-10 halftime lead to lose to an 83rd minute penalty goal in a 37-35 defeat by Yokohama. By the time their campaign reached the end of the road, Sungoliath had lost six times, with another drawn. Injury played a major part in their struggles with the side robbed of Anscombe before the season had even begun, while fellow new signings Cane and Kolbe missed significant chunks as well. Although others – notably hooker Kosuke Horikoshi and flyhalf Mikiya Takamoto – stepped up to lead the side to the playoffs, they were wobbling by the finish and were helped that fifth-placed Kobelco Kobe Steelers had got the staggers as well. Losses in all three Fuchu



Mikiya Takamoto

derbies proved pivotal, with the third of those ending Sungoliath's hopes, as Brave Lupus administered the last rights to their archrivals when they came from behind to record an eight-point semi-final victory.

What to Expect:

With their pedigree, Sungoliath will always be in the title fight, but the margins are slimming. The five-time champions of Japan badly need test stars Cane and Kolbe fit and firing for the whole season. Ono will also be hoping to coax greater output from experienced players such as Matsushima,

if they are to keep pace with their fellow top four qualifiers. The arrival of Fukuda offers promise, but he will quickly need to get on the same wavelength as his halves partner Takamoto, if the talented pair are to drive the team to the next level and mount a serious challenge for the title. While Sungoliath will always be Japanese rugby royalty, their recent struggles have removed the intimidation factor they have often enjoyed against lesser rated opponents. This spells trouble as these clubs invest heavily to try to bridge the gap.



Kosuke Horokoshi

TOYOTA VERBLITZ



Where:

Located at Toyota City in the Aichi prefecture, Verblitz are a two-hour drive from Nagoya, Japan's fourth most populous city, and the capital of the prefecture. The city was formerly known as Koromo but the name was changed in 1959 to reflect the fame and economic importance of its major employer. It is home to the iconic Toyota Stadium, a 45,000-seat venue that boasts a retractable roof. The stadium was a core venue when Japan hosted the 2019 Rugby World Cup.

What's in a name:

The origins of the club's name is a compound that is formed from the words "Verde" and "blitz", combining the team's traditional colour (the Italian word for green is verde) with lightning (the German word for lightning is blitz). Lightning was adopted

as a description for the team because it symbolizes Toyota being a rugby pioneer, and a club that constantly amazes the world with its contribution to the development of Japanese rugby. The motif on the club's primary logo is the God of Thunder, a symbol of power and speed.

Brave Blossoms squad members:

Shogo Miura, Yusuke Kizu, Isaiah Mapusua, Rikiya Matsuda, Nicholas McCurran, Kazuki Himeno, Taichi Takahashi, Viliame Tuidraki, Siosaia Fifita, Daichi Akiyama

Non-Japanese test representatives:

Pieter Steph du Toit (South Africa), Aaron Smith (New Zealand), Richie Gray (Scotland)

The Director of Rugby:

Given his reputation, and the success he enjoyed firstly as an assistant and then as

head coach of a stellar All Black side, it is perhaps surprising that Steve Hansen is yet to crack the code for success in Japan. Verblitz has been an active player in the off-season transfer market again ahead of the season, but the participation of big global names such as Kieran Read, Michael Hooper, Willie le Roux, Pieter Steph du Toit, Beauden Barrett and Aaron Smith in the past has thus far failed to translate into on-field success, with the club yet to reach the final under his stewardship. The challenge he faces was perhaps best summed up by last season's remarkable second half against Sungoliath when Verblitz twice fluffed its lines, surrendering what should have been match-winning advantages. After establishing a 14-point buffer at halftime, Toyota looked to have fended off their opponents' subsequent fightback, scoring in the 79th minute to lead by six. That they subsequently muffed the kickoff, giving Sungoliath a last chance to land the winning blow – which they did – symbolized the work that is still to be done at Aichi. With his vast experience, having coached Wales as well as the All Blacks, it would be brave to bet against Hansen getting the club to where it wants to be, but until the players can better manage the big moments, they are likely to remain downstream of the league's frontrunners.

Together again:

Back in harness with his former boss, Ian Foster returns to the coaching box after taking a break following the end of his four years in charge of New Zealand's national team. Although the ultimate prize proved elusive, Foster became the fifth All Black coach to guide the team to the Rugby World

Cup final, having been an assistant to Hansen during the 2015 win and the 2019 semi-final exit. The former Chiefs coach led his side to the final of Super Rugby in 2009 before beginning his All Blacks' career in association with Hansen three years later. Together the pair helmed arguably the greatest New Zealand side in history to 95 wins from 109 tests. Despite an at times turbulent time in charge in his own right, Foster still signed off with a more than acceptable 70 percent record, having steered the All Blacks to 32 victories from 46 assignments. He remains the record holder for the most matches for national provincial championship side Waikato, appearing 148 times during his 14-year provincial career. The former flyhalf was also a member of the foundation Chiefs side in Super Rugby, playing 26 times during the team's first three seasons. Fellow New Zealanders Mike Cron (scrum) and Gilbert Enoka (mental skills) have also linked with Verblitz. Both were constants through Hansen and Fosters' time running the All Blacks.

The main man:

Aaron Smith might have only just arrived in Aichi but despite Verblitz misfiring again last term, New Zealand's most capped scrumhalf quickly became the team's fulcrum, delivering a level of consistency that deserved more than the mid-table position Toyota achieved. The 35-year-old didn't miss a match in his first season, ending his maiden campaign with eight tries, the most by a scrumhalf in the competition. Only winger Taichi Takahashi (who scored 13) bettered Smith's mark for Verblitz. After combining with long-time All Blacks teammate Beauden Barrett in his first season, Smith will have experienced Brave Blossoms pivot Rikiya Matsuda alongside this time. The contribution the pair make to Toyota's hopes of returning to the playoffs for the first time since the game re-started after the Covid shutdown will be crucial.

Local hero:

For all the glitter that is added to the playing and coaching roster by the big names, there is no doubt who the most valuable player at Verblitz is, and he's Japanese. Brave Blossoms backrower Kazuki Himeno is



Steve Hansen and Ian Foster

the heartbeat of the side, and its spiritual as well as officially designated leader. The 30-year-old was born in Aichi and has shown unyielding loyalty to his home club, which he joined as a 23-year-old in 2017. This term will be the eighth season in which he has held captaincy duties at Toyota, despite the presence of a pantheon of big-name foreign internationals at the club through this time. A former Super Rugby Rookie of the Year winner in New Zealand while on a season long loan with the (Otago) Highlanders, Himeno is hugely respected around the world and has been a fantastic servant for Verblitz and Japan, both as a player and an ambassador. Such was his promise, he was called up for his international bow in 2017 after just eight appearances in the Top League. Alongside his test experience, Himeno has played in Super Rugby for the Sunwolves as well as the Highlanders.

Ins & outs:



Kazuki Himeno

Foster and Matsuda aside, the most eyebrow raising off-season recruit by Verblitz is National Rugby League (NRL) star Joseph Manu, who joins after nine years in Australia's national 13-a-side competition. The 27-year-old outside back is a two-time premiership winner with the Sydney Roosters club and has also played for New South Wales in the famed annual State of Origin series. Despite being New Zealand-born, this will be his first experience in rugby union after representing the (New Zealand) Kiwis in international rugby league. Veteran second rower Richie Gray has jetted in from Glasgow, with the 2013 British and Irish Lion adding Japan to his previous club experience at Toulouse, with whom he shared in a French Top 14 title. The 35-year-old, who won 79 test caps for Scotland, follows in the footsteps of Joe Launchbury, after the England international found a home in the second row at Aichi two seasons ago. Matsuda is one of two Brave Blossoms reps joining Toyota, with midfielder Nicholas McCurran, who made his debut for Japan in this year's Pacific Nations Cup, arriving from current league champions Brave Lupus. Samoan prop Samuel Mataafa is another useful addition, while the utility back Matt McGahan, who also boasts a rugby league connection, has switched from Black Rams Tokyo. Barrett is the main departure, with the All Black flyhalf returning to New Zealand after his second sabbatical in Japan.

The Matsuda meter:

Hansen might have taken a gamble with some of his recruits, such as ex-rugby league star Manu, but in Matsuda, he's onto a winner. A two-time league champion with the Wild Knights, the 30-year-old has joined Verblitz after seven seasons at his former club where he often proved a point of difference for his side. Matsuda scored 788 points from 87 appearances for Saitama, 529 of which have been accumulated in the past three seasons, at an average of 11 per game. Last season, the experienced Brave Blossoms star kicked at a 72 percent success rate through 18 matches in the league.

Silent (against the) Knights:

A semi-finalist just once since the game



resumed in Japan after Covid, Toyota's inability to consistently play with the bigger 'kids' in the 'school yard' is best illustrated by their troubles handling Saitama. The Wild Knights have won all seven matches since Covid, hitting 40 points or more in five of those games. This includes one of last season's ties, where Verblitz collapsed in the second half to lose 43-27, after having led 27-8 at halftime. Overall, Saitama has scored 275 points, while conceding 130, for an average scoreline of 39-19. Such statistics make for ugly reading and must be rewritten if Verblitz is to get where it wants to be. Matsuda scored 82 points during those matches, including 21 during the 48-21 victory in 2021. Given he has now switched sides, Hansen will be hoping he scores at a similar rate against the Wild Knights, as he did for them.

Have passport, will travel:

In an age when relocation is no barrier to career advancement, Toyota's new fullback/flyhalf recruit is almost a poster boy for that side of the modern game. The son of Kiwis rugby league legend Hugh McGahan, 31-year-old Matt has signed on for his third club in Japan, appearing for each of Yamaha Jubilo (now Shizuoka Blue Revs) and Black Rams Tokyo, prior to landing at Verblitz. His CV also includes stints with each of the

(Auckland) Blues and Queensland Reds in Super Rugby, while he also tried his hand in the 13-man code in which his father excelled, spending time in Victoria with the Melbourne Storm. It is Japan where his career has borne its 'best fruit' though, with McGahan coming to Aichi on the back of a campaign where he scored 68 points for the Black Rams, despite not being the side's regular goalkicker. This followed a superb season in the second edition of League One, where he finished as the competition's third highest point-scorer with 143. That tally included five tries (neither of the players that finished above him scored a try), while his status as a leader at the Black Rams was recognized when he led the team as a stand-in captain. McGahan begins the next stage of his career having totaled 266 points from 42 appearances across the three seasons of the new league. The includes nine tries.

Try time Taichi:

Fourth on the individual rankings last term, when he scored 13, Toyota should be making better use of the output from their try-hungry winger. Despite Verblitz failing to make the semi-finals in each of the first three League One seasons, 28-year-old Takahashi has now scored 28 times in 36 appearances, showing himself to be one of the competition's most potent finishers. The

tries put Takahashi onto the national team radar, with returning Brave Blossoms coach Eddie Jones including the Verblitz winger in his first squad, after he had been overlooked by the Australians' predecessor Jamie Joseph, for the 2023 Rugby World Cup.

History:

Toyota Motor Industry Rugby Club was founded in 1941 and won the Japan Rugby Championship, which predated the Top League, three times, in 1969, 1978 and 1987. In 1966, Toyota won the local Kansai A-League for the first time. A second title followed in 1970, and a third in 1976, the latter beginning a phenomenal run where the club was Kansai champions for eight consecutive seasons (1976-1983). Toyota won the regional league 15 times, before moving into the Top League for the competition's second season in 2004, where Verblitz made an immediate impression, finishing fourth in its first year.

Last year:

The inability to string together consistent performances on a weekly basis saw Verblitz again fall short of the ranking that might have been expected, given the talent on their roster. The side only twice won back-to-

back matches, while its record in the critical matches against the top four which ultimately decided their fate was underwhelming: Played six, lost five, with the only success (a 35-31 win over Yokohama) coming on the penultimate weekend of qualifying, when it was already too late to change the season narrative.

What to expect:

As always with Verblitz, it's hard to tell. They will again have one of the league's best-known rosters, but such is the cutthroat nature of the competition, Verblitz fell back one place in the finishing order last term (to seventh), despite having won one game more (nine) than they had the previous year. The expansion to a six-team playoff series will help, but as the last campaign showed, even finishing sixth is no given without greater consistency in performance. After another significant off-season of transfer business, the side lacks for nothing in firepower and coaching smarts, but that has been said before. More Verblitz players (10) donned the Brave Blossoms jersey this year than from any other team in the league. Given they are being backed to shine at test level, the players need to step up more consistently for their club.



**TOYOTA VERBLITZ v
TOKYO SUNTORY SUNGOLIATH**

MIE Honda HEAT



Where:

Located in the Kansai region of the island of Honshu, the Heat's home base is at Suzuka-shi in the MIE prefecture, which is a popular tourism destination, just over 400 kilometres south west of Tokyo. The area is home to the well-known amusement park Nagashima Spa Land, as well as the Suzuka International [Motor] Racing Course, and some of the oldest and holiest sites in Shinto, the traditional religion of Japan, including the Ise Grand Shrine and the Tsubaki Grand Shrine.

What's in a name:

The MIE prefecture name was added to the teams' title in 2021 in preparation for participation in Japan Rugby League One. The team moniker reflects the heat created by the engines of the vehicles made by its parent company. It promotes the aspiration

to keep the heat on opponents.

Brave Blossoms Squad Members:

None

Non-Japanese test representatives:

Pablo Matera (Argentina), Franco Mostert (South Africa), Tom Banks (Australia)

The coach:

A test coach for two different nations, one-time selector for the All Blacks, as well as a successful club boss in both his native New Zealand and in Italy, Kieran Crowley will have learned much from his first season in Japan. Arriving late because he was unable to join until his Rugby World Cup commitments with the Azzurri had concluded, the new coach took a while to adapt to his team, taking over a squad that was having to adapt to life in a higher

division, and without their star player. Heat improved in competitiveness as the season progressed, avoiding a bottom-of-the-table finish, before easing past Green Rockets Tokatsu in a hard-fought Replacement Battle. Crowley arrived in Japan having rather surprisingly been let go by Italy after he initiated a renaissance during his four years by backing youth, which is bearing fruit for the Azzurri now. The 63-year-old previously guided Canada at two Rugby World Cups, as well as being a New Zealand selector between 2001 and 2003. Wild Knights coach Robbie Deans was an assistant coach for that side. A former All Black fullback himself, playing 19 tests between 1983 and 1991 from which he scored 105 points, Crowley was a fine servant of the Taranaki province where he was raised, playing 199 games for the union, and scoring 1723 points during a remarkable career that spanned 15 seasons. Heat's boss subsequently compiled an enviable coaching record, which included directing Italy to upset test wins over Australia at home, and Wales in Cardiff.

The main man:

It showed just how important Pablo Matera is to the Heat, that he was the central figure in the club's promotion out of Division Two, and then got back from injury in the nick of time last term to lead them to survival in The Replacement Battle. The former Argentine captain, who returned to the role after a two-year absence in August when he put in a herculean performance to lead Los Pumas to a shock 38-30 win over the All Blacks in Wellington, had earlier played his 100th test for his nation during their series-squaring 33-25 win against France in July. The 31-year-old was limited to just five matches for Mie in the last

campaign after returning from the Rugby World Cup with a leg injury. He made them count, most especially against Shuttles Aichi in the opening tie of The Replacement Battle, scoring a remarkable four tries as Heat gave themselves a healthy advantage with a 57-39 win. The Division Two side fought back bravely in the return leg, but a try from their inspirational backrower helped keep Heat's nose in front on aggregate, ensuring Mie retained its place in the top tier despite a loss on the day. Matera made just as big an impression in his first season at Suzuka, where he featured 12 times. The Argentine has played all over the world, winning a title with the Crusaders, after previously having helped the Buenos Aires-based Jaguares to the Super Rugby final. He has also played in England (Leicester Tigers) and France (Stade Francais).

Local hero:

He might have been away for four years, but there is no doubt that the signing of Brave Blossoms fullback Lemeki Lomano Lava was the one – among the flood of new names – that has excited fans the most. The Auckland-born 35-year-old, who ironically nearly saved his former club Green Rockets Tokatsu from demotion against the Heat two years ago, was a popular figure during his last stint at Mie between 2015 and 2020. Lava played 42 matches, scoring 199 points, while showing glimpses of what was to come in his impressive career as he made his test debut a year after joining Heat. Injured against England at the Rugby World Cup, Lava was unable to inspire ex-Wales coach Wayne Pivac's men to an immediate return to Division One last year as they were demolished by Black Rams Tokyo in The Replacement Battle. Aside from returning the 'love' of fans pleased to see him return, Lava should start his second journey at Suzuka Gardens well primed after being omitted from coach Eddie Jones's Brave Blossoms squad.

Ins & outs:

It's all change at Suzuka as Heat looks to avoid another season on a relegation knife edge. There are 12 new names on the playing roster, and 21 have headed out the door, along with the exits of eight staff. Alongside Lava, the recruitment of the star flyhalf from English club Saracens, Manu



Kieran Crowley

Vunipola, is the biggest coup, although the arrival of Richie Mo'unga's former back up at Fuchu, Hayata Nakao, could also prove an astute move. The serial try-scoring winger Larry Sulunga – who dotted down eight times two seasons ago in Division Two, when he was the section's leading try-scoring merchant – has swapped Urayasu for Suzuka. Mie are going to be well covered for experience in the engine room of the scrum, with the ex-(Wellington) Hurricanes man Mark Abbott joining from the Wild Knights, while Bulls second-rower Janko Swanepoel has jetted in from Pretoria. Shizuoka's midfielder Johnny Faauli who has represented Japan at Sevens is another boasting huge experience added to the roster, while Black Rams hooker Kazuhiro Koike, Steelers utility forward Ikuma Yamada and a trio of backrowers, Tony Hunt (Spears Funabashi Tokyo Bay), Tevita Tupou (Hanazono Liners) and Ryoma Nishimura (Verblitz), all add to the depth of the squad. This was arguably Heat's biggest weakness last term. The former New Zealand Super Rugby pair, backrower Heiden Bedwell-Curtis and flyhalf Mitchell Hunt, lead the departures, both having spent just one season at the club. Flyhalf Sung-ki Park, who leaves after nine years of service, is one of six players who has worn the Heat jersey for six years or more to have headed out the door. This group includes South African centre Clinton Knox who played for the club for six years.

In Frank we trust:

South Africa's loss might be Mie's gain as second rower Francois Mostert limbers up for his fifth season at Suzuka after having joined the club from Gloucester in 2020. The indefatigable Springbok missed much of the world champion's test programme this year after sustaining a leg fracture during South Africa's second test defeat by Ireland in July. Although unplanned, and hardly ideal for the Springboks who were enduring a second row 'injury crisis' at the time, the break does mean that the two-time Rugby World Cup-winner will rejoin his club fresh and revved up to play. The 34-year-old, whose tireless work ethic was best illustrated by his performance in the 2023 Rugby World Cup final where he made more tackles

than anyone else while he was on the field, served Heat well during their promotion-winning season two years ago, and then during last term's survival battle. Mostert will undoubtedly be looking for more support though, which the major changes to the playing roster suggest that he will get. While the addition of some better-known names is going to help, the former Bulls and Lions player is still going to have a big role to play if Heat is to avoid a fourth straight season playing in The Replacement Battle.

Like father, like son:

Son of Elisi, and cousin of Billy and Mako, the youngest member of the professional rugby arm of the Vunipola clan has landed in Japan, following in the footsteps of his ex-Tonga representative father, who spent time in the late 1990s at the Wild Knights. Auckland-born Manu, who has represented England at age-group level, and is eligible for each of England, New Zealand and Tonga, spent 10 years at Saracens, after joining the north London club's academy when he was just 14. He made his senior debut aged 19, in 2019, and often teamed in the backline with former England skipper, Owen Farrell. The 24-year-old played 79 games for the



Manu Vunipola

European heavyweights, scoring 291 points, while sharing in two (England) Premiership titles as well as a Champions (European) Cup. His father played 41 tests for Tonga, including at the 1999 Rugby World Cup, and had been a foundation member of the (ACT) Brumbies in the first season of Super Rugby, three years earlier, as well as later playing for Caerphilly in Wales. Manu's uncle, Fe'ao (father of Mako and Billy) is a former Tonga captain and hooker. Another uncle, Manu, for whom he is named, has served as Tonga's Minister of Sport.

The art of defence:

If there is one aspect above all others that Mie had trouble mastering on their return to Division One, it was defence. While it is never easy coming up a tier, and Heat did well to avoid dropping straight back down again, a record which saw them concede more than 40 points 10 times, with six of those being above 60, should have sent them back from where they came. That it didn't is tribute to the fighting spirit within the squad and a resolve that hardened to the point where eventual champions Brave Lupus Tokyo needed a late try to beat them 8-7 shortly before the playoffs, albeit with a largely second-string line-up. Their improvement was most evident in their final hit out before the Replacement Battle when Kobelco Kobe Steelers had to scramble to edge Heat 33-31. The two teams had met on the opening weekend where Mie shipped 80 points, including 12 tries.

History:

Founded in 1960 as a "Friendship club" at

Suzuka Manufacturing, the club was registered in the local MIE prefecture league the following year before joining the Kansai adult leagues 12 years later. Honda subsequently worked its way up the league system, eventually making it to the Top League in 2009. From there, the club bounced between Top League and the challenge league immediately below, eventually being placed in Division Two for the first season of Japan Rugby League One.

Last year:

After looking relegation certainties for most of the season, Heat found a way out of it, fending off Shuttles Aichi by nine points over two legs to retain their top-tier status, despite losing the second leg of the tie. One win in 16 during the regular season, with a point's differential that was the worst in the league by 151 points, didn't offer encouragement, but Mie found a way to survive and now have a platform to build from. The size of the hurdle Mie eventually cleared to stay up had been rammed home during the first two weekends in which they conceded 23 tries.

What to expect:

After last season's difficult return to Division One, the brains trust at Mie will be looking for a less anxious ride this time around, having recruited smartly, critically adding to their depth. Although a run for the title is probably too much to hope for, fans will expect far more competition from their team in matches this term. A home win or two would be nice for the fans. This is something they were denied last season when Heat lost all eight of its games at Suzuka Gardens.



**MIE Honda HEAT v
Toyota Industries Corporation Shuttles Aichi
in The Replacement Battle**



Where?:

With the stunning and spiritual Mt Fuji within view of the training facility, the Black Rams Tokyo are based in Setagaya which is located at the southwestern corner of Tokyo's special wards with the Tama River separating the boundary between Tokyo Metropolis and Kanagawa Prefecture. The ward, which has a population of close to one million people, is one of 23 special wards in Tokyo, and has the largest population among them.

What's in a name?

While the club itself dates to formation in 1953, the title as the Black Rams, and black playing strip, only goes back to the start of the Top League in 2003. The name reflects the teams' black jersey, with the Ram chosen to describe how the players are always up against their opponents, reminiscent of a

ram with a fierce fighting spirit. The Ram that adorns the jersey is known as Rammaru.

Brave Blossoms squad members:
Amato Fakatava, Yuki Ikeda, Ichigo Nakakusu

Non-Japanese test representatives:
TJ Perenara (New Zealand), Liam Gill (Australia), Nathan Hughes (England)

The head coach:

New arrival Tabai Matson is back in Japan after previously acting as a player/assistant coach for Yamaha Jublio (now Shizuoka Blue Revs), as the club was known then, between 2001 and 2006. A member of the inaugural (Canterbury) Crusaders side at the start of Super Rugby, the former midfielder was an uncapped All Black in 1995 and 1996, before playing two tests for his native

Fiji in 1999. Since getting into coaching the 51-year-old, who was coached by Saitama Wild Knights coach Robbie Deans in the title-winning Canterbury national provincial championship team in 1997, has travelled widely. He returned to New Zealand to assist with Canterbury (who he later led to a title as head coach), the Crusaders (where he was an assistant to Brave Lupus Tokyo coach Todd Blackadder), Fiji and the Chiefs. Matson also filled head coaching positions at English Premiership clubs Bath, and more recently Harlequins, before linking with the Black Rams. He was appointed to replace Peter Hewat, who has headed to England to join ex-Green Rockets Director of Rugby Michael Cheika's coaching team at Leicester Tigers. Matson is being joined at Setagaya by ex-All Black prop Carl Hoefft, who previously worked with the Dynaboards.

The main man:

It didn't take long for the Auckland-born Fijian backrower Nathan Hughes to take command as the Black Rams' chief attacking weapon. The 22-cap former England international scored 10 tries from 16 appearances last term, to go with the 11 he accumulated on debut in Japan two seasons ago. The power Hughes possesses has made him a handful near the goal-line, with opponents often unable to stop him even though they know what is coming when the Black Rams set up camp in that area of the field.

Local hero:

Scorer of an outrageous chip and chase try against Argentina at the 2023 Rugby World Cup, Amato Fakatava boasts a skill set that meant new Brave Blossoms coach Eddie

Jones couldn't leave him out of his test combinations. A favourite of the Black Rams faithful, who have often feted the Timaru (New Zealand)-schooled 29-year-old with personalized merchandise, Fakatava was relatively quiet last season, even though he featured 13 times, although he sprang to life when it mattered in The Replacement Battle. Already ahead on aggregate after the opening tie, Fakatava scored twice in the second leg as the Black Rams flattened Green Rockets Tokatsu to confirm another season in Division One.

Ins & outs:

The return to Japan of scrumhalf TJ Perenara was the big news out of the Black Rams camp on the recruitment front, with the 32-year-old signing up after featuring in nine matches for the Red Hurricanes in 2021. Perenara wrapped up his (Wellington) Hurricanes career this year, having appeared for the side on a whopping 163 occasions, while a return to the All Blacks after a year away allowed him to move above Justin Marshall and into second position among New Zealand's most capped scrumhalves (Aaron Smith of Verblitz leads that list). Perenara has been joined at the Black Rams by veteran Australian backrower Liam Gill. Several long-serving players left the club after the last campaign, with scrumhalf Masatoshi Nakamura making way after a phenomenal 13 seasons (2011-24) while hooker Kazuhiro Koike and prop Takao Makabe hung up their boots after nine years' service, and fullback Takehiro Nakazawa after eight. Backline utility Matt McGahan has headed to Aichi to join Verblitz after five seasons, three more than ex-Wales midfielder Hadleigh Parkes, who returned to New Zealand. Along with Hewat's departure, his assistant, Irishman Ruaidhri Murphy has also left the club.

World of their own:

The Black Rams can't be accused of taking it easy during the off-season, with eight of the squad heading offshore to gain international experience. Five of the players landed in Australia where they featured for Canberra's Gungahlin Eagles, while two signed up for leading New Zealand province Hawke's Bay, and one headed to club rugby



in Christchurch playing for Belfast, the club of former All Blacks and Kobelco Steelers title-winning coach, Wayne Smith.

Go Nakakusu:

McGahan's departure after scoring 266 points for the Black Rams from 42 appearances in League One moves the goal-kicking duties on to flyhalf Ichigo Nakakusu who debuted for the club last season, where he made 11 appearances. It's a major responsibility given the tight margins in the lower rungs of the table, although the 24-year-old, who was a Japanese schools representative earlier in his career and lists All Black legend Dan Carter as his favourite player, was up to the mark during the Replacement Battle, kicking five conversions in each match. Experienced Australian utility back Isaac Lucas, who has interchanged with McGahan at flyhalf in the past, provides another option, although Nakakusu's custody of the kicking tee during the back-to-back wins over Green Rockets Tokatsu suggests the Keio University product will be the first cab off the rank. Nakakusu's promise was recognized when he was included in Japan's tour squad for the November internationals in Europe.

Falling foul:

Matson had a big bucket list to work on

when he arrived at Setagaya but one aspect sure to have been near the top of the new coaches' clip board in the off-season is the side's discipline. A part of the game his predecessor could never quite rein in, the Black Rams only improved slightly last term on their 'notoriety' from the second edition of the league, which they ended as the most penalized team in the competition, with 227 conceded at an average of 14 per game. While better 'behaved' than the bottom two, Hanazono (201) and Mie (184), last season, the Black Rams still gave up 175 penalties, which undoubtedly played its part in their drop into The Replacement Battle. Without improvement in this key area, another bumpy ride awaits.

The photocopy derby:

There is an additional edge every time the Black Rams play against the Yokohama Eagles, in what has come to be known as a 'derby' due to the similarities in production of their parent companies, Ricoh and Canon. With both large producers of office products, the photocopy name was an appropriate moniker for a rivalry that goes beyond the field of play. Canon gained the bragging rights last term after the Eagles won both meetings, 24-8 and 31-12. The wins continued the dominance the Eagles have enjoyed in the rivalry since League One



Amato Fakatava

began, with the Yokohama side now having beaten their rivals four times in the first three seasons of the competition, after winning 30-12 in the league's maiden season, and 34-13 a year later. Once he has sorted out the Black Rams' discipline, snapping the run of defeats against their major rivals is another high on the 'to do' list for the new coach.

The wandering Wallaby:

The transfer from D-Rocks to the Black Rams adds another chapter to the career of the 15-test ex-Wallaby backrower, who is suiting up in his third Japanese club jersey since arriving at the Shining Arcs in 2020. The 32-year-old Gill made his name with the Queensland Reds, sharing in the state's Super Rugby title in 2011, before taking his talents offshore on a journey that passed through French clubs Toulon and Lyon prior to reaching Japan. After starting out at the Shining Arcs, he featured in the D-Rocks' first two seasons, helping the side to promotion, before making way for the arrival at the club of Springbok Jasper Wiese. Gill has now landed at Black Rams, where his extensive experience and proven leadership is going to come in handy, while forming a formidable backrow trio alongside Fakatava and Hughes.

History:

Founded in 1953, the club sprang to prominence in 1972 and 1973 when it twice won the Japan Rugby Championship, the forerunner to Top League. Ricoh was a foundation member when the Top League was formed in 2003 and has only missed one season since, when it was relegated at the end of the 2007-2008 campaign. The Black Rams immediately returned after winning the challenger tournament the following year. Among the big names to have worn the clubs' jersey are the Rugby World Cup winning trio of Stephen Larkham (Australia), Ma'a Nonu (New Zealand) and Franco Mostert (South Africa) as well as the well-performed England test forward James Haskell.

Last year:

Narrow defeats against Verblitz (15-8) and the Dynaboars (25-17) on the opening two weekends set the tone for a campaign that always looked fated to end in The Replacement Battle. While the Black Rams were largely competitive in defeat, with four of their 13 losses by margins of seven points or less, their inability to finish off those matches almost cost them their Division One place. Three wins at the end ensured their survival, with the side closing the regular season on a positive after a 31-24 win over the Dynaboars. The confidence gained was



Liam Gill

carried into a one-sided Replacement Battle where they dispatched the previously well-performed Green Rockets Tokatsu by 74 points over the two legs, winning the second of those games 55-0.

What to expect:

Matson has faced some big challenges since he became a coach, but few will have been as big as that he signed on for at the Black

Rams. While the recruitment of a player of the quality of Perenara will give the club a lift, and the cards have fallen kindly with the draw, placing them on what looks to be the easier side of conference system, the new coach will rely heavily on his senior players to lead the way. A good start is vital to build on the confidence the end of last season may have given.



**RICOH BlackRams Tokyo v
YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES**

DIVISION 2



NEC GREEN ROCKETS TOKATSU

Kyushudenryoku KyudenVOLTEx

SHIMIZU KOTO BLUE SHARKS

Toyota Industries Corporation

Shuttles Aichi

NIPPON STEEL KAMAISHI SEAWAVES

HANAZONO KINTETSU LINERS

HINO RED DOLPHINS

RedHurricanes Osaka

HINO RED DOLPHINS



Where:

Located in Hino, the ward from which it takes its name, the Red Dolphins' home is in the western area of Tokyo, rugby's hotbed, with Hino city located near Fuchu, a ward shared by heavyweights Tokyo Sungoliath and Brave Lupus Tokyo. With a population in the vicinity of 200,000, Hino is the headquarters of Hino Motors, the company from which the Red Dolphins take their name. Hino Motors, which is a subsidiary of Toyota, is known for its semi-trailer trucks, box trucks and buses.

What's in a name:

The dolphin logo, represents intelligence and unity, which the team aims to project, on and away from the field. The logo on the club jersey is surrounded by flames that represent fighting spirit, expressing indomitable strength, and is designed with the hope that the team will be united as

Team HINO.

Brave Blossoms Squad Members:
None

Non-Japanese test representatives:
Rory Arnold (Australia), Augustine Pulu (New Zealand)

The head coach:

A former national representative, appearing 18 times for the Brave Blossoms, including at the 2003 Rugby World Cup, Yuji Sonoda has the reins at the Red Dolphins, having previously coached Kobelco Kobe Steelers. The ex-scrumhalf was in charge at Kobe for five years, the first two as a player/coach, as he brought the curtains down on 12-seasons wearing the Steelers jersey into battle, much of which was spent captaining the side. An alma mater of Hosei University,

Sonoda returned to coach the institution's premier team post Kobe, before rejoining the professional ranks with Hino. Among his support staff is the former Lions/Cats flyhalf from Super Rugby, South African Andre Pretorius.

Ins & outs:

While promotion brings with it a serious challenge, the Red Dolphins have been surprisingly quiet on the transfer front, with the Red Hurricanes' English-born Australian backrower Josh Fenner and ex-Sharks (South Africa) centre Murray Coster the most notable newcomers. Otherwise, the squad is almost identical to the promotion-winning roster from last term.

Roaring Rory:

Despite the club's see-sawing fortunes in the time since Covid, one constant has been the presence of the 32-cap ex-Wallaby Rory Arnold. The towering 34-year-old, who played 73 matches for the Brumbies in Super Rugby, as well as a brief stint with Griquas in the domestic South African Currie Cup competition, arrived at Hino following three years with Toulouse in France. Arnold played 55 games for the glamour Top 14 club before

moving to Japan, later resisting overtures to return to Australia as the Red Dolphins sat out the second edition of League One due to off-field complications. Standing 208cm and weighing in at 128kg, Arnold is one of the biggest men in the entire league and used those physical advantages to good effect to dominate in Division Three. His challenge now, like his teammates, is to repeat that dominance at the next level as the Red Dolphins 'swim' with bigger fish!

Heavyweight Hickie:

Given Hino's dominance in Division Three last term, it's perhaps surprising that the Red Dolphins provided neither the leading point-scorer or try-scorer in the section. Even so, the chief Hino 'boot', diminutive flyhalf Simon Hickie, still finished third on the rankings, five short of three figures. Although the 30-year-old New Zealander finished 61 points behind the grade's runaway leader, Koto's Conrad van Wyk, Hickie's 95 points were collected from just seven games with the healthy average return of a tick under 14 per game. This was less than a point below the 14.1 return per game maintained by van Wyk. A fine all-round sportsman, Hickie was also in the first XI cricket side at his school,



Rory Arnold

Auckland's prestigious King's College.

Triple threat:

Tries might be harder to find this term than last, but the statistics say Hino's opponents will need to be on guard against hooker Towa Taniguchi, centre Sora Ouchi and backrower Shun Nakashika. Each scored nine tries in the title-winning campaign, joint second behind van Wyk. The Red Dolphins finished the campaign with 77 tries, which was one more than was scored by Red Hurricanes Osaka when they went unbeaten in the section two seasons ago, and 19 more than the second-placed Blue Sharks.

History:

Founded by workers at the Hino Motor company, the Red Dolphins have been around for a long time, being inaugurated in 1950. Prior to the advent of semi-professional rugby in Japan, Hino knocked around in the local Kanto leagues, see-sawing between Division One and Division Two of that competition. The creation of more formal national competition saw the Red Dolphins gradually work their way up the ladder, eventually finding their way into the Top League shortly before Covid temporarily closed the game down. After a difficult ride in the maiden edition of Japan Rugby League One, the Red Dolphins were relegated to Division Two, and then dropped out of the competition altogether due to an unfortunate off-field circumstance. Last year's triumphant return put that to bed, returning the

club to the competition's second tier.

Last year:

That the Red Dolphins didn't lose a game until the title was already theirs says it all about how dominant Hino was last term as they annexed the Division Three crown. Following a statement win against chief rivals Koto Blue Sharks on the season's opening day, the 30-16 result proved an indication of what was to follow: 11 games unbeaten until the final day of the campaign, with the only blemish a surprise draw with Chugoku Red Regulators, by which time the Red Dolphins were so far in front in the league, it was all but over. The 26-26 tie was the only occasion up until their final day loss to the Blue Sharks that Hino was held below 30 points, surpassing 60 on three occasions, while scoring 59 on another.

What to expect:

Given the challenges of promotees who have gone before them, the Red Dolphins will know that an almighty scrap awaits if they are to avoid the fate of an immediate return to Division Three. The expansion of the second tier to eight teams may further intensify the battle for survival, meaning a good start will be vital. The way the Red Dolphins succeeded last year means the side are confident ahead of the new challenge, which is reflected by the club's limited off-field business, preferring instead to back the core of the squad who delivered a return to the new grade. It's a risky play, but one Hino will be hoping comes off.

NIPPON STEEL KAMAISHI SEAWAVES



Where:

The club's home, the Pacific Ocean coastal city of Kamaishi, is in the Iwate prefecture in northern Honshu, 160 kilometres northeast of Sendai, and 560 kilometres north of Tokyo. The city is best known in recent times for the powerful earthquake that struck in 2011, with the subsequent Tsunami causing widespread damage in Kamaishi. Nearly 6000 people were killed across the prefecture because of the combined force of the magnitude nine earthquake and the following Tsunami.

What's in a Name:

Formerly known as Nippon Steel Corporation Kamaishi when it was established, the club took on its current name in 2001 to reflect one of the major natural features of its home city, which is by the sea. Kamaishi is located in the Kitakami mountains on the

Sanriku rias coast and has a population of just over 32,000. The club's identity with the steel industry returned last season, with the club's corporate name changed to Japan Steel Kamaishi Seawaves. Colloquially, the team is better known as 'The Iron Man of the North'.

Brave Blossoms Squad Members:
None

Non-Japanese test representative:
Ben Nee-Nee (Samoa)

The coach:

A former Kamaishi player, Yasuo Suda played for the IBM club before joining the Seawaves in 2010. He had an emotional introduction to Kamaishi rugby, taking his maiden bow in the first home match the team played after the 2011 earthquake. While the Seawaves have flirted with relegation in

Kamaishi Unosumai Memorial Stadium



recent seasons, Suda's sure hand has kept them up, although not without the odd heart flutter for supporters in The Replacement Battles.

Ins & outs:

Ex Mie Heat flyhalf Mitchell Hunt is the major off-season recruit although he has been accompanied to Iwate by his former Tasman Mako teammate, backrower Angus Fletcher. Hunt steps in for the well-travelled ex-Western Force and Tokyo Sungoliath pivot Joshua Stander, who has departed after two seasons. Prop Finn Yates has returned to Manawatu in New Zealand's national provincial championship after one season in Japan, while the long-serving second rower Sotaro Takahashi has exited after seven years, having first pulled on the Seawaves jersey in 2017.

Henry's iron will for the try-line:

Given they finished bottom of the table, veteran Jamie Henry's effort in finishing joint-top of the try-scoring rankings for Division Two last term was some achievement. The evergreen 34-year-old, who had transferred from Toyota Verblitz, scored eight tries in the regular season on debut at Iwate, and one more in the Replacement Battle. His nine tries showed there was still plenty in the tank for a player who appeared for each of the Brave Blossoms and the Sunwolves earlier in his career. Henry played one test for Japan in 2018, after having been a part of the country's Sevens side previously. He also

appeared for the Sunwolves in 2019, playing four matches before the team's final season was curtailed by the Covid pandemic, which saw that year's Super Rugby season cancelled.

Tall on tries:

Samoan international Ben Nee-Nee is the tallest member of the Seawaves squad. He's also one of the team's 'tallest' try-scorers, adding another two last term to the seven he scored in the second edition of Japan Rugby League One, when he finished as the Seawaves' leading try-scorer. The former Super Rugby second rower landed in Iwate three years ago, after playing eight times for the (Auckland) Blues in 2018 and making his test debut later the same year. As well as his season in Super Rugby, the 30-year-old also represented Auckland and North Harbour in New Zealand's national provincial championship, featuring for the former in the competition again this year. Nee-Nee was a member of the Samoan side which lost to the Brave Blossoms in this year's Pacific Nations Cup.

Hunting for glory:

After pausing his Super Rugby career three games short of a century, spread across the (Canterbury) Crusaders (45) and the (Otago) Highlanders (52), the Seawaves' big off-season capture will be hoping a move beside the seaside will re-ignite his career after a disappointing first season in Japan. Hunt joined the Heat with high hopes, but

these never eventuated, moving on after a deflating experience where he appeared 14 times, scoring just 36 points. Those statistics were well down on the norm for a player who was a two-time title-winner with the Crusaders (2017, 2018), as well as a national provincial championship gold medallist with Tasman Mako (2019). While not always the first-choice goal-kicker across his two Super Rugby sides, the 29-year-old still scored an impressive 396 points (247, Highlanders, 149, Crusaders), alongside 562 at the next level down for Tasman. Given the Seawaves survived Replacement Battles in each of the last two campaigns, and face even greater jeopardy in an enlarged section this time, the proven point-scoring and wealth of experience their new man brings could be the game-changer the side needs.

History:

Once known as the 'Iron Man of the North' during a period when Nippon Steel Corporation Kamaishi won seven straight Japan titles, the club was re-established beyond the Nippon Steel Corporation – who remain a major corporate supporter – in 2001, when it took on a wider public 'connection' beyond its company foundation. In a tight community, the club has assumed an ambassadorial-type role for the region. This was never more in evidence than the aftermath of the 2011 earthquake in which Iwate's fighting spirit was represented by the team in national competition. This showed that – even despite the earthquake and tsunami – the people of Kamaishi remained resolute and united, in a not dissimilar manner to Super Rugby's Crusaders, who made that competition's final just a few months after the Christchurch earthquake of the same year.

Last year:

While Kamaishi's season went to the Replacement Battle again, this time the ride was far more comfortable as the Seawaves despatched Kurita Water Gush Akishima at the same stage for the second year running. Having recovered from a big deficit to force a draw and keep the tie open after the home leg the season before, the Seawaves put themselves in pole position by overpowering their rivals 37-19 at Morioka. Akishima never looked like recovering the 18-point deficit, eventually folding by 15 points in the return

match. While Kamaishi won just once during the regular season, their victory over Kyuden Voltex could easily have been added to from the games against Red Hurricanes Osaka, which were lost by two, five and three points respectively.

What to expect:

The addition of Hunt adds a layer of expertise from the upper echelons of New Zealand Super Rugby that could make a big difference, as the Seawaves seek to push on from the survival slogs of recent seasons. Winning at home remains problematic for the side, with Iwate having seen just three wins in the last three years. As the most far flung of all clubs in Japan Rugby League One, and therefore the biggest journey for visiting teams, Kamaishi needs to be less 'welcoming' hosts than they have been. Attend to that deficiency and a move up the table will follow.



Benjamin Nee-Nee

KYUSHUDENRYOKU KYUDENVOLTEx



Where:

Located on the island of Kyushu, Kyuden Voltex are based in Fukuoka. The city's only representative since the beginning of League One, this season they will share the city with competition newcomers, LeRIRO Fukuoka. Voltex previously had the now defunct Munakata Sanix Blues and Coca-Cola Red Sparks for 'company' during the Top League era. The team plays its matches at the modern Level 5 stadium which was a host venue during the 2019 Rugby World Cup. The city, which is part of the heavily industrialised Fukuoka-Kitakyushu zone, is the fifth largest in Japan with an estimated population of over 2.5 million.

What's in a Name:

While the name was decided by the public after the club was promoted to the Top League in 2007, the electrical theme links to

Kyushu Electric Power, the team's founder. Although it translates from Japanese into English as Voltex; in Japanese the word is understood to mean voltage. The voltage is a force that creates the emotional intensity and enthusiasm which is expected from the players and the team. Combined with the technology and skills required of the electrical industry, the Voltex are described by their fans as a team with solid skills in fighting hotly. The team emblem features seven lines on the top and at the bottom of the logo, which represent the seven prefectures of Kyushu.

Brave Blossoms Squad Members:
None

Non-Japanese test representative:
Tom Taylor (New Zealand)

The New Man in Charge:

After being parachuted in at the last minute following the sudden departure of the Australian Zane Hilton, a month into last year's pre-season, Yuuki Imamura will now take charge on a fulltime basis, having steered the side clear of relegation in an interim coach capacity last term. Imamura was previously backs coach during the club's rise out of Division Three in the second edition of League One.

Northern Exposure:

With the division set up for a dogfight ahead of this season's expansion, Voltex enlisted help from the Northern Hemisphere to steer clear of trouble last term in the form of ex-Newcastle Falcons second rower Sean Robinson and New Zealand-born former Carcassonne backrower Aaron Carroll. The pair made a big difference, helping to keep the team's head above the waterline as they avoided the end-of-season promotion/relegation series. The 33-year-old Robinson arrived from Kingston Park after spending 10 years in the (England) Premiership, having started with the Falcons in 2014. Carroll played three matches for the Blues in Super Rugby before heading to France for two seasons where he played 41 Pro D2 matches in the south of the country before heading for Japan.

The Global Cast:

Alongside ex-All Black Tom Taylor, Robinson

**Yuuki Imamura**

and Carroll add to the international 'blend' at the Voltex, the core of which is made up of Australians, led by the Brumbies back-rower Colby Fainga'a. Ex-Queensland Reds scrumhalf Spencer Jones and the former Australian Under-20s and Wild Knights midfielder Charlie Worthington are also at the club, with Jones having been educated at The Southport School on the Gold Coast, the facility that also produced Wild Knights and Brave Blossoms centre Dylan Riley. Auckland-born former New Zealand Sevens representative Sam Vaka, whose wide-ranging career has seen him play in Super Rugby for the (Waikato) Chiefs as well as Agen in France, has offered great value since he joined in 2021, while Tongan-born second-rower Ray Tatafu played for each of Counties Manukau and Southland in New Zealand's national provincial championship before making his way to Fukuoka the same year that Vaka linked with the club.

**Akihito Yamada**



Tom Taylor

Age is Just a Number:

Five tries from nine matches showed the veteran ex-Brave Blossoms star Akihito Yamada has still got it, even as he zeros in on his 40th birthday! The now 39-year-old ended last season as the Voltex' leading try-scorer, four ahead of Vaka, who led the way the previous year. Having scored 10 tries during the previous season's promotion-winning campaign, Vaka was restricted to just five appearances last term due to injury. Yamada represented Japan on 25 occasions between 2013 and 2018, while also representing the country at Sevens. He spent a year at the Western Force in 2015 and later appeared 16 times for the Sunwolves during the Japanese-based outfit's Super Rugby journey. Yamada played nine seasons at the Wild Knights between 2010 and 2019, scoring 95 tries from 115 matches, before returning to his native Fukuoka via a short stint at the Shining Arcs which was cut short by the Covid pandemic. The well-travelled winger has also played for the Seattle Seawolves in Major League Rugby in the United States.

Tailormade Taylor:

After dropping down a grade following two seasons at Brave Lupus Tokyo, former All Black utility back Tom Taylor proved a good 'get' for Voltex. The ex (Canterbury) Crusader, whose father Warwick was part of New Zealand's winning team at the inaugural Rugby World Cup in 1987, provided stability and an assured hand for the backline, even if individual points 'collection' became a secondary goal with winger Ren Hagiwara

handling the goal-kicking. A three-cap All Black, Taylor arrived in Japan after stints with Toulon and Pau in the French Top 14, which had followed 58 matches in Super Rugby across four seasons, and three test for New Zealand in 2013. The 35-year-old landed in Fukuoka following two bountiful seasons in Tokyo where he had scored 208 points for Brave Lupus.

Last Year:

Three wins from 11 attempts might sound like a skimpy return, but it was enough to see Voltex avoid a repeat of the previous season's Replacement Battle, protecting their status after winning promotion two years ago.

What to Expect:

While finishing fifth of six might not seem like cause for optimism of a title tilt in the new season, especially with two additional rivals to be faced, Voltex aren't as bad as you might think, and could be a dark horse for a promotion challenge. Although it wasn't until the fourth attempt that Voltex gained a win – a success over Kamaishi that they would repeat in the section-ending Placement Round – the Fukuoka club was narrowly denied on four occasions last term. They were beaten once by five points, twice by four, and once by a single point, with the latter loss coming against the eventually promoted Urayasu D-Rocks. The lesson in that is clear: start winning the close games and the road to a surprise promotion might be open.

HANAZONO KINTETSU LINERS



Where:

The flagship for Japan's second city, Osaka, in Japan Rugby League One, Hanazono Kintetsu Liners are based in Higashi Osaka city and play at the city's boutique Hanazono Rugby Stadium, which has approximate capacity of 28,000.

What's in a name:

Kintetsu is an Osaka-based Japanese passenger rail company, so it was appropriate that its rugby club adopted a name with industry connotations. Derived from the Kintetsu Limited Express "Urban Liner", the team's name expresses the sense of speed and power in rugby. It was made official in 2003 when the club entered the inaugural Top League, with the addition of Hanazono to the title to reflect its Kansai roots at the commencement of Japan Rugby League One.

Brave Blossoms Squad Member:

Sanalla Waqa

Non-Japanese international test representatives:

Quade Cooper (Australia), Will Genia (Australia), Akira Ioane (New Zealand)

The head coach:

Set for his second season at the helm, Shogo Mukai has been reinforced for the new campaign, being joined by ex-Tonga head coach Toutai Kefu and former Hanazono backs coach John Mulvihill, with both Australians coming on board as backs coach. Mukai is a widely experienced coach himself, having led Japan at the 2003 Rugby World Cup, after attending the inaugural tournament in 1987 as part of the country's playing roster. Mukai previously coached TOSHIBA Brave Lupas for whom he also served for 10 years

as a player. The 63-year-old later spent 15 years in total in charge of the now defunct Coca-Cola Red Sparks. After winning 13 caps as a fullback for Japan between 1996 and 1997, Mukai turned to coaching and took Brave Lupus to consecutive nationwide titles in 1997 and 1998. That success saw him elevated to charge of the national team, winning nine of his 24 matches before stepping down. He returned to coaching a year later with the Red Sparks, leading the side to promotion to the Top League in his second season. Under Mukai's guidance, Coca-Cola retained its status for six seasons despite boasting one of the smallest budgets in the league.

In's & out's:

The pursuit of an immediate return to Division One necessitated an active off-season in the transfer market, but Hanazono have come up with some good ones, most notably All Black backrower Akira Ioane. (NSW) Waratahs flyhalf Will Harrison is another interesting acquisition from Super Rugby, while utility forward Mitchell Brown has arrived from Yokohama and fullback Hiroki Kumoyama is a new arrival from Tokyo Sungoliath. Winger Joshua Nora has been picked up by the Wild Knights while the Australian-born ex-Scotland second row Ben Toolis has also left the club.

Operation Ioane:

Overlooked by first-season New Zealand coach Scott Robertson, Hanazono's new All Black recruit will arrive in Japan well motivated to get his club into Division One, but also to prove a point to those doubters at home. The barnstorming 29-year-old, who as a former Sevens player looks superbly suited by the opportunity to play on Japan's hard grounds, jets in after playing his part in the (Auckland) Blues first title in a full Super Rugby season since 2003. Elder brother of the incumbent All Black centre Reiko, Akira has played 21 tests himself, alongside 119 appearances for the Blues, and 63 for Auckland in New Zealand's national provincial championship. The pair's father Eddie, an international for Samoa, also played in Japan, where Auckland-born Akira spent his formative years, before the family returned to New Zealand.

The Quade factor:



Toutai Kefu

It's hard for the name Quade Cooper not to spring to mind as soon as you think of the Hanazono Kintetsu Liners. Such has been the mercurial ex-Wallaby's level of influence at the club since he joined five seasons ago when he drove their successful promotion bid. Cooper won the division's Player of the Year award at the end of a successful debut in Japan, where he scored 80 points. The following year, he was their point of difference again, returning from long-term injury suffered on international duty just in time to get them past the previously unbeaten Urayasu D-Rocks in The Replacement Battle. Even Cooper couldn't save them last term though, the 36-year-old is still in Osaka, and will be determined to make sure that Hanazono's stay in Division Two is no longer than it needs to be. The Auckland-born flyhalf represented Australia on 80 occasions between 2008 and 2023, with three of his former Wallaby coaches now in Japan. Cooper was given his test debut against Italy at Padua by Saitama mentor Robbie Deans, before later being coached by each of Kobelco Kobe Steelers boss Dave Rennie and ex-Wallaby and current Brave Blossoms coach Eddie Jones.

History:

Founded in 1927 by employees of what was then the Osaka Denki Kido (later to become known as Kinki Nippon Railway or 'Kintetsu'), the team was established officially as a corporate rugby club two years later. Kintetsu spent much of its history competing in the amateur ranks within the competitive Kansai leagues in West Japan, as well as in corporate tournaments which it often dominated. The club won its first title as Osaka Company Tournament champion in 1936 and went on to win the Japan Company



Quade Cooper

Tournament eight times between 1948 and 1975, including a remarkable achievement in the 1956-57 competition when no opponent could even score a point against Kintetsu. In the mainstream of Japanese rugby, Kintetsu sprang to national prominence in 1956 and 1957 by winning the ninth and 10th Japan Company Rugby Football Championship. The club has won the Japan Rugby Championships six times in its history and was invited to participate in the inaugural Top League when the competition kicked off in 2003. After finishing 10th in the first season, Kintetsu was relegated from the league in its second year, beginning a life that has resulted in some yo-yo-ing between the premier league and the division below. Between 2008 and 2017, Kintetsu enjoyed its longest run in Top League, although its highest placing during that period was fifth in 2011. Relegated in 2017, the club had to wait until the second edition of League One to return after winning the maiden Japan Rugby League One Division Two title, before dropping down again two seasons later. One of the club's proudest days came in March 1959 when it defeated the touring British Columbia side, which was known then as the Canadian national team. British Columbia played eight games during

the visit with the only defeat suffered when beaten 16-9 by Kintetsu.

Last year:

Beaten by a single score on the opening weekend for the second year in a row, Liners never recovered. It took 14 weeks before they won their only game (against Black Rams Tokyo), which was only one week less than it had taken to enter the winner's circle a year earlier. The difference this time was that they were unable to dodge relegation, as they had a year earlier, with D-Rocks gaining revenge for their defeat in the corresponding series last year in a nail-biting Promotion/ Relegation Match. After losing the opening game, Liners looked like they were about to save themselves again when they led on aggregate with 25 minutes remaining in the second leg, but they faltered as the finish line loomed, with the Division Two side staging a big finish to win the tie by 14 points.

What to expect:

Demotion hit hard, but Hanazono are approaching the challenge of bouncing straight back to Division One proactively, with some clever signings a statement of intent, on and off the field. Harrison should provide

an excellent foil to Cooper's genius, as well as a handy goal-kicking option, although the latter will remain the key to the Liners' hopes of topping the Division Two pile. With the highly skilled loane almost a forward clone

of Cooper, Hanazono will be fun to watch. They also should have a big say, both in the destination of the section title, but also The Replacement Battle which follows.



Semisi Masirewa

NEC GREEN ROCKETS TOKATSU



Where:

Located in the Chiba prefecture, the Green Rockets home of Tokatsu is a new one, having moved from nearby Abiko before the start of Japan Rugby League One. The venue is approximately 40 kilometres from central Tokyo. Because of its proximity and excellent public transport links, a sizeable proportion of the city's resident population commute into Tokyo for work each day. The club's home stadium, Kashiwanoha Park, has a capacity of 20,000.

What's in a name:

The rocket represents the challenge for the team to 'rise to be the shiniest star in the (Japan rugby) universe'. The green speaks to the colour of the team's regular playing kit. The reaching for the star's theme even extends to the club's mixed gender cheer team who are known as the Sparkles.

Brave Blossoms Squad Member:
None

Non-Japanese Test Representatives:
Rhys Patchell (Wales), Nick Phipps (Australia), Jake Ball (Wales)

The head coach:

Six Nations-winning coach Wayne Pivac enters his second season in charge with a greater knowledge of the landscape in Japan, and the challenge he has at Chiba, after a strong start to his maiden campaign petered out, finishing with five straight losses. The New Zealander arrived at the Green Rockets needing to stabilise the club after a tumultuous season where Director of Rugby Michael Cheika left mid-stream, and the side was later relegated. The former Wales coach is no stranger to turmoil having

been relieved of his duties less than a year after orchestrating an upset success in the 2021 Six Nations. The 61-year-old won 13 of his 34 matches in his second stint as an international coach, having previously guided Fiji between 2004 and 2007, although he stood down from the role before the Pacific Islanders made the quarterfinals at that year's Rugby World Cup. At club level, Pivac guided Welsh club Scarlets to the Pro 12 title (the forerunner to the current United Rugby Championship). He also coached Northland, Auckland, and North Harbour in the national provincial championship in his homeland, winning the Division One title twice with Auckland, and Division Two with Northland.

Ins & outs:

The arrival of ex-Wales flyhalf Rhys Patchell from Super Rugby's (Otago) Highlanders was the headline act amongst the transfer business, although the Welshman didn't come from Dunedin alone, with teammate Pari Parkinson also relocating. The 28-year-old second row played six games for the Maori All Blacks while also making 41 appearances during his Super Rugby career. Thirty-one-year-old tighthead prop Suliasi Tolu has joined from Saitama Wild Knights, while the club's other picks ups are former Black Rams and Blue Revs winger Keagen Faria, as well as Shimizu Blue Sharks utility back Orbyn Leger. The return of ex-captain Lemeki Lomano Lava to Mie, as well as the retirement of 75-test scrumhalf Fumiaki Tanaka to take up a position coaching the academy, are the most prominent departures from last year's playing cast. Long-serving fullback Tom Marshall, centre Tim Bennetts, second-rowers Sam Jeffries and Luke Porter as well as Nambian Rugby World Cup flyhalf Tiaan Swanepoel,

have also left the club.

More than a patch up job:

His Super Rugby stint might not have gone according to plan, but the Green Rockets new Welsh flyhalf will be raring to go, having made just six appearances during his season with the Highlanders. The 31-year-old Patchell, who tried his hand in New Zealand after playing 83 games for Cardiff Blues and 86 for Scarlets, reunites with his former club and test coach in League One, resuming an association that has previously been a successful one when the Scarlets won the Pro 12 (the forerunner to the United Rugby Championship), beating Irish club Munster in the final.

What's in a number (s):

It's not often two teams can conjure up the same scoreline twice in a season, with shared outcomes, but that is what happened last term when the games between the Green Rockets and Urayasu D-Rocks twice finished 31-28. When Green Rockets prevailed on opening day, it was the first regular season defeat suffered by D-Rocks, who had gone through their maiden Division Two campaign unbeaten. Sadly, the teams' third meeting in the Placement Round resulted in a 48-28 defeat as the Green Rockets' flame petered out.

In Phipps we trust:

The departure of the ex-international Lomano Lava left a captaincy vacancy, which Pivac has filled by turning to another test player in the form of Wallaby scrumhalf Nick Phipps. The 35-year-old, who debuted in the second season of League One, has been a key performer for the club since his arrival at Kashiwanoha Park. He earlier played 72 tests for Australia before moving to London Irish for three seasons in the (England) Premiership.

History:

Although the NEC rugby club was only founded in 1985, its parent company Nippon Electric Company dates to 1899, and is now one of the globe's leading information, technology, and electronics businesses, with a worldwide footprint, and over 110,000 employees. The rugby club was initially known simply as NEC, taking on the Green





Nick Phipps

Rockets moniker when it entered the Top League. The club has twice won the Japan championship in 2005 and 2006, sharing the title on the second occasion after drawing the final against Toshiba Brave Lupus. The Green Rockets made a strong start to the Top League era with third placed finishes in 2004 and 2005, but the club has only once replicated that standing in the tournament since, in 2011 when it again finished third. NEC has been home to several international star players; most recently Alex Goode of England, who joined from Saracens for the maiden season of Japan Rugby League One. Stephen Donald, the hero of the All Blacks' win against France in the 2011 Rugby World Cup final, is an old boy, as is the well-travelled Fijian winger Nemani Nadolo who scored a whopping 19 tries in his debut season with the club in 2011. His performance in Japan won him a Super Rugby contract with the Crusaders. Australian winger Andrew Kellaway starred for the Green Rockets three years ago, performing to a level that parachuted him into the Wallabies when he returned home.

Last Year:

After the relegation season's turbulence, the arrival of Pivac injected a dose of confidence around Tokatsu before the season started. This seemed justified after they upset Urayasu D-Rocks on opening day. While the Green Rockets were brought back to earth the

following week by Shuttles Aichi, that defeat appeared a mere blip seven straight wins later, the last of which was achieved against the Shuttles, as they reached the final weekend of the regular season gunning for the title. The wheels could not have fallen off any more dramatically. Not only did their narrow loss in the re-match with D-Rocks deprive them of the Division Two title, but it was also the start of a downward spiral which saw the Green Rockets fail to win again, with a campaign that had promised much ending in ignominy after a 55-0 thrashing by Black Rams Tokyo in the second leg of a one-sided Replacement Battle.

What to Expect:

While last season's implosion will have made for a sombre end-of-campaign review, there was plenty of good from their earlier work that Pivac will be able to bring forward into the new campaign. Patchell's arrival should freshen up the backline, most notably in attack, as well as strengthening goal-kicking, while in Parkinson, the Green Rockets have secured a fire-brand tight forward whose deeds can bring a team along with him. Although the now-eight team section has slightly altered the landscape, the Green Rockets are sure to be a major player again. All they need is for the stars to align this time, so their promotion bid can go the full distance.

REDHURRICANES OSAKA



Where:

Located in Japan's second city, the Red Hurricanes are based at South Port in Osaka's Suminoe Ward. While they entertain visitors at their training facility, the club also holds matches at Yodoko Sakura Stadium, Yanmar Stadium and Yanmar field Nagai.

What's in a Name:

The name Red Hurricanes denotes the team's desire to be a powerhouse of Japanese rugby and create a whirlwind of red as players storm around the field.

Brave Blossoms Squad Members:
None

Non-Japanese test representative:
Henry Taefu (Tonga)

Moving on up:

After a distinguished career as a player, where he represented both New Zealand and Japan in Sevens, played for each of Bay of Plenty and Hawke's Bay in New Zealand's national provincial championship, each of the Highlanders and Chiefs in Super Rugby, as well as Black Rams Tokyo and Red Hurricanes Osaka in Japan, Colin Bourke has finally hung up his boots, having worn them for 19 years as a senior representative player. The 39-year-old has moved into coaching, joining fellow Kiwi-turned Japan international representative Bryce Robins on the Red Hurricanes coaching team. Bourke began his career with Bay of Plenty as a 20-year-old in 2004 and went on to play 90 games for his hometown union. Before relocating to Japan in 2011, Bourke had also played for each of the All Black Sevens and Maori All Black teams. After arriving at Black Rams Tokyo, Bourke went on to become a



cult hero at the club, whom he served for 11 years, before joining the Red Hurricanes in time for the second edition of Japan Rugby League One, where he helped lead the club to promotion.

Ins & Outs:

The Red Hurricanes have 'gone north' with their recruitment to bolster the squad, with second rower Elliott Stooke joining from Bath in England's Premiership, while backrower Jack O'Sullivan has been signed from top Irish province Munster. Stooke's last appearance was in the Premiership final where his side were narrowly beaten by Northampton Saints, 25-21. The third of the club's frontline signings comes out of Super Rugby with Moana Pasifika centre Henry Taefu returning to Japan after he represented Tonga in the country at the 2019 Rugby World Cup. Former head coach Matt Cockbain, who led the club for the last two seasons, has departed.

Try, try, and try again:

The gap between Divisions Two and Three is a large one, and it was underlined by the Red Hurricanes' try-scoring struggles on their return to the higher grade. After totting up 76 tries from 12 matches during the promotion season, the Osaka-based side managed less than half of that number a year later, being restricted to 32 tries in 12 outings; a total even exceeded by the section's bottom ranked side, Kamaishi Seawaves. Such were the side's difficulties; their top individual try

scorer scored three; a figure achieved by four players. This number was good enough for joint-24th amongst rankings for individual try scorers in the division. The Red Hurricanes' leading try scorers from their promotion campaign, fullback Taichi Yoshizawa (11), hooker Hisamitsu Shimada (eight) and the retired Bourke (7), made little impact a year on, with Shimada scoring twice, while Yoshizawa and Bourke managed just one try each.

History:

Formed in 1993 by NTT DoCoMo employees, the club began life in the Kansai Social Workers leagues, rising from the D grade to the A grade in their first decade of operation. The Red Hurricanes spent their next eight seasons in the Top West A league, finally cracking that title in 2010 to earn promotion into the nationwide Top League. Although they survived for five seasons, they won just 15 matches through this time, preserving their position via the Replacement Battle on three occasions before relegation finally came in 2015. The next four years saw two promotions and another relegation before the final year prior to the Covid shutdown saw the Red Hurricanes enjoy their most successful topflight season, winning six of their 11 games. The conference system used when the Top League re-started post-Covid saw the Red Hurricanes finish third in the White conference with four wins from seven matches, before being defeated in the quarterfinals. The maiden Japan Rugby League One brought yet

another relegation, before the reorganisation of NTT's sporting involvement into the Sports X umbrella organisation, and the creation of Urayasu D-Rocks, resulted in the Red Hurricanes dropping down to Division Three. After an 11 win/one loss season, they achieved yet another promotion, and although their first season with new company was tough, they did just enough to keep their heads above water, winning three matches before fending off Kamaishi Seawaves and Kyushu Electric Power Kyuden Voltex in the Placement round to avoid the lottery of The Replacement Battle.

The man they can't do without:

Formerly of the (Auckland) Blues, (Wellington) Hurricanes and Tokyo Sungoliath, Blake Gibson has only been at the Red Hurricanes for one season but is already the player they can't do without. The 29-year-old backrower, who made his debut for Auckland in New Zealand's national provincial championship as a 19-year-old in 2014 and took his maiden bow in Super Rugby a year later, moved to Osaka last season, after having one injury-ruined campaign with Sungoliath when he arrived in Japan for the 2022-23 competition. While Gibson finished last year's equal leading try-scorer with three from the eight games he played, of more significance was the fact the Red Hurricanes won five of the matches

in which featured, not winning a game when the New Zealander did not take the field.

The message in that for the Red Hurricanes medical staff is clear: make sure Gibson is always ready to go!

Last year:

After opening with back-to-back wins, both by narrow margins (four and two points), the Red Hurricanes didn't win again for another seven weeks before finally breaking the cycle with a 38-33 win over the Seawaves. The losses during that run included a crushing 71-12 defeat by the Shuttles on a bleak day at Aichi, as well as both 'Sports X derbies', losing 45-15 and 31-12 to 'stalemates', Urayasu D-Rocks. Dropped into the Placement Round to try and avoid The Replacement Battle, the Red Hurricanes rediscovered their mojo, recording two narrow wins to end the season on a positive note while preserving their Division Two status.

What to expect:

It was hard going last term, and while the addition of two new teams to the section should enhance the Red Hurricanes prospects of avoiding an end-of-season relegation threat this time, that is in no way a given, especially as the Division's newcomers both appear well 'armed' to extend their stay in the grade beyond its first year.



Blake Gibson

SHIMIZU KOTO BLUE SHARKS



Where:

The Blue Sharks are based in the Koto district of Tokyo, one of 23 special wards in the city, and officially known as Koto city. The team's home was the core of Shitamachi, the original downtown Edo-Tokyo. Literally meaning 'Central Ward', it is historically the main commercial center of the Japanese capital.

What's in a Name:

The Blue Sharks name came into being in 2001, joining other teams in the Japan leagues who had added to their names with a moniker either reflecting the local area in which they played, or chosen by fans. The team had previously been known as the Shimizu Construction Rugby Club. Koto was added in 2021 after the club completed an agreement with the Koto ward in Tokyo which saw the club move to the area, shifting

its home matches to Yumenoshima Stadium in the ward.

Brave Blossoms Squad Members:
None

Non-Japanese test representatives:
Lima Sopoaga (New Zealand/Samoa),
Murphy Taramai (Samoa)

The coach:

New to the head coaching role, after serving as an assistant coach in his first year with the club, Hiromasa Yoshihiro is locally bred, having represented Kanto in the nationwide league prior to getting into coaching. In his first professional head coaching role, which brings with it a sense of the unknown, the 39-year-old is going to be well served by having the experience of several seasoned senior players as he looks to navigate his way

through uncharted waters in a personal sense.

Ins & outs:

Former Bristol Bears second rower Ed Holmes headlines the arrivals at Koto with the Englishman coming through the door along with veteran former Urayasu D-Rocks and Sunwolves man Hayden Cripps, who adds to the side's depth at both flyhalf and fullback. Grenoble midfielder Terence Hepetema has traded the Pro D2 competition in France for League One, with ex-Moana Pasifika Under-20s winger Essendon Tuitupou and Southland national provincial championship centre Noah Foster are new acquisitions from New Zealand.

The point's machine:

With the ex-All Blacks and Samoa flyhalf Lima Sopoaga touching down in the off-season, you would have got very long odds on fullback Conrad van Wyk finishing as the top point-scoring Blue Shark. That's how it played out though, with the dual international, who was dogged by injury, handing the goalkicking reins to the 36-year-old journeyman. The South African was so good, he's not only finished as the division's leading accumulator of points with 156 from 11 outings, but his 11 tries were more than anyone else as well. This included a hatrick as part of a 31-point haul against Akishima, which came a week after he had run up 26 against SkyActivs Hiroshima. After playing for six different sides in his homeland, which included a stint in Super Rugby with the Johannesburg-based (Golden) Lions, van Wyk headed to Japan in 2016, initially joining Brave Lupus Tokyo for four seasons. He moved to the Blue Sharks in 2021 on an eight-month contract which was quickly upgraded once the club started reaping a good return from their investment. Given he is keen to play on for as long as the body allows, after last season's exploits, van Wyk is sure to have a home at the Blue Sharks for as long as he is willing.

History:

The team was created in 1976 as the rugby union team for Shimizu Corporation, one of Japan's largest architectural and construction firms. After first winning the fourth Division of the Kanto League in 1983, Shimizu worked their way up the grades, winning the fourth



Lima Sopoaga

Division three times before achieving back-to-back promotions in the 1987, 1988 and 1989 seasons. When the game was restructured in 2003 with the introduction of the Top League, the Blue Sharks were placed in the second tier Top East League. Their stay was brief as they were relegated after the 2007–08 season and played in lower leagues for a decade. The Blue Sharks returned in the 2017–18 season, where they secured a fourth-place finish. The following year, they won the competition, and also won their promotion play-off match against Chugoku Red Regulions to be promoted to the Top Challenge League, and then into Division Three of Japan Rugby League One at its inception. After gaining promotion in the league's maiden year, they were promptly relegated a year later, before a solid campaign last term gained promotion for the restructured eight-team Division Two.

Murph's not a smurf:

He dresses in blue on international duty, and

light blue for his club, but Murphy Taramai is most definitely too big to be described as a 'smurf'. The 104-kilogram backrower got to 'throw his weight' around at test level earlier this year when he scored two tries on debut during Samoa's historic win over Six Nations side Italy at Apia. The 32-year-old, who previously appeared for the New Zealand Sevens side, is into his fourth season at the Blue Sharks and shapes as a crucial figure as the side tackles a higher grade.

Just like starting over:

Disrupted by injury, former All Black and Samoa flyhalf Lima Sopoaga will be looking to lead the way for the Blue Sharks this time after being restricted to a lesser role on debut, where he appeared on just nine occasions. The well-traveled 33-year-old – who played 16 tests for New Zealand and 88 games for the Highlanders in Super Rugby, as well as three tests for Samoa after qualifying for his homeland last year – landed in Japan following stints with the now defunct London Wasps alongside Lyon in the French Top 14. With 55 points for the All Blacks, and 853 points in Super Rugby which included a title in 2015, the Blue Sharks had high hopes when they brought their star man onboard. Despite their marquee signing's personal challenges, mission one has been completed, successfully

navigating their way out of Division Three. Mission Two: a strong return to Division Two, may rest on keeping their key man fit and firing.

Last year:

Despite losing twice to the section-winning Red Dolphins, the Blue Sharks passage to the expanded Division Two was never really in any doubt. Although a surprise 31-28 loss to the SkyActives on the third weekend meant they had lost two of the opening three, the Blue Sharks were to lose just once more, ending their campaign on a positive note when they took down the Red Dolphins 38-20.

What to expect:

While the gap between divisions is historically tough to bridge, the Blue Sharks have recent experience of Division Two. They were a member of the 'club' two seasons ago and return with a significantly stronger roster than they had then. Although Sopoaga's experience will be key, having a goal-kicker of van Wyk's accuracy in the cast is also a major advantage. Even if back-to-back promotions seems a long shot, it wouldn't be the hugest shock if the Blue Sharks were in the picture when The Division One Replacement Battle comes around.



Murphy Taramai

TOYOTA INDUSTRIES CORPORATION SHUTTLES AICHI



Where: Located at Kariya in the Aichi prefecture, where the team trains, Shuttles Aichi are based near Nagoya in central Honshu and play their matches at the Mizuho Rugby Stadium in the city.

What's in a Name:

The name Shuttles derives from a part used in the Non-Stop Shuttle Change Toyoda Automatic Loom (for weaving fabrics). This was invented by the founder of Toyota Industries, Sakichi Toyoda. The team, which operates from the Toyota Industries base at Kariya, is distinct from the nearby Toyota club who's rebranding to Verblitz helped clear up any confusion between the two clubs.

Brave Blossoms Squad Members:
None

Non-Japanese test representatives:
Freddie Burns (England), James Gaskill (England), Taleni Seu (Samoa)

Ins & outs:

After picking up several players from the international market last term, the Shuttles have stayed closer to home in their most recent recruitment, with the New Zealand-born Tom Florence the only internationally sourced player to arrive. A former age-grade representative in his homeland, the backrower's most recent club was New Orleans Gold in the American Major League Rugby. The 25-year-old backrower Isileli Manu joins from Green Rockets Tokatsu, while ex-Spears Funabashi Tokyo Bay second-rower Fritz Jahnke-Tavana has an interesting background, being New Zealand-born but having played his junior rugby in Australia. Former Kobelco Kobe Steelers

head coach Nick Holten has signed on as an assistant. Five players have departed with second rower Toshiki Fujii and hooker Hiroki Murakawa having packed up after nine seasons in Aichi.

Almost 'infredible':

The Shuttles might have been denied when it mattered by Mie in a competitive Replacement Battle, but fault for their inability to gain promotion could in no way be laid at the feet – or goalkicking boot – of their returned flyhalf, Freddie Burns. The 34-year-old, who played the last of his five tests wearing the red rose in 2014, was the Division's highest point-scorer with 107, which he followed up with 18 in the two promotion legs against Heat. Last season's haul added to the 133 points the Englishman scored three seasons' ago to help the Shuttles win promotion from Division Three, bringing his overall tally for the club to 258 from 20 outings. If he can produce that sort of form again in the 2024-25 campaign, the former Gloucester, Bath, Leicester and (Otago) Highlanders man could have a big say in the outcome of the section title.

When Lightning Strikes:

The Shuttle had made a brilliant start to last season and were three-from-three when they faced Urayasu in a top-of-the-table clash. With both sides scoring a converted try in the first half, only a penalty goal separated

the protagonists at the break, but an unfortunately timed lightning strike at Chiba proved an ill-wind for the visitors, with the game abandoned due to safety concerns. The competition rules state that in the event of an abandonment while the game was in-play, the winning points shall be awarded to the team that was in front in the time. As that was Urayasu, the Shuttles were frustratingly condemned to their first defeat of the season, although they at least had the consolation of a bonus point from the 10-7 loss.

Lighting the Olympic flame:

When accreditation passes were handed out at the 2020 Olympics in Tokyo, one had the name Kerevi on it, with then Wallaby Samu in the Australian team for the Sevens tournament at the Games. Four years on, the name was accredited again, only in a different city and for a different country, as Samu's elder brother Joshua attended the Paris Games as part of the Japan squad. A damaging centre, the 32-year-old has been a key member of the Shuttles backline in recent years and will be central to his side's hopes of following Samu's D-Rocks into Division One for the 2025-26 season.

History:

The Shuttles club was founded in 1984 and has spent much of its life playing in corporate and regional leagues. It did spend some time in Top League during the era of that



Freddie Burns



Shuttles v Urayasu

competition but was placed in Division Three for Japan Rugby League One's kick off, before winning promotion after the maiden edition.

A lesson from recent years:

Don't give opponents too much of a start in the Replacement Battle. The Shuttles have qualified for the promotion series in each of the last two seasons, only to blow it by conceding near insurmountable leads after the opening legs. Sagamihara Dynaboars were home and dry after the first game two years ago romping to a 59-21 win which made the return contest – which they won anyway – irrelevant to the outcome of a series they won on aggregate 102-35. While the corresponding games last term were far more competitive, with the Shuttles taking the second leg against Mie, they had conceded too much of a head start, with the 18-point deficit accrued following a 57-39 loss in the first match proving too much to overcome when they hosted the return game.

Last year:

Promotion might have again been denied them, but the gap to Division One is closing, with the Shuttles coming within a whisker of

an upgrade during a Replacement Battle with Mie Heat that kept fans on tenterhooks to the end. The Shuttles finally lost on aggregate 72-63, but the 24-15 win over their top tier opponent in the second leg offered plenty of hope for this season, while also completing a campaign that had had plenty of high points on a positive note. Winning two out of three against Green Rockets Tokatsu, who will be a chief rival in the grade again, offers promise, as does the narrow margins in two of their three defeats to promoted D-Rocks, who won their first two meetings by three and five points respectively.

What to expect:

While the expansion to eight teams will spice up the division, the Shuttles are a good bet for the Replacement Battle, and possibly beyond. With the core of last year's squad still in place, and the point-scoring prowess of Burns providing an advantage over most of their rivals, the Shuttles should give themselves another opportunity to advance via the promotion/relegation series after having failed that test in each of the two seasons since their return to the section from Division Three.

DIVISION

Preview

It's all change in Division Three as two clubs depart from last year's cast, while three new names arrive.

Division champions Red Dolphins have moved up a grade, accompanied by last season's runners-up, the Blue Sharks.

With the league being expanded in its fourth season, the bottom tier upsizes by one, so it's hello to SECOM RUGGUTS, Yakult Levins and LeRIRO Fukuoka, who have each joined.

The arrival of the new teams promises a tight competition as the existing members seek to make the most of the departure of last term's top two, while the rookies seek to make an instant impact in their maiden seasons.

Each team plays three matches against the other teams in the division, with all teams having three bye rounds.

The teams that will contest Division Three of the league are:

SKYACTIVS HIROSHIMA



Where: Hiroshima (Chūgoku), Honshu **Last Year:** Fourth position (4 wins)

Star International Player: Halfback Jacob Abel (Australia)

After a campaign which saw a chance for promotion torn from their grasp at the last minute, SkyActivs Hiroshima will be determined to make sure lightning doesn't strike twice and have made some handy signings to try and ensure that it doesn't. Top of the list is the experienced South African centre Clinton Knox who has traded Mie for Hiroshima. His experience and cool head should be a major asset to a group that was guilty of losing its way at key moments last term. Like Knox, New Zealand-born utility forward Sam Chongkit, who joins from the Blue Sharks, is another experienced League One performer, having debuted in its maiden season. The 29-year-old, who was schooled at the renowned Hamilton Boys' High School in his homeland, should add starch to the forward effort. Perhaps the SkyActivs most intriguing acquisition though, is the former Ealing Trailfinders second row Andrew Davidson, who has joined from the English Championship club. While the 28-year-old is after something new in his career, his background from an arduous league in England suggests that he has plenty to offer and should enjoy playing in the (mostly) warmer climate. Although they recorded one more win than they had managed in 2022-23, and once again won the Hiroshima bragging rights at the expense of the Red Regulators, three losses by eight points or less defined the SkyActivs season. Had they won just one of those, a place in The Replacement Battle and a shot at promotion would have been theirs. The challenge this year is to ensure that they don't make the same mistakes again.

CHUGOKU ELECTRIC POWER RED REGULIONS



Where: Hiroshima (Chūgoku), Honshu **Last Year:** Fifth (1 win, 1 draw) – Division Three
Star International Player: Flyhalf Hayato Miyazaki

It was a reflection of the strange season put together by the Red Reguliions that they were the first team to take points off title-winners Red Dolphins, boasted the second highest point-scorer in the section in rookie flyhalf Hayato Miyazaki, and had a try-scorer in hooker Kentaro Iwanaga (8) who finished just three behind the division's best – and yet they won just once, and finished last! The Red Reguliions' inconsistency must have been infuriating to their fans, especially considering five of their defeats were by 10 points or less – twice being nipped by a point against second placed Blue Sharks – and they also slugged out a courageous 26-26 draw with the Red Dolphins. Perhaps even more infuriatingly, they lost the city bragging rights to cross-town rivals SkyActivs, even though they came from 21-0 down to prevail 22-21 in the first derby of the season. Despite a brilliant solo performance by Miyazaki, who scored all their points, Red Reguliions lost the return game 25-20, before SkyActivs took out the decider 43-22, even though Iwanaga got across the goal-line twice for his side. All is not lost though. In Miyazaki, the Red Reguliions have unearthed a gem, with the Hotoku Gakuen Ritsumeikan University product running up 115 points in his rookie season, one of only two players in the grade to surpass three figures. With 11 league games now under his belt, the 24-year-old should be even better for that experience, and could be the game-changer the Red Reguliions need to advance up the point's table.



Hayato Miyazaki (Chugoku Electric Power Red Reguliions)

KURITA WATER GUSH AKISHIMA



Where: Akishima-shi (Tokyo) **Last Year:** Third (5 wins)
Star International Player: Flyhalf Piers Francis (England)

Although a late rush gave them third, and a shot at promotion, Kurita Water Gush Akishima again came up short against their Replacement Battle nemesis, Kamaishi Seawaves, and so must do it all again, with another slog in the third grade to earn their third consecutive promotion shot. Logic suggests the departure of last year's top two sides opens the door, and the club has signed a partnership agreement with the Blues, a mighty New Zealand club, to strengthen the team and develop global talent. To begin with, two players from the Blues has joined this year; Leo Gordon and King Maxwell. The two biggest losses for the ex-Wallaby Wycliff Palu, who runs the side, are the damaging winger and leading try-scorer Hosea Saumaki (6), who has left after just one season. The departure of the pair is going to make it difficult for the Australian coach, and it may be that his side spends as much time looking down the point's table, as it does up, while the much-changed league takes shape.

SAYAMA SECOM RUGGUTS



Where: Sayama, (Saitama prefecture), Honshu **Last Year:** New entrant
Star International Player: Backrower Cory Hill (Wales)

Founded in 1985, SECOM Rugguts arrive in League One with an experienced squad, and fresh off last year's success in the East Regional Top League. The club was a founding member of the nationwide Top League in 2003 but was relegated at the end of that season. Although the Rugguts returned in 2006, their second involvement at the top was no more successful than the first, with demotion after one season, and confinement to local leagues for 14 years prior to last year's successful application to be a part of League One's expansion. The side, which is coached by former New Zealand Sevens star Scott Pierce, was bolstered for last year's regional success by the presence of Wales backrower Cory Hill, who joined after two seasons with Yokohama Eagles in the top tier of League One. Hill came out of international retirement to join Wales' tour of Australia earlier this year where he appeared from the bench in both tests. Whetukamokamo Douglas is a statement signing, with the well-regarded backrower arriving from Green Rockets Tokatsu. Capped seven times by the Maori All Blacks, Douglas was also a Super Rugby winner with the Crusaders, appearing on 41 occasions for the Christchurch-based team. Former New Zealand age-grade and (Auckland) Blues midfielder TJ Faiane also has Super Rugby experience. The 28-year-old signed on last year after two seasons with the Red Dolphins while flyhalf Daniel Waite played for each of Taranaki in New Zealand's national provincial championship and Rouen Normandie in the second tier Pro D2 in France, before his arrival at the Rugguts last year. New fullback Chase Tiatia is similarly well-travelled, having appeared for each of the (Waikato) Chiefs, (Wellington) Hurricanes and Perth-based Western Force in Super Rugby, as well as the Wellington, Bay of Plenty and Hawke's Bay provinces in New Zealand's national provincial championship.



Cory Hill (SAYAMA SECOM RUGGUTS)

LERIRO FUKUOKA



Where: Fukuoka, Kyushu **Last Year:** New Entrant
Star International Player: Centre Karne Hesketh

Kyushu's newest entrant to the league joining Kyuden Voltex, inclusion caps a rapid rise for Ukiha City-based club, which didn't even exist four years ago. Founded without any major corporate support in 2021, the team immediately proved itself a force on the local scene, winning consecutive regional leagues in its first two seasons. LeRIRO enters with a squad almost entirely consisting of local Japanese, with one exception being the vastly experienced New Zealand-born centre Karne Hesketh, whose name will forever be linked with Japan's historic 34-32 win over South Africa at the 2015 Rugby World Cup, where he scored the match-winning try in the 84th minute. The 39-year-old started his representative career with Otago in New Zealand's national provincial championship in 2006, playing 33 matches, before he headed to Japan after the 2009 season. This led to 12-years at the now defunct Munakata Sanix Blues, LeRIRO's predecessor representing Fukuoka in the national league, as well as selection for the Brave Blossoms in 2014. Hesketh's famous try at Brighton was one of seven he scored from 16 test appearances between 2014 and 2016. LeRIRO will be looking to draw from that vast store of experience as they try to bring their local dominance to the national stage.

YAKULT LEVINS TODA



Where: Toda City (Saitama prefecture), Honshu **Last Year:** New Entrant
Star International Player: Fullback Moses Jones

Runner's-up in last season's fourth-tier national championship to fellow new League One entrant, SECOM Rugguts, Yakult Levins had been a leading force in the East Regional Top League prior to their elevation into the next tier. The club, which was founded in 1980, last won the Eastern league in 2021, and is bringing the core of that squad on its maiden League One journey. Although the Levins boast a largely local playing roster, Hamilton-born New Zealand fullback Moses Jones, who joined the team last year, is a player to watch. Flyhalf Nick Evemy, who goes by the nickname 'Santa' is another key figure, having been with the team since 2016. The 33-year-old schooled at New Zealand's Tauranga Boys' High School, an institution of which ex-All Blacks skipper and Tokyo Sungoliath backrower Sam Cane is also an alma mater. Backrower Jaycob Matiu is also New Zealand born, hailing from Whangarei in the country's north. The presence of the seasoned Kiwis helps to complement the enthusiasm of the local players, who will be looking forward to showcasing their wares on the national stage.

IMPORTANT MEDIA INFORMATION



Thank you for your interest in Japan Rugby League One.

In cooperation with the participating clubs, we will endeavour to meet all your requirements to cover and explain the club game in Japan.

Japan Rugby League One is a separate body from the Japan Rugby Football Union.

Media requirements are attended to by Mr Yusuke Kuwano, and Miss Wakako Sato.

For international media activity, they are supported by Japan Rugby League One's international media advisor, Mr Matt McLraith.

Our media plans for the fourth season of Japan Rugby League One will operate on the same lines as previous years to assist with your coverage.

Each week, we will provide a preview of the upcoming round, and then a review once the weekend has concluded.

These will be free for you to publish.

Further information we believe could be of use to you may also be supplied on an ad-hoc basis.

We will again hold regular zoom conferences for international media that will be attended by invited players and coaches from the teams.

Japan Rugby League One chairman, Mr Genichi Tamatsuka, and chief operating officer, Mr Hajime Shoji, will also be available for interview.

Once Japan Rugby League One and the clubs have agreed on player and coach participants for an international news conference, we will advise you all and seek feedback as to whether you would like to attend.

For planning purposes, we would ask that should you confirm your attendance, and later become unavailable, we would appreciate knowing in advance.

This is important as some players and coaches attending the conferences may only have been requested by JRLO with a particular media market in mind.

All players and coaches who are requested to attend conferences will have value/angles related to the current league and to global

news, at the time when the conference takes place.

We understand that many countries have player and/or coaching representatives in Japan, some of whom are still active for their national teams.

We will factor this into our planning when considering conference participants from JRLO clubs.

We are open to taking requests for conference attendees and will consult the clubs on receiving these requests to see whether those players and coaches will be available.

We will also try to help facilitate one-on-one interview requests, although as the players are not in the employ of Japan Rugby League One, it will be at the discretion of the clubs whether the requested player can be made available.

During the four years that we have worked on a project for the international media (including the final Top League), the clubs have been very accommodating to the media's requests. As many of the media personnel at the clubs do not speak English, it is suggested that you contact Mr Kuwano, Miss Sato or Mr McLraith in the first instance to gauge the possibility on these requests.

We thank you for your support of Japan Rugby League One and look forward to being of assistance to you again.

Best Regards

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