



WELCOME
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世界最高峰の熱狂を一緒に楽しもう



ジャパンラグビー リーグワン

 JAPAN RUGBY LEAGUE ONE 2025-26 | 

MEDIAGUIDE

WELCOME



A Welcome from JRLO Chairman

Genichi Tamatsuka

It is with great pleasure that I welcome you to the 2025-26 season of Japan Rugby League One.

Following the successful introduction of three additional teams last term, as well as an expanded finals series in Division One, League One has received further international endorsement ahead of its fifth edition by the return to Japan of former World Rugby Player of the Year Ardie Savea.

He joins fellow ex-World Player of the Year Pieter Steph Du Toit, who will also be back in the League after missing last season due to injury.

The involvement of both men adds to the competition's star quality, which is spearheaded by a strong representation from the World Champion Springboks, as well as an ever-growing contribution from the All Blacks, led by Savea and the two-time League One winner, Richie Mo'unga.

We are grateful to the international players 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 come and experience Japan Rugby League One for themselves.

No one can doubt the appropriateness of League One as physical and mental preparation for test play, but also the quality of the competition it provides.

The participation of players who are at the height of their powers in the international arena continues to raise the overall standard and competitiveness of the league, which was once again born out in last season's final, where the margin between champions Toshiba Brave Lupus Tokyo and runners up Kubota Spears Funabashi Tokyo-Bay was just five points.

This was the competition's fourth final, and all four have finished with a margin of less than a converted try, by six, two, four and five points respectively.

It is not just the star power of the international players driving League One's continued evolution into one of the world's premier club competitions.

The standard of coaching across our teams is exceptional.

Such has been the level of interest from across Japan as League One has progressed, we took the decision last season to invite three new teams to join.

Each of Yakult Levins Toda, LeRIRO Fukuoka and SAYAMA SECOM RUGGUTs made their mark, with the latter enjoying an exceptional introduction which saw them narrowly

miss out on promotion from Division Three at their first attempt after they qualified for the end-of-season Replacement Battle.

As well as the league's re-sizing, we also took the decision to introduce a six-team finals series, adding an extra weekend and two extra matches, to the season's conclusion.

The move was not without risk, but the teams responded superbly, with the battle for the six finals places going to the penultimate weekend, leading into an exciting series of games that concluded the season.

We are also continuing to make strong progress gaining recognition internationally, with League One news and features now regularly found alongside content from contemporary competitions such as Super Rugby, the United Rugby Championship and the English Premiership, on streaming services, online rugby news websites, and rugby specific magazines and newspapers.

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



Welcome by Managing Director

Hajime Shoji

Welcome to the fifth season of Japan Rugby League One.

Another exciting competition awaits us all, with last season having provided exciting finishes across all three divisions.

While the standard of play continues to rise with the arrival of star overseas players, the results achieved by the Brave Blossoms on the international stage are signs that the league's continued growth is having a positive flow on effect to the Japan national team. Growing the player base, and by association public interest, was one of the key ambitions when League One was introduced.

The continuation of that pursuit will see important changes to player eligibility introduced, starting in the 2026-27 season, which will change the classifications for some players. This will continue to ensure that growth opportunities for Japanese-born and educated players are protected and expanded.

We have already introduced a League One Rising competition, which began earlier this year and provided all clubs with the opportunity to expand the competitive element afforded to their younger players via their development squads.

It has been great to see so many players who have already advanced from the clubs development pools into their League One squads.

The League One Rising competition should further enhance this process.

We do not expect the upcoming change to our rules to prevent the continued flow of current overseas stars – capped and uncapped – into League One, nor to lessen their ability to positively impact on both the competition, and rugby in Japan in general.

The presence of high-profile international players continues to help draw fans to the games, with last season's final between Toshiba Brave Lupus Tokyo and Kubota Spears Funabashi Tokyo Bay achieving a crowd of more than 50,000.

It was the second straight year that we have topped that mark for the title decider.



While Brave Lupus created history by becoming the first team to successfully defend their League One title, victory was only achieved after a hard-fought battle, with the Spears closing to within five points to set up an exciting finale.

This concluded an exciting three-week finals series, with the addition of an extra week having provided a further layer of 'jeopardy' for the teams, both in the chase for the top six positions through the regular season, but also in the elimination matches themselves.

We were also very pleased with the outcome of the re-sizing of Divisions Two and Three, which each produced tight races for the section titles, along with some thrilling finishes in The Replacement Battles.

The performance of the three clubs that were new to League One: SAYAMA SECOM RUGGUTs, Yakult Levins Toda and LeRIRO Fukuoka, was particularly encouraging, with each team spreading the 'gospel' of rugby to new areas, soliciting new fans to the game. Their competitiveness was never in doubt, with the RUGGUTs especially enjoying a memorable introduction.

They, like all 26 clubs in the league, will start their next journey with high hopes, excited by the possibilities as our next season kicks off.

Everyone associated with the League shares these hopes as we look ahead to what we believe will be another thrilling competition that will draw even more fans to venues, as well as more promotion for the game in Japan, locally and in the international arena.

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.

Regards

2025-26 JRLO Explained

An introduction to Japan Rugby League One

Now into its' fifth 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.

Japan Rugby League One is unique from all other rugby club leagues in that its competitors are supported by some of the world's largest commercial entities, as opposed to operating as privately owned enterprises.

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

Five seasons on from the end of the Top League,

clubs are moving towards decreasing reliance on their corporate parent companies, although the individual structures meant that they, and their playing and coaching rosters, were cushioned from the Covid-enforced turbulence that claimed some of the game's most iconic teams 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 all-round attraction that continues to encourage a steady flow of current test stars to its' clubs, it has the brightest future of any club competition in the world.



Bigger & Better

Last season's expansion, which increased the number of participating teams by three as well as introducing an extra weekend of the Division One finals series, proved successful additions as the league added to its' nationwide footprint.

The number of venues hosting matches was greatly increased, with games played in 22 prefectures (regional/metropolitan administrative areas); an increase of three from the previous season.

The Tochigi, Yamanashi, and Kyoto prefectures all hosted League One for the first time.

Such was the level of the league's spread, the opening weekend saw matches held at 13 venues in nine regions.

The inclusion of new clubs saw the number of games increase by 47 from the competition's third season, with 209 matches played across the divisions over a 21-week period, which included bye weeks.

Re-sizing Divisions Two and Three to accommodate the new entries proved a winner, producing fierce competition and an exciting conclusion as the titles in both sections, as well as the Replacement Battle lineups, were not decided until the final weekend.

Adding another round to the finals series was also a positive step, with fifth-placed Kobelco Kobe Steelers upsetting fourth-placed Shizuoka BlueRevs Dave Rennie's men rose two places on the rankings through the finals series, eventually beating Saitama Panasonic Wild Knights in the playoff for third.

Six teams participated in the playoffs with the top two finishers from the regular season, Toshiba Brave Lupus Tokyo and the Wild Knights, receiving direct entry to the semi-finals.

Third placed Kubota Spears Funabashi Tokyo Bay and sixth placed Tokyo Suntory Sungoliath, along with Shizuoka and Kobe, met on the opening weekend in elimination matches.

The league's three new entries – SAYAMA SECOM RUGGUTs, Yakult Levins Toda and LeIRO Fukuoka – joined a six-team Division Three, while Hino Red Dolphins and Shimizu Corporation Koto Blue Sharks were elevated into an enlarged eight-team Division Two.

Division Two consisted of two full rounds of home-and-away matches before the promotion relegation series, known as The Replacement Battle.

In the section below, the six teams played three rounds before the division's two promotion candidates were found.

The Replacement Battles took place at both ends of the Division Two table but ended with the status quo retained, with neither of Toyota Industries Shuttles Aichi, Hanazono Kintetsu Liners, Mazda SkyActivs Hiroshima or SAYAMA SECOM RUGGUTs successful in their home-and-away series against higher ranked opponents.

The formats from across the three sections has been retained for this season.



Yakult Levins Toda

2025-26 Season Breakdown

Division One – 12 teams. One full round robin (12 matches) followed by six 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. First and second enters promotion/relegation series with seventh and eighth from Division Two.

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 Ginnosuke 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. It is bidding again in the hope of welcoming the 2035 event to Japan.

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.

This it is achieving, with overall match attendance passing one million for a single season two seasons ago, while the last two finals have achieved a collective attendance of over 100,000 fans.

The on-going competitiveness of the Brave Blossoms – who have reached the final of the last two Pacific Nations Cup tournaments and beat Wales in June – has underlined the benefits the national side is gaining from the higher level of competition that Japanese players are exposed to in League One.



Brave Blossoms

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 under discussion in England's Premiership after being shelved when three of its clubs, who faced financial difficulties, were wound up as professional entities.

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 Suntory 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 Suntory Sungoliath v Toshiba 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. Two years ago, on their way to a 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. Last term, as they advanced two titles ahead of their rivals, Brave Lupus bested Sungoliath on both occasions where the two met.

Ricoh Black Rams Tokyo 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. Prior to the dramatic collapse of their campaign last term, which included a first ever League One defeat in the derby, Yokohama had been dominant as it reached back-to-back semi-finals,

while the Black Rams were stuck among the lower echelons of the point's table, being sucked into the Replacement Battle two seasons ago. 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!

Mazda SkyActivs Hiroshima v Chugoku Electric Power Red Regulions

The battle of Hiroshima, this fiercely contested playoff saw the SkyActivs drop one of the three matches last term, despite their going on to win the Division Three title. Such is the nature of the rivalry, even though the Red Regulions have finished in the bottom half of the table in each of the last two campaigns, they have still managed to prevail in one of the derbies.



YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES v BlackRams Tokyo

Star overseas players – how does the system work?

While eligibility changes will be implemented for the 2026-27 season, the status quo will remain in place this time.

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

Some clubs do carry an extra foreign international player, but they can not be registered to play unless one of the three who have already been registered gets injured and cannot play again.

There is another category for whom foreign born but uncapped in their nations of origin. A total number of those players and the capped player must be 10 or less. 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 was the case with the last Rugby World Cup, after which 25 foreign players reported for duty in League One.

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.

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 – which continues to grow as the league's streaming, terrestrial and digital TV reach expands – is exposed to the star foreign players who play their club rugby in Japan every week.

The achievements of the Japan-based players with their national teams continues to show that the standard of play in League One is appropriate for test preparation, 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 six years. This includes beating the British & Irish Lions four years ago and winning over the All Blacks by record scores in London in 2023, and Wellington earlier this year, as well as capturing a second consecutive Rugby World Cup in 2019 and taking out each of the last two Rugby Championships.

Many key All Blacks, including this year's returnee Ardie Savea, have also used League One as their springboard into the test season, while Los Pumas' test appearance record holder Pablo Matera, has been the key man for Mie Honda Heat over the last two seasons.



Ardie Savea(KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS)

The international star players for season five

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

Division One

Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY:

Malcolm Marx (South Africa*), Shaun Stevenson (New Zealand), Bernard Foley (Australia)

Saitama Wild Knights:

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

Yokohama Canon Eagles:

Faf de Klerk (South Africa*), Jesse Kriel (South Africa*), Dino Lamb (Italy)

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/Fiji)

Toyota Verblitz:

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

Shizuoka BlueRevs:

Kwagga Smith (South Africa), Charles Piutau (New Zealand/Tonga), Semi Radradra (Fiji), Villami Tahitua (Fiji)

BlackRams Tokyo:

TJ Perenara (New Zealand*), Liam Gill (Australia), Paddy Ryan (Australia)

Kobelco Kobe Steelers:

Brodie Retallick (New Zealand*), Ardie Savea (New Zealand*), Anton Lienert-Brown (New Zealand*)

Mie Honda Heat:

Pablo Matera (Argentina*), Franco Mostert (South Africa*), Tevita Ikanivere (Fiji)

Sagamihara Dynaboars:

Jackson Hemopo (New Zealand), Lukhanyo Am (South Africa)

Urayasu D-Rocks:

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

Division Two

Hanazono Kintetsu Liners:

Akira Ioane (New Zealand), Peter Umaga-Jensen (New Zealand), Manie Libbok (South Africa)

NEC Green Rockets Tokatsu:

Nick Phipps (Australia), Rory Arnold (Australia)

Toyota Industries Corporation Shuttles Aichi:

Taleni Seu (Samoa), James Gaskell (England), Christian Leallifano (Australia), Noah Lolesio (Australia)

Nippon Steel Kamaishi Seawaves:

Ben Nee Nee (Samoa), Paula Mahe (Tonga)

RedHurricanes Osaka:

Lotu Inisi (Tonga), Henry Taefu (Tonga), Elliott Stooke (England)

Shimizu Koto Blue Sharks:

Harrison Goddard (Australia), Billy Burns (Ireland), Sione Talitui (Tonga), Siale Piutau (Tonga)

Division Three

Kurita Water Gush Akishima:
Piers Francis (England)

Mazda SkyActivs Hiroshima:
Beaudein Waaka (New Zealand), Jackson Pugh (Australia)

Chugoku Electric Power Red Regulions:
Edward Quirk (Australia)

SAYAMA SECOM RUGGUTs:
Sam Slade (Samoa)

* Toyota Verblitz, Shizuoka Blue Revs and Shimizu Corporation Koto Blue Sharks, Toyota Industries Corporation Shuttles Aichi have all named four international Category C players in their squads. While this is allowed, only three can be registered, with the fourth player only allowed to enter the competition in the case of injury to one of the club's existing Category C players.

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 had the coaches who were still active in Super Rugby. The involvement of 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 five

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

Kubota Spears Funabashi Tokyo Bay:
Frans Ludeke (Bulls South Africa)

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)

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

Yokohama Canon Eagles:
Leon MacDonald (Blues NZ, All Blacks NZ*, All Black XV NZ)

Mitsubishi Heavy Industries Sagami-hara Dynaboars:
Glenn Delaney (Canterbury NZ, Highlanders NZ*, London Irish England, Scarlets Wales)
Urayasu D-Rocks: Graham Rowntree (Leicester Tigers England, England*)

* While he has stepped down from his position as head coach, Robbie Deans remains involved in the Saitama Panasonic Wild Knights programme as an executive advisor.

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, has been reversed through the last two years when the new look Brave Blossoms, under returning coach Eddie Jones, have played 21 test matches.

As well as participation in the Pacific Nations Cup, where Japan hosted the playoffs last year, and qualified for back-to-back finals, the schedule has also included home tests against England, New Zealand, Wales and Australia, as well as away tests against England (Twickenham), France (Stade de France), Ireland (Aviva Stadium), Wales (Principality Stadium), Georgia (Mikheil Meskhi Stadium) and South Africa (Wembley).

A Japan XV also hosted the Maori All Blacks for two games last term, and another earlier this year when it also played Australia A and the Rugby World Cup-bound Hong Kong China.

The increased schedule is part of a new era for the national team, as Jones looks 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 Memorandum of Understanding with each of New Zealand Rugby and Rugby Australia, Japanese rugby is becoming a regular and increasingly competitive feature on the tier one

international rugby circuit, with the Wallabies narrowly edging the Brave Blossoms 19-14 in Tokyo before both sides embarked on last month's European tours. For Japan, the trip included a test match against South Africa at the home of English sport, London's Wembley Stadium, where surely a record was set when 33 of the 46 players across the two teams had featured earlier in the year in League One.

One further player from the game, South African flyhalf Manie Libbok, has linked up with Hanazono Kintetsu Liners for the new season.

It is unlikely one competition has provided so many of the players in an official test match before.

The benefits of the Brave Blossoms' increased exposure on the test scene is flowing 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 inclusion in proposed future global club competitions such as the mooted world club rugby championship. International teams, especially from Australia, already play home-and-away training matches against League One clubs as part of their pre-season, while most sides in the league have formal high-performance relations with at least one international counterpart, especially in Australia and New Zealand, although links with northern hemisphere outfits are rapidly growing in number.

Eligibility rules change explanation

League One has changed the state of the game in Japan.

Since its inception five years ago, more teams and more players have been exposed to a higher level of competition, with last season's expansion by three teams further evidence of the league's domestic impact.

Powered by the arrival of many bigger name players – some of whom are at the height of their careers and still active with their national teams – fans have been treated to the game's elite, with the class of the international arrivals filtering down to the league's lower divisions, where several star players are plying their trade.

As with all competitions, including France's Top 14 which is facing a similarly complex challenge around player makeup in squads, League One must continue to evolve.

An important step will take place from the 2026-27 season, as the League tweaks its eligibility requirements.

The goal is to level the playing field while encouraging club's to further develop and promote local talent.

The key move has been to alter the way some foreign-born Japanese test players as well as uncapped foreign-born players who are now eligible for Japan on residential/registration grounds, are categorized.



Brave Blossoms

Essentially, by extending beyond World Rugby eligibility rules the requirements the players must meet to be categorized as A1 (or local players), the league hopes to close a loophole which has allowed various clubs to build up an armoury of foreign-bred players who have not been counted among their overseas

allowances.

These are players who have met international qualification for Japan even if they have not yet played, which has allowed them to be considered A1 (or local) players under the existing regulations. By not counting among teams' allowed quotas of

foreign players, more vacancies have been created within the regulation, which has allowed clubs to sign more non-capped from overseas.

While cleverly worked by clubs, the tactic has stalled the development of the next generation of young Japanese, squeezed out by the cadre of Japan-qualified foreigners.

The eligibility change is a proactive attempt to address statistics which reveal that 35 percent of all players in Division One are foreign-born, 26 percent in Division Two and 11 percent in Division Three.

Significantly, the number of players qualified as 'locals' under the existing rules, who would lose that registration once the change comes into effect, has risen rapidly in the last three years.

The average number of foreign-born players in matchday squads, currently classified as 'local' players and therefore not subject to the quota system for overseas players has skyrocketed from 3.8 to 5.4 in just three seasons.

It is, League One chief operating officer Hajime Shoji acknowledges, a "difficult balance".

Importantly, clubs were consulted and involved in the outcome.

It has been agreed to set a 30-cap threshold for foreign-born players who had represented Japan, meaning several current foreign-born Brave Blossoms no longer qualify as local players for their clubs.

The thinking behind the high threshold was to lessen any advantage clubs who have already stockpiled foreign-born Japanese test players, would have once the changes come into force.

The changes do not shut any player out, with the existing allowances for foreign test stars (each team is allowed to register three) and non-capped foreign players remaining.

Teams will be allowed a combination of nine non-A1 players in their 23-man matchday squads, with the mix between Japanese test players who have not reached the threshold to be considered 'local', foreign capped test players, and non-capped foreign players, up to the coaches to decide.

Even allowing for the change, League One remains the most 'open' professional competition in the world – in terms of opportunity for foreigners – which officials expect will ensure 'business as usual', with leading international players continuing to join.



Charles Piutau (SHIZUOKA BlueRevs)

The eligibility change, coupled with an already growing trend for clubs to land current test players, or players taking a sabbatical from their test duties such as All Black star Ardie Savea, could strengthen the competition overall.

An increased influx of high-profile test and non-test players at the height of their powers, as opposed to those whose careers are winding down, would bring even greater levels of 'current' expertise, which an increasing number of Japanese players will be able to benefit from.

As with any change, there are elements of uncertainty.

But with an aging population, and the reduction in the number of Japanese faces on the field becoming more readily apparent, the game is proactively addressing the issue.

In doing so, league leaders believe they will retain the integrity of the competition as Japanese, while also continuing its competitive advantage as an attraction for the best players in the game.

Note: Under current League rules, there are three categories in which players are designated:

Category A: Players of Japanese origin and players who have met the requirements to represent Japan through residency or have been exclusively registered with Japan Rugby Football Union for 48 months and

have not played for another country.

Category B: Foreign players who are uncapped, but who are yet to meet eligibility requirements to play for Japan.

Category C: Test capped foreign players, who are ineligible to represent Japan.

Once the changes are introduced, Category A will be split into two.

A1 players will be categorized as players who were either born in or one of whose parent or grandparent were born in Japan – or did their junior schooling – in Japan.

Non-Japanese born foreign players who have represented Japan in 30 tests or more, and Japanese test players who have not yet reached the 30-test mark but are Japanese citizens and are deemed to have contributed widely to the game in Japan, will also be classed as A1.

Foreign-born players who have either represented the Brave Blossoms but have not played 30 tests, as well as those who are eligible on residency but have yet to play for Japan, will be registered in the new A2 category.

There is a limit as to how many of these players can be included in a match-day squad.

Competition Draw for the 2025-26 season

DIVISION 1

ROUND	date		Conference	KO	Match		Prefecture	Venue	
1	13/12/2025	Sat	B		RICOH BlackRams Tokyo	V	TOKYO SUNTORY SUNGOLIATH	TOKYO	CHICHIBUNOMIYA
	13/12/2025	Sat	A		URAYASU D-Rocks	V	Mitsubishi Sagamihara Dynaboars	CHIBA	ZA Olipri
	13/12/2025	Sat	B		KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS	V	Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY	HYOGO	NOEVIA
	13/12/2025	Sat	B		TOYOTA VERBLITZ	V	MIE Honda HEAT	AICHI	TOYOTA
	14/12/2025	Sun	A		TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO	V	SAITAMA Panasonic WILD KNIGHTS	TOKYO	AJINOMOTO
	14/12/2025	Sun	A		YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES	V	SHIZUOKA BlueRevs	KANAGAWA	NISSAN
2	20/12/2025	Sat	B		Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY	V	RICOH BlackRams Tokyo	CHIBA	FUKUDA DENSHI ARENA
	20/12/2025	Sat	B		TOKYO SUNTORY SUNGOLIATH	V	TOYOTA VERBLITZ	TOKYO	AJINOMOTO
	21/12/2025	Sun	A		SAITAMA Panasonic WILD KNIGHTS	V	URAYASU D-Rocks	SAITAMA	KUMAGAYA
	21/12/2025	Sun	A		SHIZUOKA BlueRevs	V	TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO	SHIZUOKA	YAMAHA
	21/12/2025	Sun	A		Mitsubishi Sagamihara Dynaboars	V	YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES	KANAGAWA	SAGAMIHARA GION
	21/12/2025	Sun	B		MIE Honda HEAT	V	KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS	MIE	SUZUKA
3	27/12/2025	Sat	B		RICOH BlackRams Tokyo	V	MIE Honda HEAT	SAGA	EKIMAE Stadium
	27/12/2025	Sat	B		Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY	V	TOKYO SUNTORY SUNGOLIATH	TOKYO	CHICHIBUNOMIYA
	27/12/2025	Sat	B		KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS	V	TOYOTA VERBLITZ	HYOGO	KOBE UNIV
	28/12/2025	Sun	A		YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES	V	TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO	TOKYO	CHICHIBUNOMIYA
	28/12/2025	Sun	A		SHIZUOKA BlueRevs	V	URAYASU D-Rocks	SHIZUOKA	YAMAHA
	28/12/2025	Sun	A		Mitsubishi Sagamihara Dynaboars	V	SAITAMA Panasonic WILD KNIGHTS	KANAGAWA	SAGAMIHARA GION
4	10/01/2026	Sat	A		TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO	V	Mitsubishi Sagamihara Dynaboars	KANAGAWA	TODOROKI
	10/01/2026	Sat	A		SAITAMA Panasonic WILD KNIGHTS	V	SHIZUOKA BlueRevs	SAITAMA	KUMAGAYA
	10/01/2026	Sat	A		URAYASU D-Rocks	V	YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES	TOKYO	CHICHIBUNOMIYA
	10/01/2026	Sat	B		TOKYO SUNTORY SUNGOLIATH	V	KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS	TOKYO	AJINOMOTO
	10/01/2026	Sat	B		TOYOTA VERBLITZ	V	RICOH BlackRams Tokyo	FUKUOKA	MIKUNI
	11/01/2026	Sun	B		MIE Honda HEAT	V	Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY	MIE	SUZUKA
5	17/01/2026	Sat	A		SHIZUOKA BlueRevs	V	Mitsubishi Sagamihara Dynaboars	SHIZUOKA	YAMAHA
	17/01/2026	Sat	A		YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES	V	SAITAMA Panasonic WILD KNIGHTS	KANAGAWA	NIPPATSU
	17/01/2026	Sat	A		URAYASU D-Rocks	V	TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO	TOKYO	CHICHIBUNOMIYA
	17/01/2026	Sat	B		Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY	V	TOYOTA VERBLITZ	TOKYO	EDOGAWA
	17/01/2026	Sat	B		KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS	V	RICOH BlackRams Tokyo	HYOGO	KOBE UNIV
	17/01/2026	Sat	B		TOKYO SUNTORY SUNGOLIATH	V	MIE Honda HEAT	YAMANASHI	JIT Stadium
6	24/01/2026	Sat	Inter		SAITAMA Panasonic WILD KNIGHTS	V	TOKYO SUNTORY SUNGOLIATH	SAITAMA	KUMAGAYA
	25/01/2026	Sun	Inter		SHIZUOKA BlueRevs	V	TOYOTA VERBLITZ	SHIZUOKA	YAMAHA
	24/01/2026	Sat	Inter		MIE Honda HEAT	V	URAYASU D-Rocks	TOCHIGI	TOCHIGI GREEN
	24/01/2026	Sat	Inter		Mitsubishi Sagamihara Dynaboars	V	RICOH BlackRams Tokyo	KANAGAWA	SAGAMIHARA GION
	24/01/2026	Sat	Inter		YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES	V	KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS	KANAGAWA	NIPPATSU
	24/01/2026	Sat	Inter		TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO	V	Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY	TOKYO	CHICHIBUNOMIYA

DIVISION 1

ROUND	date		Conference	KO	Match		Prefecture	Venue
7	07/02/2026	Sat	Inter		RICOH BlackRams Tokyo	V SAITAMA Panasonic WILD KNIGHTS	TOKYO	KOMAZAWA
	07/02/2026	Sat	Inter		TOYOTA VERBLITZ	V YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES	AICHI	PALOMA MIZUHO
	07/02/2026	Sat	Inter		KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS	V SHIZUOKA BlueRevs	HYOGO	KOBE UNIV
	07/02/2026	Sat	Inter		Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY	V URAYASU D-Rocks	TOKYO	EDOGAWA
	08/02/2026	Sun	Inter		TOKYO SUNTORY SUNGOLIATH	V Mitsubishi Sagamihara Dynaboars	TOKYO	CHICHIBUNOMIYA
	07/02/2026	Sat	Inter		MIE Honda HEAT	V TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO	TOCHIGI	TOCHIGI GREEN
8	14/02/2026	Sat	Inter		SAITAMA Panasonic WILD KNIGHTS	V TOYOTA VERBLITZ	SAITAMA	KUMAGAYA
	14/02/2026	Sat	Inter		SHIZUOKA BlueRevs	V Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY	SHIZUOKA	TBC
	14/02/2026	Sat	Inter		YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES	V RICOH BlackRams Tokyo	TOKYO	CHICHIBUNOMIYA
	14/02/2026	Sat	Inter		Mitsubishi Sagamihara Dynaboars	V MIE Honda HEAT	KANAGAWA	SAGAMIHARA GION
	14/02/2026	Sat	Inter		URAYASU D-Rocks	V TOKYO SUNTORY SUNGOLIATH	MIYAZAKI	KUROKIRI Stadium
	15/02/2026	Sun	Inter		TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO	V KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS	TOKYO	CHICHIBUNOMIYA
9	21/02/2026	Sat	Inter		Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY	V Mitsubishi Sagamihara Dynaboars	TOKYO	EDOGAWA
	21/02/2026	Sat	Inter		RICOH BlackRams Tokyo	V URAYASU D-Rocks	TOKYO	KOMAZAWA
	21/02/2026	Sat	Inter		TOYOTA VERBLITZ	V TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO	AICHI	PALOMA MIZUHO
	21/02/2026	Sat	Inter		KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS	V SAITAMA Panasonic WILD KNIGHTS	HYOGO	KOBE UNIV
	22/02/2026	Sun	Inter		MIE Honda HEAT	V SHIZUOKA BlueRevs	MIE	SUZUKA
	22/02/2026	Sun	Inter		TOKYO SUNTORY SUNGOLIATH	V YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES	TOKYO	CHICHIBUNOMIYA
10	28/02/2026	Sat	Inter		TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO	V RICOH BlackRams Tokyo	KAGOSHIMA	SHIRANAMI Stadium
	28/02/2026	Sat	Inter		SAITAMA Panasonic WILD KNIGHTS	V MIE Honda HEAT	SAITAMA	KUMAGAYA
	01/03/2026	Sun	Inter		SHIZUOKA BlueRevs	V TOKYO SUNTORY SUNGOLIATH	SHIZUOKA	TBC
	01/03/2026	Sun	Inter		YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES	V Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY	OITA	CRASUS DOME
	01/03/2026	Sun	Inter		Mitsubishi Sagamihara Dynaboars	V TOYOTA VERBLITZ	KYOTO	TAKEBISHI
	28/2/2026	Sat	Inter		URAYASU D-Rocks	V KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS	TOKYO	KOMAZAWA
11	14/03/2026	Sat	Inter		MIE Honda HEAT	V YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES	TOCHIGI	TOCHIGI GREEN
	14/03/2026	Sat	Inter		RICOH BlackRams Tokyo	V SHIZUOKA BlueRevs	TOKYO	KOMAZAWA
	14/03/2026	Sat	Inter		Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY	V SAITAMA Panasonic WILD KNIGHTS	TOKYO	CHICHIBUNOMIYA
	14/03/2026	Sat	Inter		KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS	V Mitsubishi Sagamihara Dynaboars	HYOGO	KOBE UNIV
	15/03/2026	Sun	Inter		TOYOTA VERBLITZ	V URAYASU D-Rocks	AICHI	PALOMA MIZUHO
	15/03/2026	Sun	Inter		TOKYO SUNTORY SUNGOLIATH	V TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO	TOKYO	CHICHIBUNOMIYA
12	20/03/2026	Fri	Inter		KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS	V YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES	HYOGO	KOBE UNIV
	21/03/2026	Sat	Inter		Mitsubishi Sagamihara Dynaboars	V TOKYO SUNTORY SUNGOLIATH	TOKYO	CHICHIBUNOMIYA
	21/03/2026	Sat	Inter		SAITAMA Panasonic WILD KNIGHTS	V RICOH BlackRams Tokyo	SAITAMA	KUMAGAYA
	22/03/2026	Sun	Inter		TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO	V MIE Honda HEAT	TOKYO	CHICHIBUNOMIYA
	22/03/2026	Sun	Inter		TOYOTA VERBLITZ	V SHIZUOKA BlueRevs	AICHI	TBC
	21/3/2026	Sat	Inter		URAYASU D-Rocks	V Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY	TOKYO	YUMENOSHIMA

DIVISION 1

ROUND	date		Conference	KO	Match		Prefecture	Venue
13	28/03/2026	Sat	Inter		SHIZUOKA BlueRevs	V KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS	SHIZUOKA	TBC
	28/03/2026	Sat	Inter		TOKYO SUNTORY SUNGOLIATH	V SAITAMA Panasonic WILD KNIGHTS	TOKYO	CHICHIBUNOMIYA
	28/03/2026	Sat	Inter		Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY	V TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO	TOKYO	EDOGAWA
	28/03/2026	Sat	Inter		YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES	V TOYOTA VERBLITZ	KANAGAWA	TBC
	29/03/2026	Sun	Inter		RICOH BlackRams Tokyo	V Mitsubishi Sagamihara Dynaboars	TOKYO	CHICHIBUNOMIYA
	29/3/2026	Sun	Inter		URAYASU D-Rocks	V MIE Honda HEAT	TBC	TBC
14	04/04/2026	Sat	A		Mitsubishi Sagamihara Dynaboars	V SHIZUOKA BlueRevs	NAGASAKI	KAKIDOMARI
	04/04/2026	Sat	A		SAITAMA Panasonic WILD KNIGHTS	V YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES	SAITAMA	TBC
	04/04/2026	Sat	B		TOYOTA VERBLITZ	V Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY	GIFU	NAGARAGAWA
	04/04/2026	Sat	B		MIE Honda HEAT	V TOKYO SUNTORY SUNGOLIATH	TOCHIGI	TOCHIGI GREEN
	05/04/2026	Sun	A		TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO	V URAYASU D-Rocks	HOKKAIDO	PREMIST DOME
	5/4/2026	Sun	B		RICOH BlackRams Tokyo	V KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS	TBC	TBC
15	17/04/2026	Fri	B		MIE Honda HEAT	V RICOH BlackRams Tokyo	TBC	TBC
	18/04/2026	Sat	A		SHIZUOKA BlueRevs	V SAITAMA Panasonic WILD KNIGHTS	SHIZUOKA	TBC
	18/04/2026	Sat	A		YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES	V URAYASU D-Rocks	OITA	CRASUS DOME
	18/04/2026	Sat	B		TOYOTA VERBLITZ	V KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS	AICHI	TBC
	18/04/2026	Sat	B		TOKYO SUNTORY SUNGOLIATH	V Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY	KUMAMOTO	EGAO Kenko Stadium
	18or19/4/2026	Sat or Sun	A		Mitsubishi Sagamihara Dynaboars	V TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO	KANAGAWA	TBC
16	24/04/2026	Fri	A		URAYASU D-Rocks	V SHIZUOKA BlueRevs	TBC	TBC
	25/04/2026	Sat	A		SAITAMA Panasonic WILD KNIGHTS	V Mitsubishi Sagamihara Dynaboars	SAITAMA	TBC
	24or25or26/4/2026	Fri or Sat or Sun	A		TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO	V YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES	TBC	TBC
	24or25or26/4/2026	Fri or Sat or Sun	B		RICOH BlackRams Tokyo	V TOYOTA VERBLITZ	TBC	TBC
	24or25or26/4/2026	Fri or Sat or Sun	B		KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS	V TOKYO SUNTORY SUNGOLIATH	TBC	TBC
	25/or26/4/2026	Sat or Sun	B		Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY	V MIE Honda HEAT	TOKYO	TBC
17	01/05/2026	Fri	A		URAYASU D-Rocks	V SAITAMA Panasonic WILD KNIGHTS	TBC	TBC
	02/05/2026	Sat	B		TOYOTA VERBLITZ	V TOKYO SUNTORY SUNGOLIATH	AICHI	TBC
	1or2or3/5/2026	Fri or Sat or Sun	A		TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO	V SHIZUOKA BlueRevs	TBC	TBC
	1or2or3/5/2026	Fri or Sat or Sun	A		YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES	V Mitsubishi Sagamihara Dynaboars	TBC	TBC
	1or2or3/5/2026	Fri or Sat or Sun	B		KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS	V MIE Honda HEAT	TBC	TBC
	1or2or3/5/2026	Fri or Sat or Sun	B		RICOH BlackRams Tokyo	V Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY	TBC	TBC
18	09/05/2026	Sat	A		SAITAMA Panasonic WILD KNIGHTS	V TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO	SAITAMA	TBC
	09/05/2026	Sat	A		SHIZUOKA BlueRevs	V YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES	SHIZUOKA	TBC
	09/05/2026	Sat	B		MIE Honda HEAT	V TOYOTA VERBLITZ	MIE	SUZUKA
	10/05/2026	Sun	B		Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY	V KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS	TOKYO	EDOGAWA
	10/05/2026	Sun	B		TOKYO SUNTORY SUNGOLIATH	V RICOH BlackRams Tokyo	TBC	TBC
	9or10/5/2026	Sat or Sun	A		Mitsubishi Sagamihara Dynaboars	V URAYASU D-Rocks	KANAGAWA	TBC

DIVISION 2

Round	Date		Match		Prefecture	Venue
1	13/12/2025	Sat	Toyota Industries Corporation Shuttles Aichi	V	HANAZONO KINTETSU LINERS	AICHI PALOMA MIZUHO
	13/12/2025	Sat	NEC GREEN ROCKETS TOKATSU	V	RedHurricanes Osaka	CHIBA KASIWA-NO-HA
	13/12/2025	Sat	SHIMIZU KOTO BLUE SHARKS	V	NIPPON STEEL KAMAISHI SEAWAVES	TOKYO YUMENOSHIMA
	14/12/2025	Sun	HINO RED DOLPHINS	V	Kyushudenryoku KyudenVotlex	GUNMA OTA
2	20/12/2025	Sat	HANAZONO KINTETSU LINERS	V	NEC GREEN ROCKETS TOKATSU	OSAKA HANAZONO
	20/12/2025	Sat	Kyushudenryoku KyudenVotlex	V	SHIMIZU KOTO BLUE SHARKS	FUKUOKA HAKATANOMORI
	21/12/2025	Sun	RedHurricanes Osaka	V	Toyota Industries Corporation Shuttles Aichi	OSAKA YANMAR
	21/12/2025	Sun	NIPPON STEEL KAMAISHI SEAWAVES	V	HINO RED DOLPHINS	IWATE KAMAISHI
3	27/12/2025	Sat	NIPPON STEEL KAMAISHI SEAWAVES	V	Kyushudenryoku KyudenVotlex	FUKUSHIMA Hawaiians
	10/01/2025	Sat	HANAZONO KINTETSU LINERS	V	HINO RED DOLPHINS	OSAKA HANAZONO
	10/01/2025	Sat	SHIMIZU KOTO BLUE SHARKS	V	RedHurricanes Osaka	TOKYO YUMENOSHIMA
	10/01/2025	Sat	NEC GREEN ROCKETS TOKATSU	V	Toyota Industries Corporation Shuttles Aichi	CHIBA KASIWA-NO-HA
4	17/01/2025	Sat	RedHurricanes Osaka	V	HANAZONO KINTETSU LINERS	OSAKA YANMAR
	17/01/2025	Sat	Toyota Industries Corporation Shuttles Aichi	V	NIPPON STEEL KAMAISHI SEAWAVES	AICHI KARIYA
	18/01/2025	Sun	HINO RED DOLPHINS	V	SHIMIZU KOTO BLUE SHARKS	TOKYO AGF Field
	24/01/2025	Sat	Kyushudenryoku KyudenVotlex	V	NEC GREEN ROCKETS TOKATSU	FUKUOKA HAKATANOMORI
5	31/01/2025	Sat	HINO RED DOLPHINS	V	Toyota Industries Corporation Shuttles Aichi	TOKYO Kami Yugi Park
	07/02/2025	Sat	SHIMIZU KOTO BLUE SHARKS	V	HANAZONO KINTETSU LINERS	TOKYO YUMENOSHIMA
	08/02/2025	Sun	Kyushudenryoku KyudenVotlex	V	RedHurricanes Osaka	FUKUOKA HAKATANOMORI
	08/02/2025	Sun	NEC GREEN ROCKETS TOKATSU	V	NIPPON STEEL KAMAISHI SEAWAVES	CHIBA KASIWA-NO-HA
6	14/02/2025	Sat	Toyota Industries Corporation Shuttles Aichi	V	SHIMIZU KOTO BLUE SHARKS	AICHI PALOMA MIZUHO
	14/02/2025	Sat	HANAZONO KINTETSU LINERS	V	Kyushudenryoku KyudenVotlex	OSAKA HANAZONO
	21/02/2025	Sat	RedHurricanes Osaka	V	NIPPON STEEL KAMAISHI SEAWAVES	OSAKA TBC
	22/02/2025	Sun	NEC GREEN ROCKETS TOKATSU	V	HINO RED DOLPHINS	CHIBA KASIWA-NO-HA
7	28/02/2025	Sat	Toyota Industries Corporation Shuttles Aichi	V	Kyushudenryoku KyudenVotlex	AICHI PALOMA MIZUHO
	28/02/2025	Sat	HINO RED DOLPHINS	V	RedHurricanes Osaka	TOKYO AGF Field
	28/02/2025	Sat	SHIMIZU KOTO BLUE SHARKS	V	NEC GREEN ROCKETS TOKATSU	TOKYO YUMENOSHIMA
	07/03/2025	Sat	NIPPON STEEL KAMAISHI SEAWAVES	V	HANAZONO KINTETSU LINERS	IWATE KAMAISHI
8	07/03/2025	Sat	HINO RED DOLPHINS	V	NEC GREEN ROCKETS TOKATSU	TOKYO AGF Field
	14/03/2025	Sat	Kyushudenryoku KyudenVotlex	V	HANAZONO KINTETSU LINERS	FUKUOKA HAKATANOMORI
	14/03/2025	Sat	SHIMIZU KOTO BLUE SHARKS	V	Toyota Industries Corporation Shuttles Aichi	TOKYO YUMENOSHIMA
	15/03/2025	Sun	NIPPON STEEL KAMAISHI SEAWAVES	V	RedHurricanes Osaka	IWATE KAMAISHI
9	27/03/2025	Fri	RedHurricanes Osaka	V	Kyushudenryoku KyudenVotlex	OSAKA TBC
	28/03/2025	Sat	Toyota Industries Corporation Shuttles Aichi	V	HINO RED DOLPHINS	AICHI PALOMA MIZUHO
	28/03/2025	Sat	NEC GREEN ROCKETS TOKATSU	V	SHIMIZU KOTO BLUE SHARKS	CHIBA KASIWA-NO-HA
	28/03/2025	Sat	HANAZONO KINTETSU LINERS	V	NIPPON STEEL KAMAISHI SEAWAVES	OSAKA HANAZONO

DIVISION 2

Round	Date		Match		Prefecture	Venue
10	04/04/2025	Sat	HANAZONO KINTETSU LINERS	V	RedHurricanes Osaka	OSAKA TBC
	3or4or5/4/2026	Fri or Sat or Sun	NEC GREEN ROCKETS TOKATSU	V	Kyushudenryoku KyudenVoltex	TBC TBC
	4or5/4/2026	Sat or Sun	SHIMIZU KOTO BLUE SHARKS	V	HINO RED DOLPHINS	TOKYO TBC
	4or5/4/2026	Sat or Sun	NIPPON STEEL KAMAISHI SEAWAVES	V	Toyota Industries Corporation Shuttles Aichi	IWATE IWAGIN Stadium
11	11/04/2025	Sat	Toyota Industries Corporation Shuttles Aichi	V	NEC GREEN ROCKETS TOKATSU	AICHI KARIYA
	10or11or12/4/2026	Fri or Sat or Sun	Kyushudenryoku KyudenVoltex	V	NIPPON STEEL KAMAISHI SEAWAVES	Kyushu region TBC
	10or11or12/4/2026	Fri or Sat or Sun	HINO RED DOLPHINS	V	HANAZONO KINTETSU LINERS	TBC TBC
	11or12/4/2026	Sat or Sun	RedHurricanes Osaka	V	SHIMIZU KOTO BLUE SHARKS	OSAKA TBC
12	25/04/2025	Sat	NIPPON STEEL KAMAISHI SEAWAVES	V	NEC GREEN ROCKETS TOKATSU	IWATE TBC
	24or25or26/4/2026	Fri or Sat or Sun	HANAZONO KINTETSU LINERS	V	SHIMIZU KOTO BLUE SHARKS	OSAKA TBC
	24or25or26/4/2026	Fri or Sat or Sun	RedHurricanes Osaka	V	HINO RED DOLPHINS	OSAKA TBC
	24or25or26/4/2026	Fri or Sat or Sun	Kyushudenryoku KyudenVoltex	V	Toyota Industries Corporation Shuttles Aichi	Kyushu region TBC
13	02/05/2025	Sat	Toyota Industries Corporation Shuttles Aichi	V	RedHurricanes Osaka	AICHI KARIYA
	1or2or3/5/2026	Fri or Sat or Sun	NEC GREEN ROCKETS TOKATSU	V	HANAZONO KINTETSU LINERS	TBC TBC
	1or2or3/5/2026	Fri or Sat or Sun	SHIMIZU KOTO BLUE SHARKS	V	Kyushudenryoku KyudenVoltex	TOKYO TBC
	1or2or3/5/2026	Fri or Sat or Sun	HINO RED DOLPHINS	V	NIPPON STEEL KAMAISHI SEAWAVES	TBC TBC
14	10/05/2025	Sun	HANAZONO KINTETSU LINERS	V	Toyota Industries Corporation Shuttles Aichi	OSAKA TBC
	8or9or10/4/2026	Fri or Sat or Sun	RedHurricanes Osaka	V	NEC GREEN ROCKETS TOKATSU	OSAKA TBC
	9or10/4/2026	Sat or Sun	Kyushudenryoku KyudenVoltex	V	HINO RED DOLPHINS	Kyushu region TBC
	9or10/4/2026	Sat or Sun	NIPPON STEEL KAMAISHI SEAWAVES	V	SHIMIZU KOTO BLUE SHARKS	IWATE TBC

DIVISION 3

Round	Date		Match		Prefecture	Venue
1	13/12/2025	Sat	SAYAMA SECOM RUGGUTs	V	MAZDA SKYACTIVS HIROSHIMA	TOCHIGI ASHIKAGA Athletic
	13/12/2025	Sat	Kurita Water Gush Akishima	V	Chugoku Electric Power Red Regulions	KANAGAWA OGINO
	14/12/2025	Sun	Yakult Levins Toda	V	LeRIRO Fukuoka	FUKUOKA KURUME Athletic
2	21/12/2025	Sun	MAZDA SKYACTIVS HIROSHIMA	V	Kurita Water Gush Akishima	YAMAGUCHI Me-Life Stadium
	21/12/2025	Sun	Chugoku Electric Power Red Regulions	V	Yakult Levins Toda	HIROSHIMA SAKA Ground
	21/12/2025	Sun	LeRIRO Fukuoka	V	SAYAMA SECOM RUGGUTs	FUKUOKA KURUME Athletic
3	10/01/2026	Sat	SAYAMA SECOM RUGGUTs	V	Yakult Levins Toda	TOCHIGI ASHIKAGA Athletic
	10/1/2026	Sat	MAZDA SKYACTIVS HIROSHIMA	V	Chugoku Electric Power Red Regulions	HIROSHIMA FUKUTSU
	11/1/2026	Sun	LeRIRO Fukuoka	V	Kurita Water Gush Akishima	FUKUOKA KURUME Athletic
4	17/01/2026	Sat	Kurita Water Gush Akishima	V	SAYAMA SECOM RUGGUTs	TOKYO AGF Field
	18/2026	Sun	Chugoku Electric Power Red Regulions	V	LeRIRO Fukuoka	YAMAGUCHI Me-Life Stadium
	25/01/2026	Sun	Yakult Levins Toda	V	MAZDA SKYACTIVS HIROSHIMA	TOCHIGI Honda Green Stadium
5	31/01/2026	Sat	Yakult Levins Toda	V	Kurita Water Gush Akishima	TOKYO KOMAZAWA
	31/01/2026	Sat	LeRIRO Fukuoka	V	MAZDA SKYACTIVS HIROSHIMA	FUKUOKA KURUME Athletic
	31/1/2026	Sat	Chugoku Electric Power Red Regulions	V	SAYAMA SECOM RUGGUTs	HIROSHIMA TBC

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6	07/02/2026	Sat	MAZDA SKYACTIVS HIROSHIMA	V	Yakult Levins Toda	HIROSHIMA	BALCOM S
	08/02/2026	Sun	LeRIRO Fukuoka	V	Chugoku Electric Power Red Regulions	FUKUOKA	KURUME Athletic
	15/02/2026	Sun	SAYAMA SECOM RUGGUTs	V	Kurita Water Gush Akishima	SAITAMA	TBC
7	21/02/2026	Sat	Kurita Water Gush Akishima	V	MAZDA SKYACTIVS HIROSHIMA	TOKYO	AGF Field
	22/02/2026	Sun	Yakult Levins Toda	V	Chugoku Electric Power Red Regulions	GUNMA	Shikishima Park
	21/2026	Sat	SAYAMA SECOM RUGGUTs	V	LeRIRO Fukuoka	TOCHIGI	ASHIKAGA Athletic
8	01/03/2026	Sun	Kurita Water Gush Akishima	V	LeRIRO Fukuoka	TOKYO	AGF Field
	28/2or1/3/2026	Sat or Sun	Chugoku Electric Power Red Regulions	V	MAZDA SKYACTIVS HIROSHIMA	HIROSHIMA	BALCOM S
	28/2/2026	Sat	Yakult Levins Toda	V	SAYAMA SECOM RUGGUTs	KANAGAWA	YAMATO Sport Centre
9	07/03/2026	Sat	LeRIRO Fukuoka	V	Yakult Levins Toda	FUKUOKA	KURUME Athletic
	15/3/2026	Sun	Chugoku Electric Power Red Regulions	V	Kurita Water Gush Akishima	HIROSHIMA	BALCOM S
	7/3/2026	Sat	MAZDA SKYACTIVS HIROSHIMA	V	SAYAMA SECOM RUGGUTs	HIROSHIMA	BALCOM S
10	21/03/2026	Sat	Kurita Water Gush Akishima	V	Yakult Levins Toda	KANAGAWA	OGINO
	28/03/2026	Sat	MAZDA SKYACTIVS HIROSHIMA	V	LeRIRO Fukuoka	HIROSHIMA	BALCOM S
	29/03/2026	Sun	SAYAMA SECOM RUGGUTs	V	Chugoku Electric Power Red Regulions	SAITAMA	TBC
11	4or5/4/2026	Sat or Sun	MAZDA SKYACTIVS HIROSHIMA	V	Chugoku Electric Power Red Regulions	TBC	TBC
	4or5/4/2026	Sat or Sun	SAYAMA SECOM RUGGUTs	V	Yakult Levins Toda	TBC	TBC
	4or5/4/2026	Sat or Sun	LeRIRO Fukuoka	V	Kurita Water Gush Akishima	TBC	TBC
12	11or12/4/2026	Sat or Sun	Yakult Levins Toda	V	MAZDA SKYACTIVS HIROSHIMA	TBC	TBC
	11or12/4/2026	Sat or Sun	Kurita Water Gush Akishima	V	SAYAMA SECOM RUGGUTs	TBC	TBC
	11or12/4/2026	Sat or Sun	Chugoku Electric Power Red Regulions	V	LeRIRO Fukuoka	TBC	TBC
13	25or26/4/2026	Sat or Sun	Chugoku Electric Power Red Regulions	V	SAYAMA SECOM RUGGUTs	TBC	TBC
	25or26/4/2026	Sat or Sun	Yakult Levins Toda	V	Kurita Water Gush Akishima	TBC	TBC
	25or26/4/2026	Sat or Sun	LeRIRO Fukuoka	V	MAZDA SKYACTIVS HIROSHIMA	TBC	TBC
14	2or3/5/2026	Sat or Sun	Kurita Water Gush Akishima	V	MAZDA SKYACTIVS HIROSHIMA	TBC	TBC
	2or3/5/2026	Sat or Sun	Yakult Levins Toda	V	Chugoku Electric Power Red Regulions	TBC	TBC
	2or3/5/2026	Sat or Sun	SAYAMA SECOM RUGGUTs	V	LeRIRO Fukuoka	TBC	TBC
15	9or10/5/2026	Sat or Sun	MAZDA SKYACTIVS HIROSHIMA	V	SAYAMA SECOM RUGGUTs	TBC	TBC
	9or10/5/2026	Sat or Sun	Chugoku Electric Power Red Regulions	V	Kurita Water Gush Akishima	TBC	TBC
	9or10/5/2026	Sat or Sun	LeRIRO Fukuoka	V	Yakult Levins Toda	TBC	TBC

Results/Tables from the 2024-25 season

DIVISION 1

ROUND	date	DIVISION	KO	Match			Prefecture	STADIUM	audience
1	12/21/2024 Sat	B	D1	12:10	MIE Honda HEAT	23 v 21	RICOH BlackRams Tokyo	MIE SUZUKA	2,868
	12/21/2024 Sat	A	D1	14:00	SHIZUOKA BlueRevs	15 v 13	KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS	SHIZUOKA YAMAHA	8,498
	12/21/2024 Sat	B	D1	14:30	TOKYO SUNTORY SUNGOLIATH	12 v 33	SAITAMA Panasonic WILD KNIGHTS	TOKYO AJINOMOTO	20,263
	12/22/2024 Sun	B	D1	14:30	Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY	30 v 27	TOYOTA VERBLITZ	TOKYO CHICHIBUNOMIYA	12,358
	12/22/2024 Sun	A	D1	14:30	Mitsubishi Sagamihara Dynaboars	31 v 19	URAYASU D-Rocks	KANAGAWA SAGAMIHARA GION	6,607
2	12/22/2024 Sun	A	D1	15:05	YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES	21 v 28	TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO	KANAGAWA NISSAN	22,871
	12/28/2024 Sat	B	D1	13:00	RICOH BlackRams Tokyo	33 v 32	TOKYO SUNTORY SUNGOLIATH	TOKYO CHICHIBUNOMIYA	8,169
	12/28/2024 Sat	A	D1	13:05	URAYASU D-Rocks	19 v 62	SHIZUOKA BlueRevs	KUMAMOTO EGAO	2,603
	12/28/2024 Sat	B	D1	14:30	SAITAMA Panasonic WILD KNIGHTS	26 v 24	Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY	SAITAMA KUMAGAYA	10,464
	12/28/2024 Sat	B	D1	14:40	TOYOTA VERBLITZ	17 v 21	MIE Honda HEAT	GIFU NAGARAGAWA	5,901
3	12/29/2024 Sun	A	D1	13:00	TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO	61 v 8	Mitsubishi Sagamihara Dynaboars	TOKYO AJINOMOTO	10,471
	12/29/2024 Sun	A	D1	14:30	KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS	36 v 18	YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES	HYOGO NOEVIA	15,292
	1/4/2025 Sat	A	D1	12:00	URAYASU D-Rocks	12 v 40	YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES	FUKUSHIMA JVillage	1,455
	1/4/2025 Sat	A	D1	12:00	Mitsubishi Sagamihara Dynaboars	34 v 40	SHIZUOKA BlueRevs	TOKYO CHICHIBUNOMIYA	4,824
	1/4/2025 Sat	B	D1	13:00	RICOH BlackRams Tokyo	16 v 39	SAITAMA Panasonic WILD KNIGHTS	TOKYO KOMAZAWA	8,403
4	1/4/2025 Sat	B	D1	14:30	TOKYO SUNTORY SUNGOLIATH	30 v 30	TOYOTA VERBLITZ	TOKYO AJINOMOTO	15,914
	1/5/2024 Sun	B	D1	12:00	MIE Honda HEAT	27 v 32	Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY	MIE SUZUKA	2,934
	1/5/2025 Sun	A	D1	13:00	TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO	32 v 26	KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS	TOKYO AJINOMOTO	9,605
	1/11/2025 Sat	A	D1	12:00	YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES	53 v 35	SHIZUOKA BlueRevs	KANAGAWA NIPPATSU	6,842
	1/11/2025 Sat	B	D1	14:40	TOYOTA VERBLITZ	32 v 18	RICOH BlackRams Tokyo	GIFU NAGARAGAWA	4,845
5	1/12/2025 Sun	B	D1	14:05	TOKYO SUNTORY SUNGOLIATH	26 v 26	Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY	TOKYO CHICHIBUNOMIYA	11,379
	1/12/2025 Sun	B	D1	14:30	SAITAMA Panasonic WILD KNIGHTS	48 v 24	MIE Honda HEAT	SAITAMA KUMAGAYA	7,545
	1/12/2025 Sun	A	D1	14:30	Mitsubishi Sagamihara Dynaboars	34 v 26	KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS	KANAGAWA SAGAMIHARA GION	3,638
	1/18/2005 Sat	B	D1	12:00	Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY	26 v 18	RICOH BlackRams Tokyo	TOKYO EDOGAWA	4,484
	1/18/2005 Sat	A	D1	13:00	SHIZUOKA BlueRevs	34 v 28	TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO	SHIZUOKA YAMAHA	6,571
6	1/18/2005 Sat	A	D1	14:10	YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES	47 v 21	Mitsubishi Sagamihara Dynaboars	KANAGAWA NIPPATSU	8,402
	1/19/2025 Sun	A	D1	12:05	KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS	50 v 22	URAYASU D-Rocks	HYOGO NOEVIA	8,983
	1/19/2025 Sun	B	D1	12:10	MIE Honda HEAT	19 v 27	TOKYO SUNTORY SUNGOLIATH	MIE SUZUKA	3,608
	1/19/2025 Sun	B	D1	14:30	TOYOTA VERBLITZ	22 v 38	SAITAMA Panasonic WILD KNIGHTS	FUKUOKA MIKUNI	13,251
	2/1/2025 Sat	Inner	D1	12:00	KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS	44 v 15	RICOH BlackRams Tokyo	HYOGO KOBE UNIV	4,738
7	2/1/2025 Sat	Inner	D1	14:00	SHIZUOKA BlueRevs	14 v 33	TOKYO SUNTORY SUNGOLIATH	SHIZUOKA YAMAHA	6,203
	2/1/2025 Sat	Inner	D1	14:30	SAITAMA Panasonic WILD KNIGHTS	53 v 26	URAYASU D-Rocks	SAITAMA KUMAGAYA	6,474
	2/1/2025 Sat	Inner	D1	14:30	TOYOTA VERBLITZ	20 v 24	YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES	AICHI TOYOTA	16,366
	2/1/2025 Sat	Inner	D1	14:30	Mitsubishi Sagamihara Dynaboars	12 v 40	Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY	KANAGAWA SAGAMIHARA GION	3,925
	2/2/2025 Sun	Inner	D1	12:10	MIE Honda HEAT	12 v 35	TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO	MIE SUZUKA	2,863

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ROUND	date		DIVISION	KO	Match			Prefecture	STADIUM	audience	
7	2/8/2025	Sat	Inner	D1	12:00	KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS	29 v 31	TOKYO SUNTORY SUNGOLIATH	HYOGO	NOEVIA	5,585
	2/8/2025	Sat	Inner	D1	12:00	RICOH BlackRams Tokyo	24 v 32	SHIZUOKA BlueRevs	FUKUSHIMA	JVillage	1,207
	2/8/2025	Sat	Inner	D1	12:05	URAYASU D-Rocks	31 v 26	MIE Honda HEAT	TOKYO	CHICHIBUNOMIYA	13,604
	2/8/2025	Sat	Inner	D1	14:10	YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES	22 v 30	Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY	KANAGAWA	NIPPATSU	8,195
	2/9/2025	Sun	Inner	D1	14:30	SAITAMA Panasonic WILD KNIGHTS	28 v 28	TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO	SAITAMA	KUMAGAYA	11,051
	2/9/2025	Sun	Inner	D1	14:30	Mitsubishi Sagamihara Dynaboars	44 v 40	TOYOTA VERBLITZ	KANAGAWA	SAGAMIHARA GION	5,287
8	2/15/2025	Sat	Inner	D1	14:05	TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO	43 v 33	TOKYO SUNTORY SUNGOLIATH	TOKYO	CHICHIBUNOMIYA	13,339
	2/15/2025	Sat	Inner	D1	14:30	Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY	25 v 20	KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS	TOKYO	EDOGAWA	4,175
	2/15/2025	Sat	Inner	D1	14:30	TOYOTA VERBLITZ	23 v 33	SHIZUOKA BlueRevs	GIFU	NAGARAGAWA	4,118
	2/15/2025	Sat	Inner	D1	14:30	RICOH BlackRams Tokyo	44 v 22	URAYASU D-Rocks	TOKYO	YUMENOSHIMA	3,065
	2/16/2025	Sun	Inner	D1	12:00	MIE Honda HEAT	38 v 37	Mitsubishi Sagamihara Dynaboars	MIE	SUZUKA	2,506
	2/16/2025	Sun	Inner	D1	14:30	YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES	36 v 51	SAITAMA Panasonic WILD KNIGHTS	TOKYO	CHICHIBUNOMIYA	12,288
9	2/22/2025	Sat	Inner	D1	12:00	RICOH BlackRams Tokyo	44 v 45	TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO	TOKYO	CHICHIBUNOMIYA	8,380
	2/22/2025	Sat	Inner	D1	12:00	Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY	62 v 14	SHIZUOKA BlueRevs	TOKYO	EDOGAWA	3,908
	2/22/2025	Sat	Inner	D1	14:30	KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS	63 v 21	TOYOTA VERBLITZ	OSAKA	HANAZONO	9,295
	2/22/2025	Sat	Inner	D1	14:30	SAITAMA Panasonic WILD KNIGHTS	39 v 10	Mitsubishi Sagamihara Dynaboars	SAITAMA	KUMAGAYA	5,507
	2/23/2025	Sun	Inner	D1	12:00	MIE Honda HEAT	20 v 17	YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES	MIE	SUZUKA	3,136
	2/23/2025	Sun	Inner	D1	13:05	TOKYO SUNTORY SUNGOLIATH	40 v 35	URAYASU D-Rocks	YAMANASHI	JIT Stadium	3,686
10	3/1/2025	Sat	Inner	D1	12:00	Mitsubishi Sagamihara Dynaboars	7 v 22	RICOH BlackRams Tokyo	TOKYO	CHICHIBUNOMIYA	6,031
	3/1/2025	Sat	Inner	D1	12:00	URAYASU D-Rocks	31 v 36	TOYOTA VERBLITZ	FUKUSHIMA	JVillage	1,239
	3/1/2025	Sat	Inner	D1	13:00	TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO	31 v 27	Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY	KAGOSHIMA	SHIRANAMI	6,056
	3/2/2025	Sun	Inner	D1	13:05	SHIZUOKA BlueRevs	44 v 14	MIE Honda HEAT	SHIZUOKA	YAMAHA	7,429
	3/2/2025	Sun	Inner	D1	14:30	SAITAMA Panasonic WILD KNIGHTS	46 v 32	KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS	SAITAMA	KUMAGAYA	7,128
	3/2/2025	Sun	Inner	D1	14:30	TOKYO SUNTORY SUNGOLIATH	22 v 33	YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES	TOKYO	CHICHIBUNOMIYA	12,532
11	3/14/2025	Fri	Inner	D1	19:00	URAYASU D-Rocks	22 v 33	Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY	TOKYO	CHICHIBUNOMIYA	14,056
	3/15/2025	Sat	Inner	D1	13:05	TOYOTA VERBLITZ	22 v 33	TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO	AICHI	TOYOTA	24,165
	3/15/2025	Sat	Inner	D1	14:00	SHIZUOKA BlueRevs	22 v 17	SAITAMA Panasonic WILD KNIGHTS	SHIZUOKA	YAMAHA	5,302
	3/15/2025	Sat	Inner	D1	14:30	YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES	47 v 5	RICOH BlackRams Tokyo	TOKYO	CHICHIBUNOMIYA	5,109
	3/15/2025	Sat	Inner	D1	14:30	KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS	10 v 17	MIE Honda HEAT	HYOGO	NOEVIA	10,043
	3/16/2025	Sun	Inner	D1	14:30	Mitsubishi Sagamihara Dynaboars	34 v 22	TOKYO SUNTORY SUNGOLIATH	KYOTO	TAKEBISHI	6,035
12	3/22/2025	Sat	Inner	D1	12:00	MIE Honda HEAT	31 v 39	URAYASU D-Rocks	MIE	SUZUKA	2,778
	3/22/2025	Sat	Inner	D1	14:30	Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY	41 v 24	YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES	TOKYO	EDOGAWA	4,680
	3/22/2025	Sat	Inner	D1	14:30	SHIZUOKA BlueRevs	31 v 25	RICOH BlackRams Tokyo	SHIZUOKA	IAI	7,720
	3/22/2025	Sat	Inner	D1	14:40	TOYOTA VERBLITZ	22 v 31	Mitsubishi Sagamihara Dynaboars	GIFU	NAGARAGAWA	4,563
	3/22/2025	Sat	Inner	D1	15:05	TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO	42 v 31	SAITAMA Panasonic WILD KNIGHTS	TOKYO	CHICHIBUNOMIYA	16,937
	3/23/2025	Sun	Inner	D1	14:30	TOKYO SUNTORY SUNGOLIATH	37 v 39	KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS	TOKYO	CHICHIBUNOMIYA	9,663
13	3/29/2025	Sat	Inner	D1	12:00	TOKYO SUNTORY SUNGOLIATH	22 v 17	SHIZUOKA BlueRevs	TOKYO	CHICHIBUNOMIYA	5,094
	3/29/2025	Sat	Inner	D1	12:00	Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY	33 v 5	Mitsubishi Sagamihara Dynaboars	TOKYO	EDOGAWA	2,301
	3/29/2025	Sat	Inner	D1	12:05	URAYASU D-Rocks	26 v 54	SAITAMA Panasonic WILD KNIGHTS	MIYAGI	Q&A.S MIYAGI	2,847
	3/30/2025	Sun	Inner	D1	13:00	TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO	59 v 21	MIE Honda HEAT	HOKKAIDO	PREMIST	7,206
	3/30/2025	Sun	Inner	D1	13:05	YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES	17 v 29	TOYOTA VERBLITZ	OITA	CRASUS	5,387
	3/30/2025	Sun	Inner	D1	14:30	RICOH BlackRams Tokyo	24 v 27	KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS	TOKYO	CHICHIBUNOMIYA	7,482

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ROUND	date		DIVISION	KO	Match			Prefecture	STADIUM	audience		
14	4/5/2025	Sat	B	D1	12:00	SAITAMA Panasonic WILD KNIGHTS		33 v 22	TOYOTA VERBLITZ	SAITAMA	KUMAGAYA	5,565
	4/5/2025	Sat	A	D1	14:00	YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES		38 v 8	URAYASU D-Rocks	TOKYO	CHICHIBUNOMIYA	6,065
	4/5/2025	Sat	A	D1	14:30	SHIZUOKA BlueRevs		55 v 17	Mitsubishi Sagami-hara Dynaboars	SHIZUOKA	YAMAHA	10,127
	4/5/2025	Sat	B	D1	14:30	TOKYO SUNTORY SUNGOLIATH		60 v 31	MIE Honda HEAT	OSAKA	HANAZONO	3,114
	4/6/2025	Sun	B	D1	14:30	RICOH BlackRams Tokyo		14 v 42	Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY	TOKYO	CHICHIBUNOMIYA	6,318
	4/6/2025	Sun	A	D1	14:30	KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS		28 v 73	TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO	HYOGO	NOEVIA	8,053
15	4/11/2025	Fri	B	D1	19:00	MIE Honda HEAT		33 v 53	SAITAMA Panasonic WILD KNIGHTS	TOKYO	CHICHIBUNOMIYA	14,896
	4/12/2025	Sat	A	D1	12:00	Mitsubishi Sagami-hara Dynaboars		38 v 28	YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES	NAGASAKI	KAKIDOMARI	4,261
	4/12/2025	Sat	A	D1	12:00	TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO		26 v 56	SHIZUOKA BlueRevs	TOKYO	CHICHIBUNOMIYA	10,097
	4/12/2025	Sat	A	D1	12:00	URAYASU D-Rocks		20 v 33	KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS	CHIBA	ZA ORIPRI	1,605
	4/13/2025	Sun	B	D1	14:30	Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY		30 v 10	TOKYO SUNTORY SUNGOLIATH	OSAKA	HANAZONO	6,401
	4/13/2025	TBD	B	D1	14:30	RICOH BlackRams Tokyo		37 v 7	TOYOTA VERBLITZ	CHIBA	ZA ORIPRI	1,789
16	4/25/2025	Fri	A	D1	19:05	URAYASU D-Rocks		19 v 61	TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO	TOKYO	CHICHIBUNOMIYA	11,408
	4/26/2025	Sat	B	D1	12:00	Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY		39 v 20	MIE Honda HEAT	TOKYO	EDOGAWA	4,455
	4/26/2025	Sat	B	D1	14:30	SAITAMA Panasonic WILD KNIGHTS		27 v 21	RICOH BlackRams Tokyo	SAITAMA	KUMAGAYA	8,003
	4/26/2025	Sat	A	D1	14:30	KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS		59 v 33	Mitsubishi Sagami-hara Dynaboars	OSAKA	HANAZONO	7,401
	4/27/2025	Sun	A	D1	14:00	SHIZUOKA BlueRevs		38 v 28	YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES	SHIZUOKA	ECOPA	8,113
	4/27/2025	Sun	B	D1	14:30	TOYOTA VERBLITZ		28 v 45	TOKYO SUNTORY SUNGOLIATH	OSAKA	HANAZONO	10,569
17	5/3/2025	Sat	B	D1	13:00	TOKYO SUNTORY SUNGOLIATH		43 v 34	RICOH BlackRams Tokyo	TOKYO	AJINOMOTO	14,065
	5/3/2025	Sat	A	D1	14:00	SHIZUOKA BlueRevs		62 v 52	URAYASU D-Rocks	SHIZUOKA	YAMAHA	12,406
	5/3/2025	Sat	B	D1	14:30	Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY		29 v 29	SAITAMA Panasonic WILD KNIGHTS	TOKYO	CHICHIBUNOMIYA	15,588
	5/3/2025	Sat	A	D1	14:30	Mitsubishi Sagami-hara Dynaboars		28 v 45	TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO	KANAGAWA	SAGAMIHARA GION	8,911
	5/4/2025	Sun	B	D1	12:10	MIE Honda HEAT		30 v 38	TOYOTA VERBLITZ	MIE	SUZUKA	5,437
	5/4/2025	Sun	A	D1	14:30	YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES		29 v 47	KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS	TOKYO	CHICHIBUNOMIYA	8,899
18	5/9/2025	Fri	A	D1	18:35	URAYASU D-Rocks		34 v 21	Mitsubishi Sagami-hara Dynaboars	TOKYO	CHICHIBUNOMIYA	8,650
	5/10/2025	Sat	A	D1	13:00	TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO		49 v 28	YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES	TOKYO	CHICHIBUNOMIYA	10,290
	5/10/2025	Sat	B	D1	14:30	SAITAMA Panasonic WILD KNIGHTS		60 v 17	TOKYO SUNTORY SUNGOLIATH	SAITAMA	KUMAGAYA	9,553
	5/10/2025	Sat	B	D1	14:30	TOYOTA VERBLITZ		14 v 37	Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY	AICHI	TOYOTA	14,731
	5/10/2025	Sat	A	D1	17:00	KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS		23 v 29	SHIZUOKA BlueRevs	HYOGO	NOEVIA	7,991
	5/11/2025	Sun	B	D1	14:30	RICOH BlackRams Tokyo		67 v 22	MIE Honda HEAT	TOKYO	CHICHIBUNOMIYA	12,396
PO1	5/17/2025	Sat	QF①	D1	12:05	SHIZUOKA BlueRevs		20 v 35	KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS	OSAKA	HANAZONO	7,006
PO1	5/18/2025	Sun	QF②	D1	14:30	Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY		20 v 15	TOKYO SUNTORY SUNGOLIATH	OSAKA	HANAZONO	6,900
PO1	5/24/2025	Sat	SF①	D1	14:05	TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO		31 v 3	KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS	TOKYO	CHICHIBUNOMIYA	16,253
PO1	5/25/2025	Sun	SF②	D1	14:30	SAITAMA Panasonic WILD KNIGHTS		24 v 28	Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY	TOKYO	CHICHIBUNOMIYA	17,735
PO2	5/31/2025	Sat	BF	D1	14:05	KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS		22 v 17	SAITAMA Panasonic WILD KNIGHTS	TOKYO	CHICHIBUNOMIYA	8,151
PO3	6/1/2025	Sun	FINAL	D1	15:05	TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO		18 v 13	Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY	TOKYO	KOKURITSU	51,009

DIVISION 2

ROUND	date	DIVISION	KO	Match			Prefecture	STADIUM	audience	
1	13/12/2025 Sat	D2	14:30	Toyota Industries Corporation Shuttles Aichi	20	V 24	HANAZONO KINTETSU LINERS	AICHI	PALOMA MIZUHO	4,462
	13/12/2025 Sat	D2	14:30	NEC GREEN ROCKETS TOKATSU	27	V 23	RedHurricanes Osaka	CHIBA	KASIWA-NO-HA	3,763
	13/12/2025 Sat	D2	12:00	SHIMIZU KOTO BLUE SHARKS	24	V 25	NIPPON STEEL KAMAISHI SEAWAVES	TOKYO	YUMENOSHIMA	945
	14/12/2025 Sun	D2	14:30	HINO RED DOLPHINS	34	V 13	Kyushudenryoku KyudenVolfex	GUNMA	OTA	9,071
2	20/12/2025 Sat	D2	13:00	HANAZONO KINTETSU LINERS	17	V 59	NEC GREEN ROCKETS TOKATSU	OSAKA	HANAZONO	1,255
	20/12/2025 Sat	D2	14:30	Kyushudenryoku KyudenVolfex	41	V 33	SHIMIZU KOTO BLUE SHARKS	FUKUOKA	HAKATANOMORI	2,579
	21/12/2025 Sun	D2	14:30	RedHurricanes Osaka	22	V 30	Toyota Industries Corporation Shuttles Aichi	OSAKA	YANMAR	1,771
	21/12/2025 Sun	D2	12:00	NIPPON STEEL KAMAISHI SEAWAVES	38	V 38	HINO RED DOLPHINS	IWATE	KAMAISHI	697
3	27/12/2025 Sat	D2	12:00	NIPPON STEEL KAMAISHI SEAWAVES	10	V 26	Kyushudenryoku KyudenVolfex	FUKUSHIMA	Hawaiians	2,191
	10/01/2025 Sat	D2	14:30	HANAZONO KINTETSU LINERS	56	V 19	HINO RED DOLPHINS	OSAKA	HANAZONO	10,646
	10/01/2025 Sat	D2	14:30	SHIMIZU KOTO BLUE SHARKS	17	V 36	RedHurricanes Osaka	TOKYO	YUMENOSHIMA	1,590
	10/01/2025 Sat	D2	14:30	NEC GREEN ROCKETS TOKATSU	24	V 35	Toyota Industries Corporation Shuttles Aichi	CHIBA	KASIWA-NO-HA	3,562
4	17/01/2025 Sat	D2	12:00	RedHurricanes Osaka	42	V 0	HANAZONO KINTETSU LINERS	OSAKA	YANMAR	907
	17/01/2025 Sat	D2	13:00	Toyota Industries Corporation Shuttles Aichi	25	V 30	NIPPON STEEL KAMAISHI SEAWAVES	AICHI	KARIYA	572
	18/01/2025 Sun	D2	14:30	HINO RED DOLPHINS	38	V 19	SHIMIZU KOTO BLUE SHARKS	TOKYO	AGF Field	5,514
	24/01/2025 Sat	D2	13:00	Kyushudenryoku KyudenVolfex	30	V 33	NEC GREEN ROCKETS TOKATSU	FUKUOKA	HAKATANOMORI	1,092
5	31/01/2025 Sat	D2	13:00	HINO RED DOLPHINS	46	V 35	Toyota Industries Corporation Shuttles Aichi	TOKYO	Kami Yugi Park	1,346
	07/02/2025 Sat	D2	16:00	SHIMIZU KOTO BLUE SHARKS	19	V 31	HANAZONO KINTETSU LINERS	TOKYO	YUMENOSHIMA	1,549
	08/02/2025 Sun	D2	14:30	Kyushudenryoku KyudenVolfex	15	V 47	RedHurricanes Osaka	FUKUOKA	HAKATANOMORI	845
	08/02/2025 Sun	D2	14:30	NEC GREEN ROCKETS TOKATSU	20	V 27	NIPPON STEEL KAMAISHI SEAWAVES	CHIBA	KASIWA-NO-HA	3,414
6	14/02/2025 Sat	D2	12:00	Toyota Industries Corporation Shuttles Aichi	29	V 14	SHIMIZU KOTO BLUE SHARKS	AICHI	PALOMA MIZUHO	1,354
	14/02/2025 Sat	D2	12:00	HANAZONO KINTETSU LINERS	12	V 39	Kyushudenryoku KyudenVolfex	OSAKA	HANAZONO	2,267
	21/02/2025 Sat	D2	13:00	RedHurricanes Osaka	25	V 8	NIPPON STEEL KAMAISHI SEAWAVES	OSAKA	TBC	3,343
	22/02/2025 Sun	D2	14:30	NEC GREEN ROCKETS TOKATSU	50	V 23	HINO RED DOLPHINS	CHIBA	KASIWA-NO-HA	2,409
7	28/02/2025 Sat	D2	12:00	Toyota Industries Corporation Shuttles Aichi	54	V 19	Kyushudenryoku KyudenVolfex	AICHI	PALOMA MIZUHO	896
	28/02/2025 Sat	D2	14:30	HINO RED DOLPHINS	48	V 7	RedHurricanes Osaka	TOKYO	AGF Field	2,386
	28/02/2025 Sat	D2	14:30	SHIMIZU KOTO BLUE SHARKS	29	V 36	NEC GREEN ROCKETS TOKATSU	TOKYO	YUMENOSHIMA	3,223
	07/03/2025 Sat	D2	13:00	NIPPON STEEL KAMAISHI SEAWAVES	35	V 24	HANAZONO KINTETSU LINERS	IWATE	KAMAISHI	4,426
8	07/03/2025 Sat	D2	13:00	HINO RED DOLPHINS	39	V 41	NEC GREEN ROCKETS TOKATSU	TOKYO	AGF Field	1,227
	14/03/2025 Sat	D2	14:30	Kyushudenryoku KyudenVolfex	7	V 21	HANAZONO KINTETSU LINERS	FUKUOKA	HAKATANOMORI	1,107
	14/03/2025 Sat	D2	14:30	SHIMIZU KOTO BLUE SHARKS	30	V 35	Toyota Industries Corporation Shuttles Aichi	TOKYO	YUMENOSHIMA	4,982
	15/03/2025 Sun	D2	14:30	NIPPON STEEL KAMAISHI SEAWAVES	30	V 35	RedHurricanes Osaka	IWATE	KAMAISHI	1,234
9	27/03/2025 Fri	D2	12:00	RedHurricanes Osaka	75	V 28	Kyushudenryoku KyudenVolfex	OSAKA	TBC	1,199
	28/03/2025 Sat	D2	12:00	Toyota Industries Corporation Shuttles Aichi	50	V 8	HINO RED DOLPHINS	AICHI	PALOMA MIZUHO	3,031
	28/03/2025 Sat	D2	12:00	NEC GREEN ROCKETS TOKATSU	21	V 45	SHIMIZU KOTO BLUE SHARKS	CHIBA	KASIWA-NO-HA	2,556
	28/03/2025 Sat	D2	14:30	HANAZONO KINTETSU LINERS	16	V 14	NIPPON STEEL KAMAISHI SEAWAVES	OSAKA	HANAZONO	2,125
10	04/04/2025 Sat	D2	14:30	HANAZONO KINTETSU LINERS	40	V 7	RedHurricanes Osaka	OSAKA	TBC	3,361
	30r4or5/4/2026 Fri or Sat or Sun	D2	14:30	NEC GREEN ROCKETS TOKATSU	20	V 14	Kyushudenryoku KyudenVolfex	TBC	TBC	931
	4or5/4/2026 Sat or Sun	D2	14:30	SHIMIZU KOTO BLUE SHARKS	33	V 5	HINO RED DOLPHINS	TOKYO	TBC	3,785
	4or5/4/2026 Sat or Sun	D2	12:00	NIPPON STEEL KAMAISHI SEAWAVES	26	V 23	Toyota Industries Corporation Shuttles Aichi	IWATE	IWAGIN Stadium	1,512

DIVISION 2

ROUND	date	DIVISION	KO	Match			Prefecture	STADIUM	audience	
11	11/04/2025 Sat	D2	19:30	Toyota Industries Corporation Shuttles Aichi		33 V 36	NEC GREEN ROCKETS TOKATSU	AICHI	KARIYA	1,856
	10or11or12/4/2026 Fri or Sat or Sun	D2	12:00	Kyushudenryoku KyudenVolfex		23 V 40	NIPPON STEEL KAMAISHI SEAWAVES	Kyushu region	TBC	1,778
	10or11or12/4/2026 Fri or Sat or Sun	D2	12:00	HINO RED DOLPHINS		31 V 48	HANAZONO KINTETSU LINERS	TBC	TBC	12,452
	11or12/4/2026 Sat or Sun	D2	14:30	RedHurricanes Osaka		15 V 45	SHIMIZU KOTO BLUE SHARKS	OSAKA	TBC	1,247
12	25/04/2025 Sat	D2	19:00	NIPPON STEEL KAMAISHI SEAWAVES		54 V 21	NEC GREEN ROCKETS TOKATSU	IWATE	TBC	3,014
	24or25or26/4/2026 Fri or Sat or Sun	D2	14:30	HANAZONO KINTETSU LINERS		15 V 8	SHIMIZU KOTO BLUE SHARKS	OSAKA	TBC	2,391
	24or25or26/4/2026 Fri or Sat or Sun	D2	12:00	RedHurricanes Osaka		24 V 34	HINO RED DOLPHINS	OSAKA	TBC	1,125
	24or25or26/4/2026 Fri or Sat or Sun	D2	14:30	Kyushudenryoku KyudenVolfex		20 V 12	Toyota Industries Corporation Shuttles Aichi	Kyushu region	TBC	737
13	02/05/2025 Sat	D2	19:00	Toyota Industries Corporation Shuttles Aichi		35 V 21	RedHurricanes Osaka	AICHI	KARIYA	4,172
	1or2or3/5/2026 Fri or Sat or Sun	D2	12:00	NEC GREEN ROCKETS TOKATSU		42 V 19	HANAZONO KINTETSU LINERS	TBC	TBC	6,004
	1or2or3/5/2026 Fri or Sat or Sun	D2	12:00	SHIMIZU KOTO BLUE SHARKS		24 V 61	Kyushudenryoku KyudenVolfex	TOKYO	TBC	523
	1or2or3/5/2026 Fri or Sat or Sun	D2	13:00	HINO RED DOLPHINS		34 V 34	NIPPON STEEL KAMAISHI SEAWAVES	TBC	TBC	4,689
14	10/05/2025 Sun	D2	12:00	HANAZONO KINTETSU LINERS		7 V 38	Toyota Industries Corporation Shuttles Aichi	OSAKA	TBC	2,379
	8or9or10/4/2026 Fri or Sat or Sun	D2	14:30	RedHurricanes Osaka		21 V 22	NEC GREEN ROCKETS TOKATSU	OSAKA	TBC	2,127
	9or10/4/2026 Sat or Sun	D2	12:00	Kyushudenryoku KyudenVolfex		15 V 24	HINO RED DOLPHINS	Kyushu region	TBC	1,028
	9or10/4/2026 Sat or Sun	D2	14:30	NIPPON STEEL KAMAISHI SEAWAVES		69 V 17	SHIMIZU KOTO BLUE SHARKS	IWATE	TBC	4,111

DIVISION 3

ROUND	date	DIVISION	KO	Match			Prefecture	STADIUM	audience
1	Sat	D3		SAYAMA SECOM RUGGUTS	26 V 61	MAZDA SKYACTIVS HIROSHIMA	TOCHIGI	ASHIKAGA Athletic	1,354
	Sat	D3		Kurita Water Gush Akishima	17 V 25	Chugoku Electric Power Red Regulions	KANAGAWA	OGINO	2,418
	Sun	D3		Yakult Levins Toda	24 V 15	LeRIRO Fukuoka	FUKUOKA	KURUME Athletic	1,116
2	Sun	D3		MAZDA SKYACTIVS HIROSHIMA	16 V 29	Kurita Water Gush Akishima	YAMAGUCHI	Me-Life Stadium	609
	Sun	D3		Chugoku Electric Power Red Regulions	27 V 31	Yakult Levins Toda	HIROSHIMA	SAKA Ground	1,408
	2025/1/5 Sun	D3		LeRIRO Fukuoka	17 V 39	SAYAMA SECOM RUGGUTS	FUKUOKA	KURUME Athletic	1,013
3	2025/1/11 Sat	D3		SAYAMA SECOM RUGGUTS	58 V 10	Yakult Levins Toda	TOCHIGI	ASHIKAGA Athletic	567
	2025/1/11 Sat	D3		MAZDA SKYACTIVS HIROSHIMA	57 V 13	Chugoku Electric Power Red Regulions	HIROSHIMA	FUKUTSU	1,818
	2025/1/12 Sun	D3		LeRIRO Fukuoka	20 V 26	Kurita Water Gush Akishima	FUKUOKA	KURUME Athletic	420
4	2025/1/19 Sat	D3		Kurita Water Gush Akishima	64 V 26	SAYAMA SECOM RUGGUTS	TOKYO	AGF Field	759
	2025/1/19 Sun	D3		Chugoku Electric Power Red Regulions	45 V 13	LeRIRO Fukuoka	YAMAGUCHI	Me-Life Stadium	2,593
	2025/1/19 Sun	D3		Yakult Levins Toda	15 V 54	MAZDA SKYACTIVS HIROSHIMA	TOCHIGI	Honda Green Stadium	1,064
5	2025/1/25 Sat	D3		Yakult Levins Toda	5 V 66	Kurita Water Gush Akishima	TOKYO	KOMAZAWA	709
	2025/2/1 Sat	D3		LeRIRO Fukuoka	45 V 19	MAZDA SKYACTIVS HIROSHIMA	FUKUOKA	KURUME Athletic	448
	2025/2/2 Sat	D3		Chugoku Electric Power Red Regulions	6 V 36	SAYAMA SECOM RUGGUTS	HIROSHIMA	TBC	526
6	2025/2/15 Sat	D3		MAZDA SKYACTIVS HIROSHIMA	33 V 40	Yakult Levins Toda	HIROSHIMA	BALCOM S	680
	2025/2/15 Sun	D3		LeRIRO Fukuoka	22 V 26	Chugoku Electric Power Red Regulions	FUKUOKA	KURUME Athletic	3,888
	2025/2/16 Sun	D3		SAYAMA SECOM RUGGUTS	39 V 34	Kurita Water Gush Akishima	SAITAMA	TBC	343
7	2025/2/22 Sat	D3		Kurita Water Gush Akishima	23 V 18	MAZDA SKYACTIVS HIROSHIMA	TOKYO	AGF Field	784
	2025/2/22 Sun	D3		Yakult Levins Toda	16 V 22	Chugoku Electric Power Red Regulions	GUNMA	Shikishima Park	534
	2025/2/23 Sat	D3		SAYAMA SECOM RUGGUTS	3 V 57	LeRIRO Fukuoka	TOCHIGI	ASHIKAGA Athletic	825

DIVISION 3

ROUND	date	DIVISION	KO	Match			Prefecture	STADIUM	audience	
8	2025/3/1 Sun	D3		Kurita Water Gush Akishima	12	V 56	LeRIRO Fukuoka	TOKYO	AGF Field	1,090
	2025/3/1 Sat or Sun	D3		Chugoku Electric Power Red Regulions	45	V 17	MAZDA SKYACTIVS HIROSHIMA	HIROSHIMA	BALCOM S	1,580
	2025/3/2 Sat	D3		Yakult Levins Toda	24	V 10	SAYAMA SECOM RUGGUTs	KANAGAWA	YAMATO Sport Centre	366
9	2025/3/8 Sat	D3		LeRIRO Fukuoka	44	V 22	Yakult Levins Toda	FUKUOKA	KURUME Athletic	479
	2025/3/8 Sun	D3		Chugoku Electric Power Red Regulions	10	V 42	Kurita Water Gush Akishima	HIROSHIMA	BALCOM S	750
	2025/3/16 Sat	D3		MAZDA SKYACTIVS HIROSHIMA	27	V 54	SAYAMA SECOM RUGGUTs	HIROSHIMA	BALCOM S	521
10	2025/3/22 Sat	D3		Kurita Water Gush Akishima	38	V 17	Yakult Levins Toda	KANAGAWA	OGINO	651
	2025/3/22 Sat	D3		MAZDA SKYACTIVS HIROSHIMA	38	V 28	LeRIRO Fukuoka	HIROSHIMA	BALCOM S	557
	2025/3/22 Sun	D3		SAYAMA SECOM RUGGUTs	40	V 3	Chugoku Electric Power Red Regulions	SAITAMA	TBC	2,321
11	2025/3/29 Sat or Sun	D3		MAZDA SKYACTIVS HIROSHIMA	23	V 18	Chugoku Electric Power Red Regulions	TBC	TBC	395
	2025/3/30 Sat or Sun	D3		SAYAMA SECOM RUGGUTs	33	V 17	Yakult Levins Toda	TBC	TBC	454
	2025/4/5 Sat or Sun	D3		LeRIRO Fukuoka	48	V 5	Kurita Water Gush Akishima	TBC	TBC	879
12	2025/4/5 Sat or Sun	D3		Yakult Levins Toda	14	V 27	MAZDA SKYACTIVS HIROSHIMA	TBC	TBC	537
	2025/4/12 Sat or Sun	D3		Kurita Water Gush Akishima	14	V 68	SAYAMA SECOM RUGGUTs	TBC	TBC	813
	2025/4/12 Sat or Sun	D3		Chugoku Electric Power Red Regulions	35	V 41	LeRIRO Fukuoka	TBC	TBC	2,053
13	2025/4/19 Sat or Sun	D3		Chugoku Electric Power Red Regulions	26	V 37	SAYAMA SECOM RUGGUTs	TBC	TBC	648
	2025/4/19 Sat or Sun	D3		Yakult Levins Toda	6	V 47	Kurita Water Gush Akishima	TBC	TBC	681
	2025/4/20 Sat or Sun	D3		LeRIRO Fukuoka	48	V 3	MAZDA SKYACTIVS HIROSHIMA	TBC	TBC	1,836
14	2025/4/27 Sat or Sun	D3		Kurita Water Gush Akishima	34	V 38	MAZDA SKYACTIVS HIROSHIMA	TBC	TBC	834
	2025/4/27 Sat or Sun	D3		Yakult Levins Toda	47	V 50	Chugoku Electric Power Red Regulions	TBC	TBC	1,074
	2025/5/4 Sat or Sun	D3		SAYAMA SECOM RUGGUTs	12	V 35	LeRIRO Fukuoka	TBC	TBC	1,237
15	2025/5/10 Sat or Sun	D3		MAZDA SKYACTIVS HIROSHIMA	17	V 22	SAYAMA SECOM RUGGUTs	TBC	TBC	681
	2025/5/11 Sat or Sun	D3		Chugoku Electric Power Red Regulions	15	V 27	Kurita Water Gush Akishima	TBC	TBC	1,129
	2025/5/11 Sat or Sun	D3		LeRIRO Fukuoka	40	V 10	Yakult Levins Toda	TBC	TBC	5,229

Promotion/Relegation Match										
ROUND	date	DIVISION	KO	Match			Prefecture	STADIUM	audience	
Promotion/ Relegation Match1	Sat	D1/D2		Toyota Industries Corporation Shuttles Aichi		43 V 42	URAYASU D-Rocks	AICHI	KARIYA	2,601
	Sat	D1/D2		HANAZONO KINTETSU LINERS		25 V 29	MIE Honda HEAT	OSAKA	HANAZONO	5,108
Promotion/ Relegation Match2	Fri	D1/D2		MIE Honda HEAT		29 V 19	HANAZONO KINTETSU LINERS	MIE	SUZUKA	3,306
	Sat	D1/D2		URAYASU D-Rocks		27 V 21	Toyota Industries Corporation Shuttles Aichi	CHIBA	KASHIWA-NO-HA	3,238
Promotion/ Relegation Match1	Sat	D2/D3		NIPPON STEEL KAMAISHI SEAWAVES		33 V 14	MAZDA SKYACTIVS HIROSHIMA	IWATE	IWAGIN	835
	Sat	D2/D3		SHIMIZU KOTO BLUE SHARKS		17 V 15	SAYAMA SECOM RUGGUTS	TOKYO	YUMENOSHIMA	1,200
Promotion/ Relegation Match2	Sat	D2/D3		MAZDA SKYACTIVS HIROSHIMA		24 V 51	NIPPON STEEL KAMAISHI SEAWAVES	HIROSHIMA	BALCOM S	3,191
	Sat	D2/D3		SAYAMA SECOM RUGGUTS		28 V 31	SHIMIZU KOTO BLUE SHARKS	KANAGAWA	EBINA	1,048

2024-25 JRLO awards winners

As if his enormous influence wasn't enough on the field.

The 2024-25 awards ceremony saw All Black Richie Mo'unga add his second Division One Player of the Season and Most Valuable Player titles to the back-to-back championships he has won with Toshiba Brave Lupus Tokyo in Japan Rugby League One.

The 31-year-old arrived at Fuchu in western Tokyo three years ago off the back of his seventh title in Super Rugby.

By cleaning up in each of his first two seasons at Brave Lupus, the former Crusaders flyhalf became the first player since the advent of League One to go back-to-back in winning the Division One Player of the Season award.

While he couldn't get Toyota Industries Shuttles Aichi over the line despite a gallant effort in The Replacement Battle, fellow flyhalf Freddie Burns departed for a stint in Romania on a fine note after leading his side to the club's maiden Division Two title as well as finishing the section's leading points and try scorer.

The five test-capped Englishman, who has taken on a player/coach role with Dinamo Bucuresti in the Romanian capital, saved his best for last, although the 35-year-old's heroics against Division One tailenders Urayasu D-Rocks were in vain.



Richie Mo'unga (TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO)

While the Shuttles' old hand departed League One having led the club out of Division Three, and then to the summit of the division above, Division Three's awards were scooped by a new face, with the well-travelled ex-Super Rugby veteran Chase Tiatia taking the section by storm.

The former (Waikato) Chiefs, (Wellington) Hurricanes and Western Force fullback found the SAYAMA SECOM RUGGUTS jersey a perfect fit, bagging 16 tries, helping his side go close in the Replacement Battle, and ending by being voted the grade's Most Valuable Player.

The Team of the Year saw Springbok backrow wonder Kwagga Smith make it for the fifth time from six seasons in Japan, including the final two Top Leagues, and each of the first, second and fourth editions of League One.

The BlueRevs' skipper's one exclusion came in the 2023-24 season when he missed much of the campaign due to injury.

Smith is almost a Team of the Year anchor, but he was joined last term by veteran Brave Blossoms skipper Michael Leitch, who gained the nod for the first time in League One after he led Brave Lupus to the title.

Leitch, who made the selection six times during the Top League era, was one of six members from the league champions who were judged best in their positions.

The BlueRevs, Kubota Spears Funabashi Tokyo Bay and the Saitama Panasonic Wild Knights each gained two selections, with Ricoh Black Rams, Kobelco Kobe Steelers and Yokohama Canon Eagles providing one player apiece.

Spears prop Opeti Helu and Wild Knights centre Dylan Riley gained the nod again, continuing a remarkable run which has seen the pair named in all four League One 'Teams of the Year' to date.



Freddie Burns (Toyota Industries Corporation Shuttles Aichi)

Toshiba's second rower Warner Dearn and Riley's midfield partner Damien de Allende have made the last three.

Mo'unga and his teammate at Brave Lupus, loosehead prop Sena Kimura, won back-to-back inclusions.

Shizuoka's fairytale run to the playoffs owed much to the flair of Valynce Te Whare, who spent a large part of his debut season running around like his hair was on fire, with his astonishing deeds earning him selection in one of the wing positions.

Fellow League One debutant, former (Otago) Highlanders backrower Billy Harmon, also made a fine impact, being one of the shining lights in a disappointing season for Yokohama.

After being judged the league's best hooker three seasons ago when he led the Spears to the title, Springbok hooker Malcolm Marx was again named, acknowledged after playing a major role in his side's run to the championship game.

Marx also featured in the final Top League Team of the season, alongside the All Black duo of Kobelco Kobe Steelers second rower Brodie Retallick and Ricoh Black Rams Tokyo scrumhalf TJ Perenara (then of NTT DoCoMo Red Hurricanes).

The All Black pair were both named alongside Marx again last term.

Star BlueRevs scrumhalf Shuntaro Kitamura made no race of the Rookie of the Year title after a stellar debut for Shizuoka which ended with their first appearance in the playoffs, and selection for the 23-year-old in the Brave Blossoms.

2024-25 Japan Rugby League One Team of the Year

Loosehead Prop – Sena Kimura (Toshiba Brave Lupus Tokyo): Eddie Jones did not miss the rise of the Brave Lupus man, awarding the 26-year-old Tokai University product a test debut against Wales. This followed a superb campaign where he missed just one of the champions' 20 outings and provided a rock-solid foundation for their set piece. Now a regular in the Brave Lupus set-up, having accumulated 33 appearances during the title-winning seasons, Kimura begins the new campaign just two matches short of 50 games in League One.



Dylan Riley (SAITAMA WILD KNIGHTS)

Hooker – Malcolm Marx (Kubota Spears Funabashi Tokyo Bay): The world's best hooker completed another fine body of work, which culminated in the Spears returning to the final. The run to the decider was in no small way due to the South Africans' return after they had failed to even make the playoffs 12 months earlier when the then defending champions were without their injured talisman.

Tighthead Prop – Opeti Helu (Kubota Spears Funabashi Tokyo Bay): Helu was a key performer as the Spears scrum bossed their opponents for much of the season. The 27-year-old is a dynamic proposition around the field, while not neglecting his core set piece role, and is surprisingly resilient given the way he throws himself around. He missed just two of his team's 21-match programme.

Loosehead Lock – Warner Dearn (Toshiba Brave Lupus Tokyo): Brave Blossoms captain in the Pacific Nations Cup at just 23-years of age, Dearn added senior leadership to his repertoire after another strong season which helped Brave Lupus to back-to-back titles. The rangy Ryutsu Keizai University Kashiwa High School-educated second rower brings a hard-nosed edge to his side, which when added to his athleticism and superb ball skills, makes for an exciting package. It should excite fans globally as he tries his hand with the (Wellington) Hurricanes in Super Rugby.

Tighthead Lock – Brodie Retallick (Kobelco Kobe Steelers): Still at a level that could easily cope with test rugby, Retallick led Kobe to third last term, with the promise of more to come. The All Black centurion has developed a taste for the try-line since he landed in Japan, with former test teammate Shannon Frizell the only forward to score more tries than Retallick during the 2024-25 campaign.

Blindsided Flanker – Kwagga Smith (Shizuoka BlueRevs): Once again the best flanker in the competition, the South African continues to be the benchmark, not just for loose forwards, but for all the international stars in the league. The BlueRevs made the playoffs on the back of his herculean efforts and will continue to rank amongst the contenders while their current skipper remains on the roster.



Openside Flanker – Billy Harmon (Yokohama Canon Eagles): A 'bargain' buy for Yokohama, the former Maori All Blacks and (Otago) Highlanders man 'soared' on debut for a low-flying Eagles outfit; with a high work rate and on-field energy the hall marks of his performance.

Number Eight – Michael Leitch (Toshiba Brave Lupus Tokyo): The celebrated Brave Blossoms leader remains a colossus, defying his 37 years to play all 20 matches for the champions throughout the season. Leitch had been used on the blindside and even in the second row at times in recent campaigns but thrived on his return to the back of the scrum.

Scrumhalf – TJ Perenara (Ricoh BlackRams Tokyo): The point's table showed the BlackRams' improvement, and much of it was down to their skipper, as Perenara announced his return to Japan with an outstanding season. The former All Black scrumhalf didn't miss a game and was the fulcrum of an attack whose efficiency ensured the Ricoh BlackRams Tokyo were rarely under threat of a return to the Replacement Battle.

Flyhalf – Richie Mo'unga (Toshiba Brave Lupus Tokyo): The statistics might tell a story but the All Blacks' unseen work in terms of his off-field influence, and his total commitment to the cause were no less important to the Brave Lupus success. This was exhibited most graphically when Mo'unga played through the pain of a broken hand to guide his side home in the final, scoring a try at a vital moment to help his side get home.

Left Wing – Valynce Te Whare (Shizuoka BlueRevs): The BlueRevs popular new recruit specialised in long-range tries, becoming a YouTube sensation due to the audacious nature of his hard running and flowing locks. Signed initially on a one-year trial, Te Whare's impact encouraged Shizuoka to move quickly to secure their prized winger for longer.

Inside Centre – Damian de Allende (Saitama Panasonic Wild Knights): A regular pick in World XVs for his position, the 34-year-old Springbok is the consummate professional, not letting his standards drop when he slides back into the club scene after test duty. The ever present Wild Knights inside centre, who missed just one match through the campaign, gained his third consecutive selection after a season where he scored seven tries, his most from a single campaign in Japan.

Outside Centre – Dylan Riley (Saitama Panasonic Wild Knights): Arguably the most consistently performed back in Japan, both at club and test level, Riley continued to lead the way at Kumagaya as part of the deadliest midfield in the competition. His fourth Team of the Year selection in as many seasons represented a remarkable achievement for the well-travelled centre, who was born in South Africa, then emigrated with his family to Australia, before coming of age as a rugby player in Japan.

Right Wing – Jone Naikabula (Toshiba Brave Lupus Tokyo): Fifteen tries from 16 appearances showed Naikabula had lost none of his try-scoring prowess, taking his tally during Toshiba's title-winning double to 24 from 25 outings. The 31-year-old's bountiful campaign came after he was Player of the Match in Toshiba's win over the Wild Knights in the 2023-24 final, which was followed by a test debut for the Brave Blossoms later that year.

Fullback – Takuro Matsunaga (Toshiba Brave Lupus Tokyo): One of the unsung heroes of the title repeat, Matsunaga handled the goal-kicking for much of the season, collecting 174 points which rated third for the competition. As well as his accomplished kicking, the 27-year-old proved a constant threat from the back, scoring seven tries. This was more than the two players who finished above him – the Wild Knights' Kyohei Yamasawa and Kobe's Bryn Gatland – on the individual point's standings.

DIVISION

CONFERENCE A

URAYASU D-Rocks

SAITAMA Panasonic WILD KNIGHTS

SHIZUOKA BlueRevs

TOSHIBA BRAVE LUPUS TOKYO

Mitsubishi Heavy Industries Sagami-hara 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 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:
None

Non-Japanese International Test Representatives:

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

The Head Coach:

A former Head Coach of the Georgian national team, as well as Irish powerhouses Munster in the United Rugby Championship, Graham Rowntree has made arguably the boldest move of his coaching career, signing on in League One. The 54-year-old former frontrower, who played 54 tests for England across 11 years, and three tests for the British and Irish Lions on the tours of South Africa (1997) and New Zealand (2005) took his first coaching steps at the Leicester Tigers, whom he had served as a player a remarkable 398 times between 1990 and 2007. Alongside his head coaching roles, Rowntree's initial



Samu Kerevi

coaching steps at Leicester led to assistant roles with each of England, the Lions and Harlequins. He arrives in Japan entering the 18th year of his coaching career, taking over from ex-Scottish flyhalf Greig Laidlaw, who endured a difficult initiation as a head coach as Urayasu finished bottom-of-the-table. In Rowntree, D-Rocks have appointed a successor with a proven track record, with Munster having won its first trophy for 12 years on the Englishman's watch, beating the Stormers of South Africa at Cape Town in the 2022-23 URC final. Urayasu bosses will have similar expectations of their new man.

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 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'. After being edged out by Hanazono Liners in The Replacement Battle during their first season, Urayasu made no mistake second time around, but found the going harder in the top grade, returning to the promotion/relegation series for the third time in as many years last season.

The Special K:

Urayasu struggled on debut in Division One despite a herculean effort from their ex-Wallaby vice-captain Samu Kerevi, whose 14 tries from 16 appearances shone like a beacon as D-Rocks' stand out individual contribution.

The powerful midfielder's haul included two in each of the Replacement Battle legs, which was a vital as Urayasu narrowly survived in the grade. The 32-year-old's success last term followed an impressive debut season at D-Rocks, after he ended a long association with Tokyo Sungoliath to join Urayasu for their promotion-winning season. Kerevi played a big part in that success, missing just one match. This included a two-legged win over his former Wallaby teammates Quade Cooper and Will Genia as Urayasu beat Hanazono.

The Folau Conundrum:

His class is unquestionable, but Israel Folau's place on the roster has not been without its' challenges, spending more time on the sidelines than he is on the field. While the injury-plagued star managed eight appearances last term, the 36-year-old has only played 30 games (out of a possible 61) across the four seasons of League One, since he arrived in Japan with a bang, scoring 10 tries for the then Shining Arcs in the final Top League. Folau ended his time in Super Rugby as the record holder for tries in the combined competition (when it included South African teams). He 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 – outscored Folau in his debut season.

Quentin's New Crusade:

A two-metre tall 'package', former Crusaders second rower Quentin Strange could be a canny signing by D-Rocks, bringing a winning mentality after playing 73 times for Super Rugby's most successful side, many alongside Toshiba's Richie Mo'unga. The 29-year-old second rower, who debuted in Super Rugby in 2017 and played two games for the All Blacks XV three years ago, is super in the air, with the ball skills and speed of a back, which suggests that he will be well suited to the open nature of the game in Japan. Veteran Ryohei Yamanaka has also joined after 12 seasons patrolling the wing in Kobe, during a career which includes appearances for Japan at each of the 2019 and 2023 Rugby World Cups.

The Bok Bruiser:

Injury might have disrupted his debut season, but the form of Jasper Wiese for the Springboks in 2025 suggests the backrower will make a big difference when he returns to League One. The powerful 30-year-old was a late starter in the Springboks' successful Rugby Championship defence after receiving a suspension during the earlier test series against Italy, but he made up for lost time, starring in Wellington where he was one of South Africa's best in their 43-10 demolition of New Zealand. Wiese, who will add a harder edge to D-Rocks' forward efforts, signed after four seasons at the Leicester Tigers where he played 79 times. In his final Premiership season, the South African made 16 percent of the total ball carries by Leicester players in the competition, the most by any individual for a team in the league. He was replaced at the back end of his first season in Japan by Nathan Hughes, who joined D-Rocks on-loan from the Black Rams. The former England test backrower is now a teammate of ex-Toyota centre Joseph Manu's with Racing92 in France.

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 last season. The Australians have also capitalised on the friendship, with the Force holding pre-season training camps and friendly games against their Japanese counterparts.

The Suntory 'Connection':

Kerevi is the biggest 'capture' to date, but raids on Sungoliath have also allowed D-Rocks to pick up the former Melbourne Rebels backrower Tamati Ioane, alongside ex-Brave Blossoms second rower Hendrick Tui. Ioane has joined to provide back-up to Wiese after two productive seasons which featured 18 appearances for Suntory. The 28-year-

old followed in the footsteps of Hendrick Tui, who crossed town to play 12 times last term in his first season at D-Rocks after ending an 11-year stint at nearby Sungoliath. Tui wore the famed yellow jersey on 149 occasions between 2013 and 2024. New Zealand-born, the 37-year-old attended university in Japan and began his professional career at the Wild Knights in 2011. He went on to play 47 tests for the Brave Blossoms, which included the 2015 and 2019 Rugby World Cups, as well as appearing for each of the Sunwolves and Queensland Reds in Super Rugby.

Last Year:

Taking seven weeks to break their 'duck', D-Rocks endured a difficult introduction to Division One, eventually claiming two of their three wins against the other side in the grade destined for The Replacement Battle, Mie Honda Heat. A 34-21 win over Sagami-hara on the final weekend of the regular season offered hope for relegation series, but this was dented in the first leg when Shuttles Aichi bagged a converted try in the final minute of a 43-42 victory. An anxious afternoon followed, with D-Rocks were stretched to the limit in the return tie before claiming the 27-21 victory that confirmed their place in the Division One draw for the league's fifth edition.

What to Expect:

Rowntree's arrival offers a more experienced hand at the helm, although the Englishman's lack of background in Japan will be a test of his communication skills. New coaches in League One have tended to take time to adapt to the unique 'requirements' needed to succeed. Wiese is also still on his trainer wheels, although the Springbok is sure to have 'interviewed' the raft of test teammates already in the country, to prepare himself fully for more game time. The big South African could be the catalyst D-Rocks needs to produce more threat and a greater consistency in Division One. At times last term, it seemed like Kerevi was almost playing opponents on his own. As with last term, the contributions of that pair, and the injury prone Folau, will be make or break. If all three fire, a drive up the table is not out of the question.

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, Kenji Sato, Ben Gunter, Jack Cornelsen

Non-Japanese International Test representatives:

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

The Head Coach:

Previously an assistant to Robbie Deans, Atsushi Kanazawa has taken over the job after six seasons running the Wild Knights attack as backs coach. The Wild Knights won the league twice during this time. The 48-year-old, who has also worked alongside his former boss with the Barbarians, is a product of the famed Keio University and is one of three Japanese head coaches in this

season's Division One, along with BlueRevs boss Yuchiro Fujii and Kosei Ono from Tokyo Sungoliath. While stepping aside from a full-time position, Deans is likely to remain heavily involved in his newly created position of executive advisor. The head coaching change ends the 11-year (2014-25) era where the Wild Knights, led by Deans, won League One, and its forerunner the Top League, five times.

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 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.

Hello Again #1:

He might have stayed on at the club as an ambassador after his emotional retirement two years ago, but record-breaking hooker Shota Horie will have the boots on once again at Wild Knights training this season after assuming charge of the forwards. The 39-year-old, who endured a heartbreaking exit when the team were denied what would have been the winning try in injury time of the final against Brave Lupus two seasons ago, wore the Wild Knights jersey in a mammoth 166 matches across 16 seasons between 2008 and 2024, sharing in all six national titles the club has achieved. Horie also played 44 games in



Shota Horie

Super Rugby across the Melbourne Rebels and Sunwolves, alongside 76 tests for Japan. He was player of the match when the Brave Blossoms beat the then number one ranked Ireland to lay down a marker for what became a stunningly successful Rugby World Cup for the host nation in 2019. The tournament was the third of Horie's career, and such experience promises to be invaluable for a forward pack that has appeared to lose its way at times in crunch matches during recent seasons.

Hello Again #2:

After five years and three titles, ex-Wallaby Berrick Barnes has returned to the Wild Knights, filling the gap vacated by Kanazawa guiding Saitama's attack. With the Wild Knights having scored 364 tries from 74 matches since League One began at an average of 4.9 per outing, the Australian has plenty to work with although Barnes will undoubtedly look to put his own stamp on the team as he takes on the most prominent assignment of his fledgling coaching career to date. The 39-year-old, who began his representative career in rugby league with the Brisbane Broncos, debuted for the Queensland Reds

in 2006, and Australia the following year. He went on to play 51 tests over the next seven years, the majority under the stewardship of outgoing Wild Knights head coach Robbie Deans. The former Wallaby coach later brought Barnes to Japan where the utility back played 57 matches for the Wild Knights before signing off on his playing career with a brief stint at the Black Rams. Barnes began his coaching career with consultancy roles with the Eddie Jones-coached Wallabies, alongside Kyuden Voltex in the league's second division. He then worked with Japan at the women's Rugby World Cup prior to taking up station at the Wild Knights. Former All Black second-rower Sam Whitelock who, like Barnes, is an ex-Wild Knights player, is also on-board as an advisor after taking on that role last season.

The Main Man:

He started off as the 'younger brother'. By the time Kyohei Yamasawa was finished last season's work, he was the Wild Knights' main man. The 27-year-old, who had only made 14 league appearances prior to last term, and mostly off the bench, played every game of the fourth edition of League One, ending it as the competition's leading point-scorer. Saitama's flyhalf accumulated 230 points to establish a new record for points in a League One season, bettering the 217 scored by Kobe's Bryn Gatland the previous year. Yamasawa's tally included six tries, one of which came during a bountiful afternoon against Sungoliath where he ran up 23 points. That was one of six occasions throughout the season where he posted more than 15 in a single game. While Kyohei was thriving, elder brother Takuya – four years his senior – endured another frustrating season, with injury restricting the former Brave Blossoms' utility back's involvement to just six matches. Man-of-the-match in the inaugural League One final, the 31-year-old has managed only 17 appearances across the past two seasons.

The Kubota Curse:

Prior to the second final, the Wild Knights had never lost to the Spears in either Top League or in League One. The Spears' 17-15 win not only stripped their rivals of the title, but it also began a tilt in the balance of power in their relationship that continued during last season's

thrilling semi-final. Kubota held their nerve to score a 28-24 win, but only after one point had separated the combatants between the 58th and 78th minute. The two sides met three times last term, for a win apiece alongside a 29-29 draw. Perhaps worryingly for the Wild Knights, in each of the draw and their 26-24 win, a missed goal attempt by the Spears' normally reliable former Wallaby international Bernard Foley in the final moments saved them from defeat. It seems the days of bullying the Spears, as they had since the advent of the national league, are now over.

Take That!

He might not boast the raw power of Marika Koroibete on the other Saitama wing, but Koki Takeyama has packed an even greater punch than the former Wallaby during League One, which he showed again last term when he ended as the competition's joint-leading try-scorer. Touching down on 15 occasions, along with Brave Lupus winger Jone Naikabula and BlueRevs scrumhalf Shuntaro Kitamura, the nimble 29-year-old took his tally since the league began to 36 tries from 53 appearances. Koroibete has amassed 23 from

54 games by comparison, with a best of eight in the 2023-24 campaign. The 63-test veteran, who last appeared for the Wallabies at the 2023 Rugby World Cup, has revealed he has ended his test career to focus on club involvement, and plans for after his retirement.

Where Have All the Tries Gone?:

He's quite probably the most influential back the Brave Blossoms have and has consistently been one of the Wild Knights' best, but centre Dylan Riley is an enigma where crossing the try-line is concerned. The South African-born ex-Australian Under-20 representative was the equal top try-scorer in the maiden League One with 12 but then managed just three the following season. By the time the third edition of the league began, Riley was a permanent fixture in the Japanese test side, and that season again proved profitable, as he crossed the chalk 14 times to finish second in the individual rankings behind test teammate and BlueRevs flyer, Malo Tuitama. Yet last term the tries dried up again, with just three coming his way in 13 appearances. The 28-year-old, who will have his eye on a 'home' World Cup in the backyard of his youth in Aus-



Koki Takeyama

tralia in 2027, starts the new campaign in sight of a half century of tries for the Wild Knights. Riley has totaled 46 from 83 appearances for the club since his debut in 2019, and it will be no surprise – given the up and down trend in his try-scoring – if the new season is another profitable one.

The Enforcer!:

While it's a description often overused about players, in the case of backrower Ben Gunter, the description is apt. Thai-born but educated in Australia, the 28-year-old has brought plenty of 'grunt' to the Wild Knights pack since he arrived, impressing with his ruthless approach in contact, and ability to physically dominate opponents. Those qualities were snapped up by Eddie Jones once he took charge of the Brave Blossoms, although injury meant the Japanese coach largely had to wait until this year to access his services. Gunter, who was selected for the Brave Blossoms by Jamie Joseph as soon as he qualified on residency, was available just once last year but figured in all but one of Japan's tests through the recent domestic season. Unfortunately, the one he missed was the Pacific Nations Cup final, and his absence after picking up a facial injury the previous week against Tonga, proved costly as Japan lost to Fiji. Gunter returned for October's home test against the Wallabies, and he made an impact during Japan's narrow loss, showing Australia what it had missed out on when he scored his fourth try in 16 test appearances.

Last Year:

Despite the obvious narrowing of the gap be-

tween the top sides in the league, it was still a surprise when the Wild Knights stumbled at the back end of the campaign, losing back-to-back matches against the Spears and Steelers to drop to fourth. It had seemed like business as usual' for the league's inaugural champions, as they ended the 10th round of the regular season as the league's only remaining unbeaten team. Two losses in a week – against the BlueRevs and Brave Lupus – abruptly ended that run, and while they held the Spears off by two competition points to secure direct entry to the semi-finals, Kubota turned the tables when it mattered. That defeat saw a campaign that had promised much end in disappointment.

What to Expect:

While relative continuity remains despite the personnel changes in the coaching structure, the Wild Knights do now find themselves in unfamiliar territory, having not won the title in their last three attempts. They even fell short of the final last time in a season where they failed to win on six occasions in the 20 matches they contested, after having been denied victory just five times throughout the first three years of the league. Given the strength of their playing roster, and the fact that they have won 63 of their 74 matches since League One began, it's hard to see Saitama not being part of the end-of-season conversation. Winning a second title is going to require the inaugural champions to find a solution to a worrying habit they have not solved yet though, having loosened their grip on games at key moments during their elimination in each of the last three seasons.

SHIZUOKA BlueRevs



Where:

Based in the city 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:

Shuntaro Kitamura, Malo Tuitama, Sam Greene

Non-Japanese International Test Representatives:

Kwagga Smith (South Africa), Charles Piutau (Tonga), Semi Radradra (Fiji), Viliami Tahitua (Fiji)

The Head Coach:

After three seasons, Yuichiro Fujii is well on his way towards becoming one of the best coaches Shizuoka and its forerunner Yamaha Jublio has ever had. While last season's fairytale was ultimately cut short two weeks earlier than hoped, the club's win tally for the campaign was a record, and the placing easily the best the BlueRevs had achieved in the four seasons of League One. Fujii's success shouldn't have come as a surprise. He arrived with an impressive CV, having begun his coaching career in Japan's university sys-

tem at Daijo University. The former outside centre 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 in Super Rugby, 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.

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 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.

The Main Man:

Kwagga Smith might not get the plaudits of many of his teammates on the international

stage, but in Japan, the backrower is the 'biggest' Springbok on the reservation! While he was cut down by an adductor tendon injury two seasons ago which ended his participation after five games, the 32-year-old had previously featured in the Team of the Tournament in each of its first two seasons, as well as winning the Player's Player title – an award voted on by his peers – in the second year. After helping to steer his side comfortably into the playoffs last term, Smith was once again selected for the tournament's top XV. Perhaps ironically, given his 2024-25 shift of 17 matches was the largest since he arrived in Japan, Smith's try-count went down. Well suited to the fast pace of the games and largely dry grounds, the former Springbok Sevens star had scored 19 tries across his first 27 appearances in League One across the opening three seasons but managed just four last time. To put this in perspective, it was the same number he had scored in five games in the previous season, before it was brought to a premature end. The main reason for Smith's try count drop was the development of the BlueRevs' strike power out wide, with add-

ed threat from scrumhalf, as well as the best three-quarter line in the competition. Not that this will have worried the BlueRevs skipper, whose mastery of the breakdown was pivotal to the scoring carnage caused elsewhere.

Revving Up the Tries:

It wasn't just on the overall points standings that the BlueRevs achieved their best result in League One. The difference in their try-count last term, compared to in previous seasons, was also eye-catching. After scoring 47, 55 and 72 across the tournament's first three editions, Shizuoka raised that number to 91 last season. It was a tally that only Brave Lupus, Saitama and Kobe bettered. Fourteen of those were scored against Brave Lupus, including eight on a remarkable afternoon where the BlueRevs led by 44 points before two tries in the final six minutes allowed the defending champions to at least effect some minor damage limitation in a 56-26 defeat.

Local Hero:

Prior to last season, almost nothing was known about new scrumhalf Shuntaro Kitamu-



Kwagga Smith

ra. By the end of it, the BlueRevs novice was the league's Rookie of the Year, had scored a (joint) high 15 tries, and was a Brave Blossoms international to boot! The 23-year-old was left with big boots to fill after the departure of ex-Maori All Blacks and (Canterbury) Crusaders scrumhalf Bryn Hall to Kubota, and the new man made his debut from the bench during Shizuoka's dramatic victory over Kobe on the opening weekend. Promoted to start a week later, Kitamura scored his maiden try during the 62-19 smashing of Urayasu, and even though he again featured among the replacements as Shizuoka took care of Sagami-hara in week three, another try from the starting role against Yokohama got him in the door. Two tries when the BlueRevs gassed Brave Lupus in the fifth round then closed the door to the squad's other scrumhalves. The double against the defending champions was the first of three Kitamura achieved for the season. He wound up scoring in both of the BlueRevs' upset wins over Brave Lupus, as well as when Shizuoka bowled the Wild Knights.

Unfathomable:

As if they hadn't all known already, the BlueRevs put the entire competition on notice when they held their nerve to beat Brave Lupus 34-28 in the fifth round. After pulling out to 34-14 inside of the final 15 minutes, Shizuoka held their nerve to see it out despite the defending champions roaring back into contention with a pair of quick fire tries which left just six points of separation during a pulsating final 10 minutes. What then to make of the result just a month later when the BlueRevs were speared 62-14 by Kubota? The award against them of three yellow cards certainly contributed to the misery, but despite a start which had seen them win six of eight prior to that bleak afternoon, the nine-try rout left plenty of doubts as to their playoffs' credentials. Wins in eight of the nine matches that followed, including defeats of the Wild Knights and Brave Lupus again, subsequently ensured the outcome against the Spears was little more than a statistical anomaly.

Video Valynce:

A smash hit on Youtube, both for his outrageous tries and free-flowing locks, former



Valynce Te Whare

National Rugby League centre Valynce Te Whare arrived from the Queensland-based Dolphins on a trial contract. He didn't take long to snare an upgrade, working his way onto the online highlights reels after an astonishing near length of the field effort against Yokohama. There were more to come as the debutant ran in eight tries in his rookie year, adding a further element of unpredictability to an already blossoming Shizuoka attack. The 25-year-old, who was raised in Hamilton, appeared for Waikato in New Zealand's national provincial championship before changing both countries and codes to try his hand in Australian rugby league.

The Grass is Greener:

Flyhalf Sam Greene's rise last term in many ways mirrored that of his team, with the 31-year-old enjoying his best season since he arrived in Japan a decade ago. Greene contributed 144 points from 14 appearances for the BlueRevs, delivering on promise he had shown as far back as his days in the junior ranks in Brisbane where he emerged from the schools system to play six games for Queensland following the departure of Quade Cooper from the Reds. Greene himself took up an overseas opportunity in 2016 when he joined the Shuttles. After three years at Aichi, he moved to the then Yamaha Jubilo in 2019, but while he qualified for Japan on residency grounds four years ago, it was not until last season's heroics that his test number came up. Greene made his debut off the bench during Japan's 31-22 loss to Wales at Kobe and retained his place through the Pacific Nations Cup and European autumn tour.

Last Year:

Every competition that hopes to provide enter-

tainment, with a dollop of jeopardy to maintain the interest, needs a Cinderella story... and the BlueRevs played that role last term to perfection. From the dramatic first up win with an 85th minute try against Kobe, to the unexpectedly tame ending against the same opponent five months later, the BlueRevs kept themselves, their fans, and the entire competition, genuinely captivated. Such was the dramatic nature of the upturn, their 14 wins was just two short of the entire number they had gathered in the previous three editions of League One, while their fourth placing in the regular season was up by four on the eighth achieved in each of the previous three seasons.

What to Expect:

After a season that provided such a wild ride, predicting what comes next is an educated guess not laced with too much in the way of security. Logic, which last season showed is not always in supply when it comes to the BlueRevs, suggests there is no reason why they can't make the first week of the playoffs again, or push on even further. As always, keeping the inspirational Smith – who missed just two matches last term – on the field will be essential, but with a hardworking pack, and Kitamura's spark from nine, there seems no reason why the BlueRevs outside men will not be afforded as many ball in hand opportunities as they were last term. As they proved, most notably against Brave Lupus, if the likes of Tuitama, Te Whare, Piutau and new recruit Semi Radradra receive plenty of time on the ball, it will be fun to watch, unless you happen to be the opposition!

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 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:

Sena Kimura, Shohei Ito, Warner Dearn, Michael Leitch, Takuro Matsunaga

Non-Japanese International Test Representatives:

Richie Mo'unga (New Zealand), Shannon Frizell (New Zealand), Seta Tamanivalu (New Zealand/Fiji)

The Head Coach:

Back-to-back League One titles are 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 Crusaders were 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 title. Last term was Blackadder's sixth at Fuchu, having steadily improved the fortunes of Brave Lupus. When they qualified for the semi-finals in his third season in charge, it was the first time the club had featured in the playoffs since it finished runners up in the 2015-16 competition. When they won the title two years later, it 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 hat-trick of Super 12 titles in 1998, 1999 and 2000. He later played in Scotland for Edinburgh. His son Ethan is a test capped All Black and plays with the Crusaders as his father did.

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 rivals through five consecutive titles, the last of which was achieved in the 2009-2010 season. The second of their League One titles last season moved them one ahead of the Wild Knights for the most since Japanese rugby had organized a nationwide round robin tournament with the advent

of Top League. Brave Lupus has featured in the top four in three of the four editions of League One, winning 54 of their 72 matches. The Wild Knights (63 wins) are the only side to have won more.

The Main Man:

His club record is without peer, and Richie Mo'unga will be determined to sign off with a clean sweep of titles as he prepares for his third and final (for now) season in Japan. The 31-year-old is a serial title-winner, having added his two League One titles in as many years to seven during his time with the (Canterbury) Crusaders, for whom he will return in the 2027 edition of Super Rugby. Although he has received fine support, Mo'unga's professionalism, and his commitment to the Brave Lupus cause, has undoubtedly impacted on his Japanese teammates, lifting their performance to a higher level. The inspiration he provides was never more in evidence than in last year's decider where he overcame a broken hand to score one of his team's two tries in a man-of-the-match performance as Brave Lupus fended off a stern challenge from the Spears to retain their title. The two-time Rugby World Cup attendee, who has gathered 464 points from his 56 tests, as well as setting numerous records from 109 matches with the Crusaders, begins his third season at Brave Lupus with 274 points from 33 matches. This total includes 16 tries, 12 of which were scored last term. All Black legend Dan Carter (1708) is the only player to have exceeded Mo'unga's tally of 1227 points for the Crusaders.

Mister Reliable:

It shows just how well fullback Takuro Matsunaga performed last term that he was entrusted with the goalkicking duties ahead of the team's trump card Mo'unga during a standout season which delivered 174 points and third place on the individual scoring rankings. The super reliable 27-year-old has missed just seven of the 72 matches Brave Lupus have played since League One began, contributing 285 points. Matsunaga's form for Brave Lupus has seen him elevated into the Brave Blossoms squad where he has featured in each of the last two seasons.

Captain Hurricane:

After claiming back-to-back League One titles,

and the co-captaincy of the Brave Blossoms in this year's Pacific Nations Cup, there will be plenty of Japanese eyeballs watching the progress of Warner Dearn as he tries his hand at Super Rugby. The all-action New Zealand-born second rower has signed a one-year loan with the (Wellington) Hurricanes to give Super Rugby a shot, while also moving closer to his Wairarapa-based family. Wellington is a short drive from Masterton, where his mother Tanya runs the Wairarapa Bush Rugby Union as its chief executive. A key member of each of the Brave Lupus and Japanese test forward packs, the athletic 23-year-old, who departed for Japan's autumn tour of Europe having played 28 tests, should be well suited to Super Rugby, given the quality of his ball skills alongside the abrasive nature of his approach. Dearn arrived in Japan in 2016 when his father Grant took up a strength and conditioning role at Green Rockets Tokatsu. He completed his education at Ryukei Okashima 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. He was then selected by Japan, quickly establishing himself as one of the first names on the team sheet. Dearn featured in all four of Japan's matches at the 2023 Rugby World Cup, scoring a try in the win over Chile. He is not the only member of the Brave Lupus pack who is Super Rugby bound, with test teammate and hooker Mamoru Harada having joined Moana Pasifika. The 26-year-old made his test debut for Japan last year but missed most of this season's international campaign due to injury. Veteran midfielder Yuto Mori has also departed, although the versatile Brave Blossoms back has stayed in Japan, joining Yokohama Eagles.

The Godfather:

Suiting up for his 16th season in the Brave Lupus jersey, the story of the incomparable Michael Leitch continues, with the long-time Brave Blossoms skipper showing no sign of slowing down. The face of modern Japanese rugby, the remarkable 37-year-old has been a close ally of Blackadder's as the pair have restored Toshiba's fortunes, overcoming knee and hip injuries following the 2019 Rugby World Cup that threatened to draw the curtain



Michael Leitch

on his career. His reinvigoration in the time since has been such that last season he was still leading many of the competition metrics around work rate and defense. While a fifth Rugby World Cup remains two years away, few would bet against Leitch making it, alongside reaching 100 tests, as he assembled for Japan's recent five test autumn series with 89 alongside his name. These numbers are not far short of fellow Brave Lupus second rower and legend Hitoshi Ono, who earned 98 caps for the Brave Blossoms, and played at the club for an incredible 19 years. Leitch was skipper when Japan caused one of the biggest upsets in Rugby World Cup history when it toppled South Africa in 2015. He was also in charge four years later when Japan became the first Asian nation to reach the tournament playoffs when the Brave Blossoms beat Ireland and Scotland to qualify for the quarterfinals of their home World Cup.

The Frizell Factor:

While Mo'unga gets most of the headlines, the acquisition of ex-All Black and (Otago) Highlanders backrower Shannon Frizell alongside his former test teammate two years ago has been no less significant for the Brave Lupus cause. Teammates credit the hard-nosed 31-year-old for bringing a ruthless edge to the Toshiba forwards, most notably in contact and in cleanouts at the breakdown, with his off-field and training professionalism also making a big impression. He has also added a string to his bow since he arrived in Japan by becoming a prominent name on the score-sheet. Frizell has gathered 21 tries from 35 appearances for Brave Lupus, finishing as last season's leading forward try-scorer with 11, after tying former England backrower Nathan Hughes for third while scoring 10 the year before. The latter tally included four in one match on Christmas Eve against Kobe. Frizell scored eight tries in 33 tests for the All Blacks, and 19 in 68 games for the (Otago) Highlanders in Super Rugby.

Last Year:

The first time Brave Lupus won the nationwide club championship, they went on to repeat

the act a further four times. While another five-in-a-row might prove beyond the current generation, the sense of inevitability through last season that they would become the first League One team to defend their title hints at a juggernaut showing no signs of slowing. Despite two out-of-character reverses against the BlueRevs, Brave Lupus went undefeated against everyone else, steamrolling the Wild Knights 42-31 the second time around after the first of the replays between the previous season's finalists had ended in a 28-28 draw. Their run culminated in the successful navigation of two potentially sticky playoff ties, storming clear of Kobe in the second half of their crushing 31-3 semi-final win, before establishing what proved to be a match-winning 12-point buffer midway through the second half of their 18-13 success against Kubota in the final. Although the Spears closed to within five at the finish, few begrudged Brave Lupus their victory, having been the most consistent performer throughout the season.

What to Expect:

While the absences of Harada and particularly Dearn add an element of uncertainty, Blackadder appears to have built up the depth to cope, and they will be the team to beat again. Without Dearn, a big opportunity awaits fellow New Zealand-born second rower Jacob Pierce, alongside Australian recruits Michael Stolberg and Callum McDonald, to step up, while ex-(Canterbury) Crusaders and Hanazono hooker Andrew Makalio is a capable replacement for Harada. Although Mo'unga's attempt to bid Fuchu farewell with a title hat-trick will undoubtedly be a motivating factor, the form of try-gobbling winger Jone Naikabula will also play a big part in Toshiba's prospects. The 31-year-old has contributed a remarkable 68 tries in 75 matches since his arrival at Brave Lupus six seasons ago. They will need him firing again to help sustain their title defense after he had the misfortune to miss last season's finals as well as this year's international programme due to injury.

Mitsubishi Heavy Industries Sagamihara Dynaboars



Where:

Based in Sagami 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:

Epinere Uliviti, Charlie Lawrence

Non-Japanese International Test Representatives:

Jackson Hemopo (New Zealand)
Lukhanyo Am (South Africa)

The Head Coach:

Via Canterbury in New Zealand's national provincial championship, the (Otago) Highlanders in Super Rugby, and Welsh club the Scarlets from the United Rugby Championship; Glenn Delaney took over from compatriot Greg Cooper three years ago to supervise the Dynaboars' return to Division One. While his maiden season was a tough ride, the New Zealander steered Sagami City to safe waters, comfortably surviving in the Replacement Battle against Shuttles Aichi. They have finished ninth in each of the last two seasons,



winning six matches both times. Delaney, who was defence coach when Sagami-hara 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 Moar 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.

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 Hanazono 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 in the 2019-20 competition. 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.

The Main Man:

In a team that targets efficiency over stardom in terms of its recruitment, English flyhalf James Grayson has proved a golden signing, playing a leading role as the Dynaboars have held their own against more big name laden clubs. The son of England flyhalf Paul, James had represented his homeland at age-group level before taking the plunge and swapping Northampton for Sagami-hara. 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 sit 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 points in his final outing of the campaign against Hanazono. While he finished with 99 points (10th on the rankings) last term, his tally included 22 during the one-point loss to Honda, and 19 during a critical four-point win over relegation rivals Toyota. Grayson starts his third season at Kanagawa with 33 appearances in League One to his name.

There's a Hole in My Pocket:

There might not be much to him, but 80 kg pocket rocket Kurt Lee Arendse made a huge impression during his sabbatical season with the Dynaboars, leaving a gaping hole in their ranks that Delaney has the unenviable task of trying to fill. The 29-year-old, who was on loan from the Pretoria-based Bulls, thoroughly enjoyed himself off the field in Japan. That 'feel good' flowed into his on-field performance, as he bagged seven tries in 12 games, the importance of which was highlighted by the fact that Mitsubishi won four of the six matches in which the Springbok winger was a try-scorer. Arendse tormented Japanese defenders again in October, as man-of-the-match when



James Grayson

South Africa beat the Brave Blossoms in London. On-loan back-rower Lewis Chessum has returned to his parent club, Leicester Tigers. The 22-year-old Englishman appeared 10 times after arriving shortly after the start of the season. Ex-Wallaby centre Curtis Rona has also left the club.

Lawrence of Sagamihara:

Hong Kong-born, and so previously eligible for Rugby World Cup-bound Hong Kong China, Charlie Lawrence might get to Australia with Japan instead, being a long-time fixture in League One. The 28-year-old midfielder, who is about to embark on his second campaign with Sagamihara, and eighth in Japan overall, made his test debut for the Brave Blossoms during this season's Pacific Nations Cup, starting all four matches. His inclusion, in combination with test regular Dylan Riley, for the final against Fiji suggests he is a big part of Eddie Jones's midfield thinking. Lawrence schooled at Waikato's Hamilton Boys' High, and represented New Zealand at the Under-20 World Cup, and in Sevens, before heading to Japan in 2018 where he joined Kobe. The Steelers won the Top League during the first of his two seasons at the club, with Lawrence playing three times, before he switched to Verblitz in 2020. He was the only member of the Dynaboars squad to make Japan's autumn tour squad although prop Shoma Sagawa featured in the Japan XV squad that played its Australian counterpart in October.

The Brothers Franks:

Ben and Owen Franks have always been close, with their careers often intertwined, and the last two years 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, is in his second year mentoring the Brave Blossoms scrum after being recruited by Eddie Jones as part of his new look coaching team. At the same time Ben, who also played for each of the All Blacks, Crusaders and Hurricanes, joined the Dynaboars, for whom he is gearing up for a second season. 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.

Vital Vaega:

Auckland-educated Matt Vaega has been a vital cog in the Dynaboars back division ever since he joined the club for its' return to the Top League six seasons ago. His ability to test opposing defensive lines is likely to take on even more importance with the loss of Arendse's speed and unpredictability on the edge. The 31-year-old has appeared for the Dynaboars on 61 occasions since he joined ahead of the 2019-20 season, with 47 of those coming since the advent of League One. Vaega is part of a bruising Sagamihara strike force, with six of their outside backs boasting Pacific Island roots. The powerful centre, who attended the prestigious Kelston Boys' High School, produced a remarkable performance last term during the 34-24 takedown of Suntory, scoring 24 of his side's points, which included a hatrick. He tied fullback Satoshi Koizumi and Arendse for the most tries collected by a Dynaboars' player, each dotting down on seven occasions.

From Russia with Love:

New Dynaboars backrower Friedle Olivier is something of a rarity in the game, having played club rugby in Russia. The 33-year-old South African began his career in his homeland with the (Free State) Cheetahs. Olivier is one of eight newcomers to the Dynaboars, with his countryman and prop, Pieter Scholz, also on the books. Like his compatriot, the 31-year-old is well travelled, having arrived from French Top 14 club Bayonne, after previous stints with the (Golden) Lions and (Southern) Kings in South Africa alongside the now defunct London Wasps and the Scarlets of Wales. Fijian-born backrower Jose Seru is also through the door, having joined from Hanazono. Seru featured for Japan in Sevens at the 2020 Tokyo Olympics.

Making Up for 'Locked' Time:

A permanent resident in the Dynaboars engine since the club re-emerged from the regional competitions in the 2019-20 Top League, Brave Blossoms second rower Epineri Uluiviti has some ground to make up in League One after he was omitted from the national squad for the Pacific Nations Cup after having started in each of the July tests against Wales. Japan's 31-22 loss to Wales at Kobe was the Fijian-educated 29-year-old's eighth test appearance, all coming since Eddie Jones returned as national coach.

'Shunning' the Limelight:

His contribution might have slipped under the radar, but Kobe-born Shun Miyake returns to Japan as a New Zealand national champion after playing his part in Canterbury's victory in the country's annual provincial tournament this year. The 23-year-old, who schooled at the prestigious Christ's College in Christchurch, played three years in the schools' first XV, turning down offers to enter the Japanese age-grade international programme to keep his international eligibility options open, for both New Zealand and Japan. After making the Crusaders Under-20 squad four years ago, the talented flyhalf subsequently made his national provincial championship debut for Tasman a season later, before switching to Canterbury last year. The move was rewarded with 10 appearances in his maiden season,

and seven this term, as his side topped the regular season standings before going on to beat South Island rivals Otago 36-28 in October's final. Equally comfortable at fullback, he promises to be a welcome addition to Sagami-hara's backline and goal-kicking mix.

Last Year:

Another sound performance throughout meant that the Dynaboars were never threatened by the prospect of The Replacement Battle, finishing eight points clear of the relegation line. Although they only once secured back-to-back victories, wins over each of the teams around them on the table kept their momentum going, meaning a 34-21 loss to The Replacement Battle-bound D-Rocks proved irrelevant to their final placing.

What to Expect:

The Dynaboars may lack the star quality of other rosters, but what they do have is a settled playing cast with a core group who have been together for a while and know each other well, and a coach with a proven track record of getting the most out of the resources at his disposal. Even so, they are going to miss the star dust Arendse sprinkled last term, which means competing for a mid-table position is probably the most that can be expected. It is something they have achieved in the last two seasons.

YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES



Where:

Originally based in Machida, Tokyo, the team has changed their host region Yokohama for the start of Japan Rugby League One and will play its' fifth season from its new home in the competition's 2025-26 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:

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".

Brave Blossoms Squad Members:

Ryosuke Iwaihara, Amanaki Saumaki, Kippei Ishida

Non-Japanese International Test Representatives:

Jesse Kriel (South Africa), Faf de Klerk (South Africa), Dino Lamb (Italy)

The Head Coach:

Long time fullback for the (Canterbury) Crusaders and All Blacks, Leon MacDonald arrives at Yokohama after a varied coaching career, headlined by his time leading the (Auckland) Blues. MacDonald guided the club to its' first title in 18 years when the Blues

won the abbreviated post-Covid Super Rugby trans-Tasman title in 2021, beating the (Otago) Highlanders in the final. Previously assistant to his former teammate Scott Robertson at the Crusaders, MacDonald came onboard as part of the national coaching team when Robertson ascended to the All Black position last year. After coaching New Zealand's second team, the All Blacks XV, to wins over Irish province Munster and Georgia during a short tour at the end of last season, MacDonald left the All Black staff during this year's French series. A brief stint as a consultant with the Western Force followed before he signed to replace veteran coach Keisuke Sawaki at Yokohama. Regarded as one of the greatest to have ever worn the Crusaders jersey, MacDonald appeared on 122 occasions for the Christchurch-based team, sharing in seven



Leon MacDonald

Super Rugby titles. Capped 56 times by the All Blacks, the 47-year-old twice enjoyed brief stints in Japan, playing a season with Yamaha Jubilo (now Shizuoka BlueRevs) following the 2003 Rugby World Cup, before he completed his career with a season at Kintetsu in 2009-10. In taking over at the Eagles, MacDonald joins his former Crusaders coaches Robbie Deans (Wild Knights) and Steve Hansen (Verblitz), as well as former teammates Todd Blackadder (Brave Lupus), Tabai Matson (Black Rams), and Joe Maddock and Ben Franks (both Dynaboars), each of whom are heading up, or playing prominent roles, in coaching teams at League One clubs. MacDonald will be assisted by former Kobe and (Otago) Highlanders defensive coach Dave Dillon.

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 in the third edition of League One, before the side fell back last term, finishing eighth.

The Main Man:

In a season where more went wrong than it did right, the one performer the Eagles could rely on was the same as always, veteran ex-Brave Blossoms flyhalf Yu Tamura. Resident at Canon since 2017, the 36-year-old clocked two notable point-scoring milestones last term, with his season tally of 147 from 18

matches taking him beyond 1000 points in domestic leagues (he now has 1076) while also eclipsing the 500-mark for League One, where he starts the competition's fifth edition with 630 points in the 'bank'. Now heading into his ninth season with the Eagles, and a remarkable 15th in professional competition, Tamura 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 Canon 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 Cups, most notably in the wins over Ireland and Scotland. The Meiji University product also played 15 matches 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 goal-kicker.

Local Hero:

The return of bruising winger-turned-backrower Amanaki Saumaki was the big news on the off-season player recruitment front and fans will be looking forward to seeing the 28-year-old back in the Eagles jersey after three seasons and 59 games for Kobe. Converted into a forward by ex-Eagles coach Keisuke Sawaki before the Tongan-born backrower left, Saumaki returns boasting test experience, having appeared for the Brave Blossoms on five occasions. While he didn't feature against either Wales mid-year, or in the Pacific Nations Cup, Saumaki remains in the test frame, being included Japan's autumn training squad. The backrower scored four tries for Kobe last term, with two of them coming during the Steelers 47-29 win over the Eagles. He scored again when Kobe upset the Wild Knights in the playoff for third. This followed a haul of eight the season before, which included two in the dramatic 40-40 draw with eventual champions

Brave Lupus, and four on debut in Kansai. He replaces veteran backrower Amanaki Lelei Mafi who is giving the (English) Premiership a shot with Red Bull Newcastle. Winger Yuto Mori is another good pick-up for the Eagles after a profitable stint at Brave Lupus where the 27-year-old shared in two titles, scoring a try in last season's final. Mori featured for the Japan XV against Australia in October.

A Bit More 'Faf' Please:

His class is indisputable, his prolonged absences almost ruinous, so MacDonald will have his fingers crossed that he can keep his star halfback Faf De Klerk from 'breaking' for a third year in a row. After missing most of the third season of League One due to injury, the 33-year-old was sidelined for the final seven matches last term, which severely handicapped the Eagles' already fading chances for a top six finish. Under Sawake, the energising Springbok was the fulcrum of the side's attack, with his halves partnership with Tamura crucial in managing the big moments. As challenge emerges for his test place from the promising Grant Williams and old hand Cobus Reinach, South African coach Rassie Erasmus is sure to be monitoring De Klerk's

progress closely on his return to Japan, with the Springboks' success this year highlighting the ever-increasing competition for test spots as the calendar edges closer to the two-time world champions' title defence.

Levi's World Tour:

A barrelling midfielder, Levi Aumua is back in Japan on the next stop of a 'global' tour which has seen him previously appear for nine different clubs – two in Japan – as well as four in Super Rugby, teams in France and Australia, alongside appearances for the Barbarians, and the All Blacks XV. The 31-year-old, who is reuniting with his backline coach at each of Tasman, the (Canterbury) Crusaders and (Auckland) Blues, arrives uncapped, but eligible for both Fiji and Samoa on heritage grounds, as well as New Zealand. Aumua was a stalwart for Tasman in New Zealand's national provincial championship working his way into Super Rugby via that path, with his first association with MacDonald coming while the new Eagles boss was head coach of that provincial team. He had year-long stints with Hino RED DOLPHINS and Toyota Shuttles Aichi and will add plenty of punch to what should be a very 'direct' Eagles backline, in combina-



Yu Tamura

tion with hard running Springbok centre Jesse Kriel.

The Irish 'Birdman':

It's an unusual pastime, but one that makes it appropriate Cormac Daly turns out for the Eagles, given he races pigeons in his spare time! The Kilcock (Ireland) born second rower starts his second season at Yokohama taking on additional leadership responsibilities after the departure of ex-Australian test man Matthew Phillip. His performance on debut suggests the 27-year-old is well up for the challenge, having appeared 11 times during his first season in Japan, after a career that saw him earlier represent Ireland in the Under-20 grade, alongside time with Leinster and the Queensland Reds in Super Rugby.

Last Year:

While defeats in the last four matches finished them off, in truth the Eagles' bid for a third straight playoffs position never really got off the ground, with Yokohama unable to build on a four-game winning run through January and early February, which lifted them into the championship conversation. While the fierce competition, which congested the mid-table places, meant that their playoffs aspirations remained on life support until the season's dying moments, two wins from their final 12 games highlighted just how much the confi-

dence had drained from a seasoned group of players who had become used to success. Their eventual eighth ranking represented the Eagles lowest finish of the League One era, with their six wins a marked drop on the 10 they had achieved in each of the previous three regular seasons.

What to Expect:

The arrival of MacDonald changes the game at Yokohama, with the new man having been tutored as a player by coaching luminaries, Deans, Hansen and Wayne Smith during his playing career, adapting aspects from each into his own coaching method. As for all new coaches in Japan, communicating in a different way to players and staff will be a test, but MacDonald's previous experience with Yamaha and Kintetsu, albeit in a vastly different role, at least means the new boss knows what to expect. With De Klerk and Kriel's experience to lean on, and the ageless Tamara still in harness, MacDonald does have a few aces up his sleeve. If he 'plays' them well, Yokohama should be a playoffs contender again.

DIVISION

CONFERENCE B

**Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY
KOBELCO KOBE STEELERS
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, which they have turned into a fortress where they seldom lose, 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:

Yota Kamimori, Hayate Era, Keijiro Tamefusa, Tyler Paul, David van Zeeland, Faulua Makisi, Shinobu Fujiwara, Yuya Hirose, Haruto Kida, Halatoa Vailea

Non-Japanese International Test Representatives:

Malcolm Marx (South Africa), Bernard Foley (Australia), Shaun Stevenson (New Zealand)

The Head Coach:

A two-time Super Rugby-title winner with the Bulls in 2009 and 2010, Frans Ludeke scored a notable success when he steered Spears Funabashi Tokyo Bay to its maiden national title by winning the second edition of League One. That success, in the 2022-23 season, came six years after the underrated South African had joined in 2016. He took the Spears to three semi-finals before the side made its title-breakthrough. This included back-to-back semis in the final Top League and the maiden season of League One, both times falling to the Wild Knights, whom they dethroned when

they subsequently won the title. The League One 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 championships coaching Pretoria, Ludeke was also in charge of the Johannesburg-based Cats (the alternative name for the Lions) for a season in 2006.

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.

The Main Man:

It was no coincidence that the return of a fully fit Malcolm Marx saw the Spears on target again, reaching the final for the second time in three years. The driving force behind the most potent forward pack in the competition, the South African was the key man when the Spears broke through for their maiden national title three seasons ago. The 31-year-old was sorely missed a year later after being rubbed out of the title defence when he ruptured his anterior cruciate ligament during training at the 2023 Rugby World Cup. Joint second try-scorer among forwards in the competition last term, the 10 Marx bagged took his overall record since joining the Funabashi Bay-based club in time for the final season of the old Top



League to 35 from 51 appearances. Marx returns to Japan having been a central figure as the Springboks completed back-to-back wins in the Rugby Championship.

The Highland Defence:

Scott McLeod might fly under the radar for many, but certainly not Ludeke, whose recruitment of the former All Black defensive coach proved a masterstroke. A 10-test midfielder for New Zealand who played at Brave Lupus Tokyo towards the end of his career, McLeod arrived at Funabashi with a brief to create the meanest defeat in the league. He delivered: emphatically. In conceding just 421 points from 21 appointments, at an average of a tick over 20 per outing, the Spears' defence was even tighter than in their championship-winning season, where they conceded a point more per match. The defensive steel McLeod had instilled came through in the finals series where neither Sungoliath nor Brave Lupus could break the 20-point barrier against the Spears. While his head coaching experience has been surprisingly limited, McLeod did guide the (Otago) Highlanders to victory over the British and Irish Lions in 2017 while acting as boss in an interim capacity.

New Name, Maximum Force:

He might be Kubota skipper again, after leading his team to the final on his maiden journey as club captain, but one thing about the

Spears backrower is different:

He's now got Japanese citizenship and returns from Japan's autumn tour of Europe to start his eighth season with the Spears, has been a core figure of the Brave Blossoms line-up since Eddie Jones took over as head coach. A product of Tenri University, 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 28-year-old missed just two of the Spears' 21 matches last season. In an age where loose forwards appear more vulnerable than most to injury due to the way the game is now played, the Makisi name has appeared on the gameday roster in 61 of the 72 League One games the Spears have played. While going forward that name will be absent, the reliability and commitment he has always contributed will still be there. Maxi Fowler. Remember the name!

Something to Prove:

After playing 110 games for the (Waikato) Chiefs, as well as a test for the All Blacks,

you would think new Spears fullback Shaun Stevenson has nothing to prove. He does. For all that he has already achieved in his career, the 29-year-old has never won a professional club title. Having played for the Chiefs for eight years, and New Zealand in each of Under-20, Maori All Blacks and All Blacks XV teams, it seemed inevitable All Black selection would come his way, which it duly did, making his test debut during the final year of Verblitz coach Ian Foster's tenure as New Zealand boss in 2023 during a 23-20 win over Australia in Dunedin. Surprisingly, that was it. Not featuring in new coach Scott Robertson's plans, Stevenson was allowed to move on loan to the Spears last year, subbing in for departing Wales fullback Liam Williams. The experience, which saw him appear on six occasions, scoring two tries, whetted his appetite for more, resulting in his signing on with the club fulltime. Given he was denied the ability to appear in last season's playoffs, Stevenson's return is good news for the Spears, adding additional threat to an already impressive backline. His links with the coach who gave him his test debut saw Stevenson feature for the Foster-co-coached Australia/New Zealand XV that played the British & Irish Lions on their recent

tour of Australia.

Stone Cold:

While injury meant former Saracens (England) flanker Ollie Stoneham didn't 'get warm' in his maiden season in Japan, the 24-year-old is sure to be raring to go when this year's competition kicks off, looking to make his much-delayed League One debut. A product of Cambridge, the former England Under-20 representative took the plunge to try his hand in Japan after finding his pathway blocked at Vicarage Road due to the surfeit of backrow talent that was available. With test men Billy Vunipola, Tom Willis and Ben Earl among those standing in his way, Stoneham's decision to try somewhere else made sense, and while Japan wasn't an obvious choice, expect him to make a big impact when he finally makes it onto the field.

When the Sun Shines:

Prior to the start of their championship-winning season three years ago, the Spears had never beaten Sungoliath, in either Top League or Japan League One. That ghost was laid to rest as the Spears wiped their rivals three nil for the season, gaining the additional satisfac-



Kubota Spears Funabashi TOKYO-BAY v TOKYO SUNGOLIATH

tion of ending their western Tokyo neighbour's title hopes in the semi-finals. While Suntory did administer a 'get square' by demolishing Kubota 52-26 on the opening day of the next season, the Spears returned the favour on its final day, administering a 45-26 pummelling, which set the stage for last term. As well as again eliminating Sungoliath 20-15 in a quarter-final, the Spears had earlier taken Suntory down 30-10, after the opening game of the season between the sides ended in a dramatic 26-26 draw. It all means that when the two meet again on December 27, the Spears will enter the game having lost just once to Sungoliath in their past eight meetings, a turnaround which reflects the Funabashi side's journey to the top echelon of the Japanese club game.

A Blossoming Breed:

The Spears success in reaching last season's final was handsomely rewarded by the national selectors with 10 players from the club called into the national team set-up through the year, the most of any team in the league. The group for the autumn tour included the uncapped South Africa-born pair of second rowers Tyler Paul and David van Zeeland, as well winger Haruto Kida, centre Yuya Hirose, prop Yota Kamimori and hooker Hayate Era who had all made their test debuts in the mid-year tests. While such experience is great for players' growth, it also brings with it added pressure when they return to their clubs, with the expectations of them rising. Managing that could play a vital part in how the Spears' season unfolds.

Last Year:

Despite losing just two matches through the regular season and being forced to enter the playoffs at the quarter-final stage, it says much about the belief and resilience the Spears boasted that they remained in contention to win the title up until the final whistle in the championship game. Although Brave Lupus survived their opponent's late rally to prevail by five points, defeat did not detract from a superb campaign which had seen the Spears bounce back emphatically following their injury riddled title defence in the league's third edition. While the format was slightly different, in winning 16 matches, the Spears won as many as they had during their title-winning season, and twice as many as the season in-between. Of satisfaction will have been the 48-point despatching of fourth-placed regular season finisher Shizuoka. Their gritty semi-final win over the Wild Knights was another notable moment.

What to Expect:

With the core of the roster remaining together after last season's run to the final, anything other than a serious dip at the title by the Spears would be a major surprise. Two narrow defeats by Brave Lupus, the competition's benchmark, by four and five points respectively, highlighted the narrow margin between themselves and the summit, with their seeming invincibility at their western Tokyo home ground, Edogawa Stadium, a major advantage for the title pursuit.

KOBELCO KOBESTEELERS



Where:

Located on the western 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 lost their lives while 300,000 were left homeless. Around 200,000 buildings and 120 of the 150 quays (wharfs built parallel to the shoreline) were destroyed. The club commemorates the anniversary of the earthquake every year with a special match.

What's in a Name:

Given they are based in a city synonymous with the steel industry, the Steelers name 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:

Waisake Raraturua, Tiennan Costley, Seung-sin Lee, Kazuma Ueda

Non-Japanese International Test Representatives:

Ardie Savea (New Zealand), Brodie Retallick (New Zealand), Anton Lienert-Brown (New Zealand)

The Head Coach:

Given his pedigree, it was always likely that former Wallaby coach Dave Rennie was going to guide Kobe up the rankings. Club officials must be delighted with his work so far. After lifting the 2018 champions from ninth to fifth in

his first season – a finish that would have been good enough for a playoffs spot under the new six-team format – Rennie followed through on the initial promise shown to finish fifth again in his second year, this time securing the club finals footy for the first time since they last won the title in 2018. Making the next step is now the two-time Super Rugby title-winning Chiefs coaches' mission, and further improvement should be expected, as it appears the boss, coming off an unsatisfying three years with the Australian national team, has built a similar culture at Kobe as he did at the Chiefs and, as with his time in Super Rugby, is maintaining it. This is something the players clearly relish, given the number of star players Rennie has been able to attract to the club.

History:



Dave Rennie

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 round. The club did not win it again until the 2018-19 season when they hammered Sungoliath 55-5 in the final.

The Main Man:

It is testament to just how good a player Brodie Retallick is, that the All Blacks have struggled to replace the 120kg hole that the

204cm colossus left in their ranks after his international retirement following the Rugby World Cup in 2023. New Zealand's loss has undoubtedly been Kobe's gain with the big man, who was entrusted with the leadership of the side by Rennie, still playing at a level every bit as good as he did while in the test caldron. The 34-year-old, who is gearing up for his fifth season in Japan across two stints, first arrived in Kobe after the 2019 Rugby World Cup in Japan. Despite the interference from Covid, the All Black centurion managed 15 appearances for Kobe during his first two seasons. While he returned to New Zealand ahead of the 2023 World Cup, his re-recruitment was one of his old Chiefs coach's first moves once Rennie took charge of the Steelers two seasons ago. As well as relishing the Japanese environment and culture, Retallick has developed a taste for scoring, and is now one of the most potent forces in the league when the try-line is in sight. Such is the Kobe skipper's effectiveness, his 10 tries last season were the second most by a forward, joint with the Spears' renowned try gather, Springbok hooker Malcolm Marx. Retallick scored nine tries from 15 appearances during the final two seasons of Top League and has now assembled a try-scoring record most outside backs would be proud of,



Brodie Retallick

harvesting 23 from 49 outings for Kobe. He scored nine tries in his 109 test matches.

The 'A List' Attraction:

No player is going to command more attention in League One this season – domestically or internationally – than former World Rugby Player of the Year Ardie Savea, who has been lured back to Japan by Rennie, after he played 15 matches for Kobe two seasons ago. Savea scored eight tries during his maiden season in Kobe, four of which came in one afternoon against a Verblitz side run by his former All Black coach, Steve Hansen. The explosive 31-year-old became New Zealand's 15th test centurion during the All Blacks' 24-17 win over the Springboks in September. That was his most recent achievement in a stellar career that saw him named World Rugby Player of the Year in 2023, and New Zealand's 70th test captain when he first led the All Blacks against Australia in Perth two years earlier. He has since become something of a 'go to' man for coach Scott Robertson as stand in All Black skipper, leading the side in place of injured custodian Scott Barrett, to 'bounce back' victories over Argentina last year, and South Africa in September, each time after the side had lost its previous test. He returns to Kobe after a standout season for Moana Pasifika in Super Rugby, where he rekindled the combination he had shared with elder brother and former All Black wing Julian, alongside whom he played for eight seasons with the (Wellington) Hurricanes.

Sayonara Saumaki:

Savea's return to Kobe coincides with the departure of Tongan-born backrower Amanaki Saumaki, who has returned to his former club Yokohama after three years and 59 games for Kobe. The Brave Blossoms international was one of 12 players to leave the club following the end of last season. Space was made available for Savea in Kobe's foreign capped quota by the departure of George Turner after one season. The 40-cap former Scottish test rake, who played 13 games for Kobe scoring five tries, joined Harlequins in the (English) Premiership. He has been replaced by the former Maori All Black, (Otago) Highlanders and Green Rockets Tokatsu hooker Ash Dixon. Former South Africa Under-20 second rower Neil Hansen has arrived from the (Golden

Lions while centre Mac Harris is a pickup from the (Otago) Highlanders junior ranks. Rennie used his links to Manawatu, where he coached in New Zealand's national provincial championship, to send centre Junta Hamano and utility back Hayata Tsujino to spend some time with the province during the recent competition. Tsujino is a product of nearby Kyoto Sangyo University and has just joined the squad.

All Looks Bright:

While Savea's 'recapture' was Kobe's headline off-season 'business', another important acquisition in their 'shopping bag' is centre Anton Lienert-Brown, who has joined in place of one of his predecessors in the All Black midfield, Ngane Laumape. Lienert-Brown, who like Savea has taken a one-year sabbatical from his Super Rugby duties in New Zealand, has been something of a quiet achiever on the All Black front since he was first selected in 2016. While he largely flies under the radar in the shadow of headline acts in the All Black backline such as Beauden Barrett, Rieko Ioane and Damien McKenzie, 'ALB' still boasts 88 test appearances, with his importance such that New Zealand Rugby had no hesitation in granting his year-long sabbatical in Kobe....as long as they get him back! Lienert Brown had the misfortune to miss the Chiefs two Super Rugby titles won under Rennie, making his debut for the Kobe boss in 2014, a year after the second of those victories was achieved. One of only 12 players to have played 100 or more games for the Hamilton-based side in its 29-year existence (new Spears recruit Shaun Stevenson is another), just Liam Messam (183), Sungoliath backrower Sam Cane (150), ex-Sungoliath flyhalf Damien McKenzie (140), and his current skipper at Kobe, Retallick (128), have made more than his 126 appearances.

The All Black Club:

New Zealand internationals have been a popular acquisition for Japanese clubs in recent times, but few have gained more benefit from the link than Kobe. When Lienert-Brown lines up in League One for the first time, he will become the 13th All Black to have worn the club's jersey. Alongside the three on the roster for this season, Kobe have been graced by the likes of Dan Carter, Andy Ellis, Laumape

and former Chiefs' second rower Royce Willis. Ellis, who skippered the championship-winning side in 2018, stayed the longest, playing six seasons, while the title-winning year was the second of Carter's two campaigns with the club. Rennie's former Chiefs assistant, two-time Rugby World Cup-winning All Black assistant, and Black Ferns World Cup-winner, Wayne Smith has had a long association with Kobe. He was the most recent man to bring the title to Kobe as the club's Director of Rugby for the championship-winning season.

Dodgy Defence:

While the results continue to improve, Kobe still have plenty to do, and they won't win a title until they learn to defend a lot better. Despite climbing their way to third by the end of last term, the Steelers conceded 30 or more points on eight occasions. By the time Brave Lupus put 31 on them in the semi-final, it represented the 28th time in the last three seasons that Kobe has leaked that many, with Brave Lupus doing them over three times! Helped along by some 'generous' defending, the champions collectively scored 19 tries in 240 minutes of playing time against Rennie's men, including 11 on a ridiculous afternoon at Universiade Memorial Stadium in Kobe where Brave Lupus romped to a 73-28 victory. Although the score was lower, the defending champions' 31-3 win in the semi-final was

equally as emphatic, with the message to Kobe clear:

if you want to match up to the competition's benchmark, you have to defend as stingily as they do when it matters.

Last Year:

While unable to keep pace with the front-runners in the regular season, Kobe's qualification for the enlarged six-team finals series was never in doubt, even though they lost two more games (eight) than they had in also finishing fifth in Rennie's first year. While their defence again proved suspect, only Brave Lupus and the Wild Knights tallied more than their 93 tries and they finished 18 points clear of the seventh-placed Black Rams. Making the most of the chance in the playoffs, their story did not end there, with the Steelers ending Shizuoka's fairytale on the first weekend of the finals, before tipping up the regular season's second-ranked Wild Knights in the playoff for third two weeks later.

What to Expect:

The arrival of the All Black recruits raise the stakes and with a good level of depth having been developed in recent years, Kobe appear well equipped to make a serious title bid. They will need to seize the day though. With Savea and Lienert-Brown only staying one season, the Steelers may not get a better chance.



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:

Kenta Kobayashi, Shodai Hirao, Sanshiro Kihara, Shuhei Takeuchi, Harry Hockings, Kanji

Shimokawa, Kenta Fukuda, Shogo Nakano

Non-Japanese International Test representatives:

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

The Head Coach:

After a long and distinguished playing career, which included 75 matches in the Suntory jersey over eight years, Kosei Ono took on his first head coaching role when he succeeded Kiyonori Tanaka last season. Despite a rocky start, which saw Sungoliath have to wait five matches for their first win, Ono's men built up enough momentum to climb into the top six, although a 20-15 loss to the Spears on the first weekend of the playoffs confirmed their lowest finish since the advent of League One, having reached the final and two semi-finals in its' previous editions. The rookie coach is



Cheslin Kolbe

sure to have learnt much from the experience as he prepares to go again in his second season as boss. Ono is best known for his role at flyhalf in Japan's historic win over South Africa at the 2015 Rugby World Cup, where among the other members of the Brave Blossoms side was fullback Kotaro Matsushima, who remains in harness on the Suntory roster. 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 former Suntory coach Eddie Jones replaced Kirwan after the 2011 tournament, becoming the Australians' first choice flyhalf through until 2015 and the famous day at Brighton. He moved into player management and coaching after retiring at the end of the 2021 season, returning to Sungoliath as an assistant where he worked alongside Jones 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. Former Munster and Queensland Reds head coach, and Wallabies assistant, Tony McGahan has joined Ono's staff.

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 became 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

former 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. Only Brave Lupus (seven) and the Wild Knights (six) have won the national league on more occasions than Suntory. Although Sungoliath has contested three finals in the time since its' most recent title, the club has been denied by Kobe (once) and Saitama (twice) in those matches, losing to the latter in the maiden League One decider.

The Main Man:

It's difficult to overstate just how important Cheslin Kolbe became to Sungoliath as the South African's second League One season went on. By the end, the 32-year-old Springbok was handling the goal-kicking as well as scoring tries, with a memorable 28 points in the 43-34 win against the Black Rams on the penultimate weekend all but sealing Suntory's quarter-final place. While Kolbe's tally of eight tries was well short of the frontrunners, those statistics don't explain the true extent of his threat which kept opposition defences honest, providing time and space for Sungoliath to attack elsewhere. That Suntory didn't make best use of the opportunities Kolbe's presence created is revealed by their try-count (73), which was down by 10 from last term and 18 tries below the next lowest among those gathered by the top six. Ono is certain to have been working on that in the off-season to ensure his side's sharpest attacking weapon is able to wreck maximum havoc, as he has done routinely on the international stage at the spearhead of the Springboks' attacking juggernaut.

Sam Meet Sam:

"The name is Jeffries, Sam Jeffries. That's funny, that's my name too!" That conversation, or something similar, could have been imagined for the opening day of pre-season training at Sungoliath when not one, but two, Sam Jeffries reported for duty. One is 'Aussie' Sam, a 33-year-old former Australian Under-20 international and alumni of the famed Nudgee College (Brisbane), who has joined this season from Green Rockets Tokatsu. The other is of English 'persuasion', with that Sam Jeffries a product of Bristol University who arrived at Fuchu in time to wear the jersey 15



The two Sam Jeffries

times on debut two years ago. Both players are also second rowers, which is sure to add to the confusion on the Suntory matchday team sheet. The Australian, who is a year older than his namesake, may try to pull rank, especially given the Englishman was born on April Fool's Day!

Fast & Loose:

Their playing cast suggests Sungoliath should be potent in plenty of areas on the pitch, but one aspect where they could be especially dominant is among the loose forwards, where their combination of All Black skipper Sam Cane, Wallaby veteran Sean McMahon, and European Champions Cup winner Tevita Tatafu will take some beating. Already a Brave Blossoms international, Tatafu returns for his second stint with Suntory, after sharing in a memorable last season with Bordeaux Begles where the club from south-western France outwitted English rivals Northampton Saints in the European Cup final before taking Toulouse to extra time in a classic Top 14 decider. The Tongan-born Tatafu previously played for Suntory between 2019 and 2023, where he was a teammate of the versatile McMahon who is one of the stalwarts of the club, having been with Sungoliath since 2017. Cane starts his

third season hoping to put injury 'blues' behind him after featuring just six times before injury during a trip home to New Zealand ended his maiden experience in the league. While last season was a little better, with 10 appearances, Ono will be hoping to be able to keep his All Black centurion on the field a little longer, to get the best out of the two-time Super Rugby-winning captain. The former Chiefs' skipper has quite probably already been of service on the recruitment front in the off-season, potentially as a link to squad newcomers, flyhalf Kaleb Trask and centre Gideon Wrampling. Each arrived from the Hamilton-based Waikato side. Trask, who can cover fullback, returns to League One after a previous stint with Mie two seasons ago.

Takamoto the Third:

Second seasons are nearly always harder than the first, and so it proved for Sungoliath flyhalf Mikiya Takamoto although even if the sequel wasn't quite as box office as his opening act, most players would gladly have taken it. Called into the matchday squad as a regular after Sungoliath lost ex-Wales international Gareth Anscombe before the start of the league's third edition, Takamoto stepped up big time, totting up 175 points to leave Argen-

tine veteran Nicolas Sanchez – who had been flown to Japan as Anscombe's direct replacement – almost totally redundant. The effort saw the rookie become an international himself, called up to the Brave Blossoms by Eddie Jones. Despite almost keeping to the same point-scoring rate last term, and finishing fifth on the individual rankings with 159, just two of those came in the final five matches as he was relegated to the bench behind utility back Keisuke Moriya. Moriya has now departed the club which opens the door at 'Number 10' although the arrival of the versatile Trask does provide an additional challenge. Will Takamoto take his chance again?

If Anybody Can, Kenta Can!

The bolter in the Brave Blossoms Rugby World Cup squad two years ago when he became the first uncapped player to make his test debut for Japan at the tournament since 2007, Kenta Fukuda made the bold move last term to relocate to Sungoliath, having had his game time squeezed by the arrival to Verblitz of All Black Aaron Smith. It paid off. After managing just five appearances for Verblitz in the season following the World Cup, the 28-year-old featured in all but two of Sungoliath's 19 engagements last term, ending the campaign one short of a half century of League One appearances. Dovetailing in the position with ex-Brave Blossoms veteran Yutaka Nagare, Fukuda not only offered his coach options at scrumhalf, he also forced his way back into the national team, which was timely as the 2027 tournament inches closer. If Fukuda can help to restore Suntory's place walking among the Japanese elite, neither his club nor national position will be in question, even with another Suntory scrumhalf, the long-time Brave Blossoms representative Naoto Saito, still available while he plies his trade in the Top 14 with glamour French club

Toulouse.

Last Year:

While ultimately, they failed to meet the high expectations always associated with Suntory, had the season started five weeks later, the five-time champions of Japan would have been a major player. A frustrating opening saw Ono's men edged by each of the Wild Knights and Black Rams, before back-to-back draws with Verblitz and the Spears. Wins in four of the next five put the side on an upward trajectory, and while they were able to confirm their playoffs' status on the final weekend of the regular season, the Spears proved too good in an exciting quarterfinal. Doing the double over fourth-placed Shizuoka, as well as tipping over Kobe, showed what Suntory was capable of, although their inability to beat any of the top three was a fair reflection of their position, a step behind the league's top outfits.

What to Expect:

Sungoliath are Japanese rugby royalty but that alone isn't cutting it in a super competitive league where other clubs are starting to dominate in a manner that Suntory once did. Despite having more players – eight – selected in Japan's autumn squad than any other club, they have flattered to deceive in recent seasons. Once the main Japanese attraction for the game's biggest stars, Sungoliath are now just one of many, and need their international trio of Kolbe, Cane and McMahon at full throttle for the entire season if they are to bridge the gap to the side's ranked above them. Kolbe especially showed last term how impactful he can be. If the fleet-footed Springbok can continue to dazzle, and Ono can coax more support for him out of the rest of the cast, Sungoliath will be a title threat.

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:

Akito Okui, Shinya Komura, Siosaia Fifita

Non-Japanese International Test Representatives:

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

The Director of Rugby:

He might have won the Rugby World Cup as both an assistant (2011), and then as the boss (2015), but Japan has been kryptonite for former All Blacks mentor Steve Hansen's coaching career. After seeing his defending champions eliminated in the semi-final of the 2019 World Cup at Yokohama, Hansen assumed command at Toyota, but it has been hard going since. Despite the participation of big global names such as Kieran Read, Michael Hooper, Willie le Roux, Pieter Steph du Toit,

Beauden Barrett and Aaron Smith, Verblitz has made the playoffs just once under Hansen's charge and have never reached the final. After finishing fifth in the maiden edition of League One, Verblitz have steadily slid down the rankings since, winding up sixth and then seventh, before narrowly avoiding The Replacement Battle last term when they dropped to 10th. While a spate of injuries didn't help, winning just four matches was well short of expectations, leaving Hansen and his long-time All Black coaching partner Ian Foster with plenty to do if they are to arrest the slide and drive Toyota back up the championship table.

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



Steve Hansen

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.

The Main Man:

Team success might be proving elusive, but All Black scrumhalf Aaron Smith can't be 'charged' with not trying. While many past players have been accused of using Japan as a 'pension scheme', the 36-year-old has missed just two games since he arrived at Aichi after the 2023 Rugby World Cup and remains as competitive as he was at the height of his 124-game test career. It was reflective of the dramatic downturn Verblitz endured last term, that their New Zealand star managed just one try from 16 appearances, having tallied eight from 18 on League One debut the year before. After playing all his Super Rugby at the (Otago) Highlanders, a team that has often punched above its' weight, Smith knows

a thing or two about adversity and turning around flagging fortunes. He was Player of the Year when the Highlanders shocked the (Wellington) Hurricanes to win the Super Rugby title in 2015, just two years after they finished last. Toyota will be looking to tap into that IP as they target a similar renaissance in League One.

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. Former Brave Blossoms backrower Kazuki Himeno is the heartbeat of the side. The 31-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. 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.

A Mark to Make:

There were a few raised eyebrows in the rug-



Aaron Smith

by universe when it was announced that bulldozing winger Mark Telea was not renewing his contract with New Zealand's national body, with the whirlwind of speculation that followed ultimately ended in July. The announcement that the 28-year-old would not be staying in New Zealand caught many off guard, especially as he had only missed four of the 14 tests played by the All Blacks during the first year of the Scott Robertson regime, after having been given his test debut two years earlier when Ian Foster was at the helm. The link with Foster won't have hurt Toyota's pursuit of the former (Auckland) Blues hitman, who left his homeland having tallied the respectable strike rate of 13 tries in 19 tests for the All Blacks, and 41 from 80 Super Rugby outings. Despite having been first choice in 2024, Telea wasn't selected by the All Blacks for their mid-year tests against France or The Rugby Championship once his departure details were completed. He instead rounded out his career in the national provincial championship, although Toyota will be hoping he enjoys more success in Aichi than he did in his New Zealand farewell, where Telea's North Harbour side won just once and finished with the wooden spoon. While used exclusively on the wing in the test arena, Telea was employed at centre by Harbour which will no doubt have pleased his new employers, given whose 'boots' he is stepping into.

Magnificent Manu:

While it was unable to prevent Verblitz tumbling down the championship table, Hansen's bold gamble to recruit National Rugby League (NRL) star Joseph Manu last season was one move that worked. The two-time premiership winner with the Sydney Roosters club, and New South Wales State of Origin star, proved one of the signings of the season across the entire competition, scoring 11 tries in what was remarkably his first attempt at the 15-a-side game. Despite being New Zealand-born, Manu had never played rugby union before, but he adapted quickly, with his strength and athleticism proving a handful for every defender he faced. The 27-year-old reported for duty for all 18 of Toyota's matches and his try tally shared fifth on the individual rankings for the season. With Manu now tearing it up in Paris for his new club Racing92, his successor Telea has a big act to follow.

Locked Up:

Scotland's Richie Gray may be on the waiting list for his boarding pass to the season, remaining unregistered and unable to be used unless an injury to one of his international colleagues opens the door, but Verblitz will still not be caught short in the second row. The club has welcomed a stack of players in the position, led by the arrival of the promising Zach Gallagher from New Zealand's recently crowned national provincial champions Canterbury, as well as the (Wellington) Hurricanes. Experienced South African Lourens Erasmus has logged in from Urayasu, while the Australians Harrison Goggin and Harry Bortolussi have been picked up from Sydney's Shute Shield, joining from Norths and Manly respectively. This quartet is among a dozen new players who found their way into the Toyota 'shopping bag'. Others include Kubota's South African hooker Schalk Erasmus, his Shuttles Aichi counterpart Jone Kerevi, as well as Telea and ex-Wild Knights and Black Rams outside back Semisi Tupou. Former (Wellington) Hurricanes flyhalf Aidan Morgan has jetted in from Belfast after one season with Ulster in the United Rugby Championship. After coming out of retirement to help during last season's injury crisis, ex-Wallaby skipper Michael Hooper has taken on an advisory role among the coaching staff.

A Not So Welcome Mat:

After their absence from the first three League One playoffs, the arrival of flyhalf Rikiya Matsuda was supposed to provide the point of difference in Aichi. Fate decided otherwise. Having accumulated 788 points from 87 appearances for the Wild Knights, where he won two titles, the 31-year-old managed just half of his debut season at Verblitz, being 'rubbed out' by mid-year injury. Toyota were already in big trouble when Matsuda was forced out, having won just once in nine games, but the loss of their goalkicking trump card almost guaranteed they going to be fighting against relegation as opposed to mounting a playoffs push. Verblitz survived and will be hoping the next campaign is a little kinder, both to their flyhalf, as well as to the team. The outcomes are intrinsically linked.

The (Personal) Price of Failure:

While rugby is a team game, failure, especially when expectations are high, invariably has a significant effect on individuals. So, it has been at Toyota. After starting last season with 10 members of the Brave Blossoms wider squad, the naming of Eddie Jones's most recent group for last month's European trip included just two players from Verblitz, and one was a newbie. Uncapped 23-year-old utility back Shinya Komura was among three flyhalves included in the touring roster. Back-rower Akito Okui also got the nod, leading the Japan XV against its Australian counterpart as well as Hong Kong China. There was no place for any of Shogo Miura, Yasuke Kizu, Isaiiah Mapusua, Matsuda, Nicholas McCurran, Himeno, Taichi Takahashi, Viliame Tuidraki and Daichi Aikyama who had each been named in the enlarged training squad last year.

Last Year:

The expansion of the final's series to six teams for the fourth edition might have been expected to help Toyota given they had lingered around the top six during League One's

opening years. It didn't. Rather than playing post-season finals footy, Verblitz narrowly avoided the jeopardy of the other end of the table, limping home one place above the Replacement Battle positions in 10th. A return of just four wins – the same number as 11th placed Honda – was bitterly disappointing and will have led to plenty of introspection in the offseason.

What to Expect:

After last season's shocker, title expectations may have cooled at Aichi, with a return to the top six a decent result. Shizuoka's unlikely rise from eighth to fourth set a precedent for what is possible in a competitive league, and Toyota are unlikely to be treated as unkindly on the injury front as they were in the league's fourth edition. The return of the two-time Rugby World Cup winning Springbok Pieter Steph du Toit, who played no part last term, will be a big lift, with the sidelining of Gray indicative of the depth at Hansen's disposal. The exclusion of so many Toyota players from the Brave Blossoms should also light a few fires.

MIE Honda HEAT



Where:

Located in the Tokai 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 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 International Test Representatives:

Pablo Matera (Argentina), Franco Mostert (South Africa), Tevita Ikanivere (Fiji)

The Head 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 brings a wealth of knowledge to his role, albeit experiencing a tough initiation in League One. Honda, who were promoted with high hopes three years ago, have won just five times in the regular season since the New Zealander took charge, although they have come through tight Replacement Battles each time to maintain their Division One status. While they were six points adrift of 10th-placed Verblitz last term, both sides won four matches, which represented a significant improvement on Crowley's debut year, where Heat only won once. If he can maintain that upward curve, as he did when he brought forward the Azzurri

after starting from a low base, a more secure position in Division One is not out of reach. A former All Black fullback, 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. He played 199 games for the union and scored 1723 points during a remarkable career that spanned 15 seasons. Heat's boss subsequently compiled an enviable coaching record, which included taking Canada to a Rugby World Cup as well directing Italy to upset test wins over Australia at home, and Wales in Cardiff.

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.

The Main Man:

Los Pumas most capped player, achieving that feat during this year's home series with England, Pablo Matera remains just as important for Honda as he is Argentina. After an injury plagued second season at Suzuka, the 32-year-old returned in time to inspire his side during the Replacement Battle two years ago, scoring four tries in the opening leg, which allowed Honda a buffer too great for the Shuttles to overhaul, despite the second division side's success in winning the return game. The former Argentine captain, who has twice led Los Pumas to victories over the All Blacks, was a more regular presence for Honda last term. He appeared 15 times and stepped up again when it mattered as Honda saw off Hanazono by 14 points over the two legs of the relegation series. Heat won both

matches. Matera has played all over the world, winning a title with the (Canterbury) 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).

Whirlwind Waimana:

Life at Honda has been a whirlwind for ex-New Zealand Under-20s skipper Waimana Kapa who has been appointed as the club's first foreign captain in just his third season. The 27-year-old, who joined Heat after a year with Kintetsu, led his country at the 2018 World Junior championships before being selected to play the national provincial championship for Auckland later that same year. Although the exciting backrower was called up by the (Auckland) Blues for the following season, such was the wealth of talent that the side possessed in his position, Kapa was unable to break into the match-day squad. This saw him fail to make the cut for Super Rugby the following year. In 2022, after his fourth season for Auckland, Kapa headed for Japan, where he found his way to Suzuka via Osaka. Despite being dogged by injury last term where he appeared on just six occasions

– three of which were wins – Kapa has been trusted with the top job, backed by Matera and veteran Brave Blossoms fullback Lemeki Lomano Lava.

More Please, Manu:

After an indifferent start, Honda will be hoping they can get more out of former Saracens (England) flyhalf Manu Vunipola, whose maiden season featured just eight games, split between two injury layoffs. The 25-year-old's versatility was missed as he was able to cover flyhalf and fullback, which had allowed Crowley to field Richie Mo'unga's talented former understudy at Brave Lupus, Hayata Nakao, in the flyhalf role, alongside Vunipola at the back. The well-related Vunipola, whose cousins Billy and Mako have both played for England, is eligible himself, already having represented the country at age group level. Despite the presence of England captain Owen Farrell at the club, Vunipola played 79 games for Saracens, scoring 291 points, while sharing in two (England) Premiership titles as well as a Champions (European) Cup. His father Elisi, who was also a flyhalf, played 41 tests for Tonga, including at the 1999 Rugby World Cup. Elisi was a foundation member of



Waimana Kapa

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, the father of Mako and Billy, is a former Tonga captain and hooker. Another uncle, Manu, for whom he is named, once served as Tonga's Minister of Sport.

Not Him Again!:

While Japanese fans in general might be excused for being sick of the sight of Honda's new hooker, Heat fans will be delighted with the acquisition of Tevita Ikanivere after his exploits for the flying Fijians against the Brave Blossoms in each of the Pacific Nations Cup finals. A starter when Fiji outclassed Japan 41-17 at Osaka two years ago, the 26-year-old, who joins from Super Rugby outfit Fijian Drua, was a try-scorer in the corresponding fixture this year, as the Pacific Islanders prevailed 33-27 despite being reduced to 14 men twice in the second period. The Suva-bred hooker, who ended the Pacific Nations Cup with 29 tests to his name, spent four years with the Drua in Super Rugby, finishing on 50 appearances. Former Super Rugby second rower Trevor Hosea, of the Melbourne Rebels, has also signed on, joining after two seasons at

Sungoliath where he appeared on 24 occasions.

Local Hero:

He might have been away for four years, but Lemeki Lomano Lava's return has ultimately proved timely for Honda, despite his first season back being completely wiped out by injury. The Auckland-born fullback is a handy replacement for the position's former custodian, ex-Wallaby fullback Tom Banks, who has taken his talents to Top 14 club Montpellier in France after three seasons at Suzuka Gardens. Lava was a popular figure during his first stint at Mie between 2015 and 2020 where he played 42 matches, scored 199 points, and gained a test call up by Japan. A move to Green Rockets Tokatsu prior to the Covid shutdown failed to work out with the Brave Blossoms veteran unable to inspire ex-Wales coach Wayne Pivac's men to a return to Division One following their relegation. Having subsequently sat out his first year back watching Heat struggle, the 36-year-old, who has been appointed vice-captain, will be desperate to help lead the side up the competition table.



Franco Mostert

Frankly Speaking:

Francois Mostert might only have managed four test matches during South Africa's recent domestic test season and the Rugby Championship that followed, but the reduced workload certainly won't hurt Heat, who rely heavily on the iron man of their forward pack. The seemingly tireless 34-year-old has played 17 matches for Heat in each of the last two seasons, and 57 (out of the possible 62) in total since he joined the then Division Two outfit in time for the maiden season of League One. Mostert, who previously played 83 matches for the Johannesburg-based Lions in Super Rugby, and 29 across two seasons at Gloucester, was one of Heat's best when they gained promotion three years ago. He is also one of the main reasons why they still have that status, despite having to defend it on consecutive visits to The Replacement Battle since. The 34-year-old's relentless work ethic was best illustrated by his outstanding performance in the 2023 Rugby World Cup final where he made more tackles than anyone else while he was on the field.

Last Year:

Seemingly a permanent fixture in The Replacement Battle, Heat had to go through the process again last term, ultimately surviving after an awkward series with Hanazono which wasn't finally sealed until the 75th minute of the second leg. Despite the precarious end, the four regular season wins they gained was

major improvement from their first year back, where they won just once before shading the Shuttles to retain their Division One status. Ultimately a lack of depth proved last season's biggest issue, quickly undermining a great start which had seen Honda lower the Black Rams and Verblitz on the opening two week-ends. While further back-to-back wins over the Dynaboars and Eagles in February raised mid-table hopes, a 44-14 defeat by Shizuoka at the start of March burst their bubble. It triggered a run of nine defeats in-a-row which lowered Honda into the Replacement Battle. While Mie again survived the promotion/relegation test, their failure to win either match against the one side that finished below them on the point's table, Urayasu, meant the end of their season was a lot trickier than it needed to be.

What to Expect:

While Honda haven't found things easy on return to Division One, their four wins last year will encourage hope that the new season can provide a more comfortable ride. Much will rest on their ability to keep stars like Matera, Lava and the ever-present workhorse Mostert in play and not on watching from the sidelines, a frustrating experience both Matera and Lava know all too well. More will also be needed from Vunipola, with the talented playmaker sure to strip a much better player following his first experience in Japan.



TJ Perenara

Where?:

With the stunning and spiritual Mt Fuji within view of the training facility, the BlackRams Tokyo are based in Setagaya which is located at the southwestern corner of the 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 BlackRams, 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:

Taishi Tsumura, Shu Yamamoto, Amato Fakatava, Yuki Ikeda, Ichigo Nakakusu

Non-Japanese International Test Representatives:

TJ Perenara (New Zealand), Liam Gill (Australia), Paddy Ryan (Australia)

The Head Coach:

Gearing up for his second season in charge, Tabai Matson made a grand start to his return to Japan, guiding the BlackRams to seventh, their best finish since the advent of League One. While they eventually missed out on the playoffs by seven points, it was not until the penultimate weekend of the regular season that their hopes were finally dashed, which was indicative as to the impact Matson had

made following his arrival at Setagaya. A member of the cast as a player/coach for Yamaha Jubilo (now Shizuoka BlueRevs) between 2001 and 2006, Matson played in the inaugural (Canterbury) Crusaders side at the start of Super Rugby, alongside current All Black coach Scott Robertson and new Yokohama boss Leon MacDonald. 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 52-year-old, who was coached by Saitama Wild Knights advisor 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 (Canterbury) 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. Matson has ex-All Black prop Carl Hoeft, who previously worked with the Dynaboars, as a member of his coaching staff.

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 BlackRams 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.

The Main Man:

The BlackRams didn't make the playoffs, but it is hard to think what more skipper TJ Perenara could have done to get them there, so dominant was he on return to Japan. The long-time All Black scrumhalf, who played nine matches for the Red Hurricanes during a previous stay in 2021, arrived after wrapping up a

monumental career with the (Wellington) Hurricanes in Super Rugby, where he appeared on a whopping 163 occasions. He finished his All Black era ranked second on the all-time list of New Zealand scrumhalves trailing only the Verblitz star and his long-time international teammate, Aaron Smith. The pair were denied a re-union last term by injury, although it is a head-to-head clash both are sure to be looking forward to already, as the BlackRams tangle with Verblitz on each of January 10 and then April 24.

Nationally Noticed:

It's not just opposition teams who noticed Ricoh's rise last term; Brave Blossoms coach Eddie Jones was also taking notes. As a result, the Black Rams gained a large contingent in his initial training groups and Japan XV squads, before five players – prop Taishi Tsumura, second rower Shu Yamamoto, backrower Amato Fakatava, winger Yuki Ikeda and flyhalf Ichigo Nakakusu – received the nod for the Brave Blossoms full squad, four of whom made Japan's autumn tour (Yamamoto appeared for the Japan XV against Australia). Only Kubota (10) and Suntory (eight) had more players selected than the BlackRams. The Wild Knights and champions Toshiba each also had five, although Brave Lupus had one player less than the BlackRams selected for Japan's autumn tour.

Nakakusu Keeps Going:

Any concerns over the BlackRams on-field direction after the departure of veteran utility back Matt McGahan were quickly put to bed by flyhalf Ichigo Nakakusu who not only ran the show superbly for the BlackRams he was asked to do it for Japan as well. The 25-year-old debuted two years ago, when he played 11 matches, but that workload was stepped up to 15 last term where he thrived combining with the magic of Perenara. A product of the famed Keio University, Nakakusu first represented Japan in the school's grade before making his test debut during the mid-year series against Wales. Nakakusu enjoyed an interesting afternoon first up, coming off the bench on debut at Kitakyushu to receive a yellow card which he followed with a 'redeeming' try as Japan beat Wales 24-19 in the first match of the two-game series. The 25-year-old gained his first start a week later during the Brave Blossoms'

31-22 defeat at Kobe but was not required during the Pacific Nations Cup.

Between a (D) Rock and a Hard Place:

After scoring 21 tries in his first two seasons at Setagaya, Auckland-born Fijian backrower Nathan Hughes endured a disappointing finish in League One, being forced to relocate to D-Rocks for the final stages of his time in Japan, after injury curtailed his eligibility for the BlackRams. The 22-cap former England international was sidelined by injury before the season began and – with Aussie Paddy Ryan moving in as a replacement – Hughes was left stranded once he returned to full fitness, with Ricoh unable to employ him due to their three foreign test capped vacancies being filled. Hughes was loaned to D-Rocks as a replacement for their injured Springbok backrower Jasper Wiese, farewelling League One with three tries from his five games before his off-season relocation to Parisian heavyweights, Racing92. Fortunately for the BlackRams, local favourite Amato Fakatava has filled the backrow breach, with his 13 appearances taking his tally in League One to 50, while cementing his place with the Brave Blossoms

Farewell to the Fouls:

Well, not quite, but if Matson was going to effect a change in the BlackRams performance, he had to affect an alteration in their on-field behavior, stamping out the short-cuts and ill-discipline to stop giving opponents a leg up with a high penalty count. He's made a good start. While the BlackRams still averaged a concession of 11 penalties per game, it was a far cry from two seasons prior, where they wound up the most penalized side in the league. Although Matson's men gave up 201 penalties in total, five teams conceded more, including playoff qualifiers Kobe and Shizuoka. A continuation of this trend and the play-offs could be the next step.

The Photocopy Derby:

The BlackRams might not have made the playoffs but one thing they did achieve that was cause for a mighty celebration was a 27-20 win over Yokohama Canon Eagles, giving Ricoh bragging rights over their industry rivals for the first time since League One began. As a bonus, the victory, which was achieved after they had trailed 10-3 at halftime, proved pivotal in helping the BlackRams end three points and one place above the Eagles at season's



BlackRams Tokyo v YOKOHAMA CANON EAGLES

end. The passion of the occasion was such that Yokohama's Brave Blossoms winger Kippei Ishida was red carded early in the second half, while the BlackRams ended with 13 players after both second rower Michael Stolberg and replacement prop Daigo Sasagawa were yellow carded during a tension-filled final 10 minutes. This year's edition is penciled in for February 14.

Better by Half:

Maybe the players didn't get the pre-season memo: "The game goes for 80 minutes, not the 40!" Whatever the reason, the BlackRams made a habit of giving their opponents head starts during the early weeks of last season. They won only once in their first seven (ironically having trailed at the break on that occasion) but lost three of the first five matches by giving up halftime leads. By the time the campaign ended, the BlackRams had lost five of their 12 defeats by margins of seven points or less, and had collected nine bonus points, which was enough to keep them three points above the Eagles, and seven ahead of the Dynaboars, even though all three teams won six matches.

Last Year:

Had it not been for the fairytale that unfolded

on the other side of Mount Fujii, the Black Rams would have rated as the season's biggest improver. Although their story couldn't quite match that of Shizuoka's in the end, there was plenty of merit in a campaign that began with just one win in seven matches, but ended with six wins in the bank, as well as a one-point defeat by the champions in an incredible match that saw Brave Lupus prevail 45-44. The steady improvement on Matson's watch, which saw five wins collected from the last 11 outings, suggested the new coaches' ideas and strategies were taking root, which offers plenty of encouragement heading into his second season.

What to Expect:

Matson has made a great start, but this season is not going to be any easier. Not only do opposition know how he approaches the game, but the BlackRams also now carry a target on their back and will certainly not be underestimated by the teams ranked further up the table last term. Much will rest on Pere-nara but he will need plenty of support. If the All Black star gets it, and the BlackRams learn to keep their feet on the throat when they are ahead at halftime, qualification for the top six is certainly not beyond them.

DIVISION 2

NEC GREEN ROCKETS TOKATSU

Kyushudenryoku KyudenVortex

SHIMIZU KOTO BLUE SHARKS

Toyota Industries Corporation Shuttles Aichi

NIPPON STEEL KAMAISHI SEAWAVES

HANAZONO KINTETSU LINERS

HINO RED DOLPHINS

RedHurricanes Osaka



NEC GREEN ROCKETS TOKATSU



Greg Cooper

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 International Test Representatives:

Nick Phipps (Australia), Rory Arnold (Australia)

The Head Coach:

The last time Greg Cooper was in Japan he steered Sagami-hara Dynaboars to promotion in the final Top League. Green Rockets hierarchy are hoping the former All Black fullback can pull off the same 'trick' at Kashiwanoha Park. A vastly experienced coach, the New Zealander has guided Otago in his home country's national provincial championship, the (Otago) Highlanders in Super Rugby, Parisian glamour club Stade Francais as well as the Dynaboars. He returns to Japan after three seasons in Major League Rugby where he helped to revive the on-field fortunes of the Utah Warriors, taking the club to the western conference final in its last season, earlier this year. The 60-year-old played seven tests for New Zealand, as well as being a member of the (Auckland) Blues outfit which triumphed in the inaugural Super Rugby tournament in 1996. It was in Dunedin where he really made his name though, scoring 1520 points for the then amateur Otago side through 12 seasons, during which he helped the province to the summit as they won the national provincial championship for the first time in 1991. Cooper's younger brother Matthew, also a former All Black, is the current president of New Zealand Rugby.

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 Rockets moniker when it entered the Top League. NEC 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.

The Biggest of Them All:

While 10 new 'bodies' have entered the building at Green Rockets HQ, the biggest, quite literally, is that of the 128-kilogram former Wallaby second rower Rory Arnold, who has joined from section rivals Hino Red Dolphins. The towering 35-year-old, who played 32 tests for the Wallabies, signed up after three years with Hino, where he helped the club gain promotion two seasons ago, before retaining their status last term. Despite overtures to return to his homeland, where he had started off his professional career by playing 73 matches for the Brumbies in Super Rugby, Arnold resisted, providing good value for the Red Dolphins during a 21-game stay. The Green Rockets are the next step on a journey that has also seen the Australian enjoy a brief stint with Griquas in South Africa's Currie Cup, as well as three years with Toulouse in France, where he played 55 games for the glamour Top 14 club. Although the Green Rockets will again shoot for the stars this season, their new recruits' biggest issue might be banging into them, given he stands at 2.08-meters and is one of the tallest players in the league. Arnold will team up in the second row with the former (Otago) Highlander Pari Pari Parkinson, who arrived in Japan last year. The 29-year-old second row played six games for the Maori All Blacks while also making 41 appearances during his Super Rugby career.

Wales No More:

The western side of the Severn Bridge wielded a strong influence on the Green Rockets' fortunes last term, with the Six Nations-winning ex-Wales boss Wayne Pivac overseeing the programme for a second year, while former test flyhalf Rhys Patchell arrived from the Scarlets via Cardiff and the (Otago) Highlanders. While promotion was narrowly denied the head man during his time in charge at Tokatsu, Pivac still departed having compiled with an excellent record in League One, pre-

vailing in 18 of the 24 regular seasons games he prepared his charges for. The team had won just five games across the two seasons prior to his arrival. Patchell also made a big impression, running up 127 points in his Japanese sojourn, a tally that was bettered only by the section's most dominant player, Shuttles flyhalf Freddie Burns.

America's Big Mac:

Born in Durban but schooled in New Zealand, flyhalf Reece MacDonald joins the Green Rockets having largely made his name playing Major League Rugby in the United States. The 27-year-old, whose grandfather Piet Visagie made 25 appearances for the Springboks between 1967 and 1971, first emerged in Bay of Plenty where his family had settled, before trying his hand in Sydney's Shute Shield competition, where he led the Gordon Highlanders to the title in his third season. In the move to Boston which followed, the goal-kicking playmaker helped the New England Free Jacks to back-to-back Major League Rugby titles, making the team of the championship in each of those years. After dipping his toes into New Zealand's national provincial championship for a second time with Manawatu, MacDonald returned to the United States, where he appeared seven times for Rugby Los Angeles in the 2024-25 season. LA has now merged with Californian rivals, San Diego Legion. Uncapped, MacDonald takes over a role that has been the domain of test players in the last two years, with Patchell having succeeded Namibian Rugby World Cup representative Tiaan Swanepoel when he donned the number 10 jersey last year.

In Phipps We Still Trust:

A change of coach hasn't resulted in a change of captain, with Cooper sticking with Nick Phipps, despite the former Wallaby scrumhalf being restricted to just four matches in his maiden captaincy season due to injury. The 36-year-old, who debuted in the second edition of League One, played 72 tests for Australia, succeeding Will Genia in the famed gold number nine jersey, before he moved to London Irish for three seasons in the (England) Premiership. Prior to last season's misfortune, the Super Rugby-winning former NSW Waratah had appeared 29 times across his opening two years at the Green Rockets.

Last Year:

After compiling a seven-game winning streak between February and May which put them within touching distance of a second consecutive Replacement Battle, the Green Rockets faltered, losing 42-19 to their promotion rivals Hanazono on the penultimate weekend. The loss, which followed just a week after Pivac's men had overcome the section-winning Shuttles 15-8, was even more soul destroying given they had led 19-14 into first half stoppage time, before collapsing to concede 28 unanswered points. The result left the Green Rockets' fate in the hands of others in the final round, and while they pounded the Red Hurricanes 69-17, it proved in vain after Hanazono bowled the Shuttles to finish two points ahead in the final standings.

What to Expect:

While the performances of the last two seasons, allied to a smart recruitment drive, would suggest the Green Rockets are ready to crack promotion, impending changes off the field have the potential to create uncertainty for players and coaches. NEC announced earlier this year that it would be ending its support of the club and are seeking to hand the financial responsibilities over to someone else. Potential adversity of this nature can serve to galvanize a playing group, tightening the bonds which takes performance to another level. Things can go the other way though, with the uncertainty impacting on the players' ability to ignore the distraction and focus solely on the games themselves. The Green Rockets have the experience within the senior leadership among their playing and coaching group to handle such a situation, but it won't be easy.



Nick Phipps

Kyushudenryoku KyudenVoltex



Where:

Located on the island of Kyushu, Kyuden Voltex are based in Fukuoka and have been a consistent presence on the club stage in Japan through the majority of the Top League and into the League One era. In that time, they have 'shared' the responsibility of representing their city with each of the now defunct pair of Munakata Sanix Blues and Coca-Cola Red Sparks during the Top League, before being joined for 'company' last season by new Division Three outfit LeRIRO Fukuoka. Voltex play some matches at the modern Best Denki 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 af-

ter 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 International Test representatives:
None

The Head Coach:

Parachuted in at the last minute following the sudden departure of the Australian Zane Hilton just before the start of the third edition of League One, Yuuki Imamura is marking up a checklist for his third season, having solidified the Voltex in Division Two since he assumed command. Imamura had been an assistant, overseeing the backs, during Voltex promotion-winning campaign three years ago, and has kept the side up since, avoiding the Replacement Battle last term.

Grounded Falcon:

After touching down for his first season as an unknown quantity outside of England, ex-Newcastle Falcons second rower Sean Robinson did a grand job on debut two years ago, featuring 11 times as he helped provide the forward grunt which kept the Voltex in the Division Two. The 34-year-old, who had arrived from Kingston Park after spending 10 years in the (England) Premiership, didn't have quite as successful a follow up, being sidelined for the

first seven weeks of last season. It was probably not a coincidence that the Voltex lost just two of the five matches he was available for at the crucial back end of the campaign. By contrast, New Zealand-born former Carcassonne backrower Aaron Carroll, who had arrived at the same time as the Englishman, missed just two of the team's 14 matches last term, after having made only eight appearances in his first season. Carroll played three matches for the (Auckland) 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.

Mature Colby:

Younger brother of twin Wallabies, Colby Fainga'a might not have joined his brothers, Anthony and Saia, playing test footy, but he has certainly outlasted them, limbering up for his third season with the Voltex, and 17th overall in a remarkable career. After debuting for the Brumbies in Super Rugby in 2010, Colby played 35 matches across four seasons in Canberra, before a move south to the Melbourne Rebels secured more game time, playing 66 times across five years, which included captaining the side. The former Aus-



Faingaa Colby

tralian Under-20 skipper then made his way to League One via impressive stints with each of Irish province Connacht (2018-20) and Lyon (2020-22) in France. The 34-year-old featured 12 times on debut in Japan, helping Voltex win promotion to Division Two, and starts his fourth season at the club central to its hopes of retaining that status.

Rahboni's Return:

The recruitment of the Australian-born Rahboni Warren-Vosayaco is a major coup for the Voltex, adding further class to an already impressive backrow. The 30-year-old is not unfamiliar with either the fields of Japan, or Fukuoka, having previously played with Sanix in the 2020-21 season, after earlier debuting in the country with two years at the then Shining Arcs. That stint was ended when he signed on for three years playing Super Rugby with the ill-fated Sunwolves. Warren-Vosayaco returned to Australia following the end of the Japanese chapter in Super Rugby, picking up contracts with the NSW Waratahs and Western Force, before overseas beckoned again when he signed for Brive in France's Pro D2 second division competition. His return to Fukuoka flags some unfinished business and the experience he brings is sure to lend a helping hand for a club determined to establish itself as a stable force in Division Two.

Farewell Old Friends:

Between them, former All Black flyhalf Tom Taylor and Auckland-born former New Zealand Sevens representative Sam Vaka wielded a major influence on the Voltex. As a result, they are going to be hard to replace, having both now left the club. Vaka's 10 tries, which was the second most for the section, played a major role when Voltex was promoted out of Division Three in the 2022-23 season but an injury plagued run in the two seasons that followed, which restricted the former All Black Sevens representative to just nine games, has seen his time in Fukuoka ended. Taylor has called time on a career that included three tests for New Zealand. The underrated flyhalf, whose big game nous proved invaluable across the 20 appearances he made for the Voltex during his two seasons,

played 58 matches for the (Canterbury) Crusaders in Super Rugby, as well as stints with Toulon and Pau in the French Top 14, before finishing his career in Japan with time at Brave Lupus and Voltex.

Living on the Edge:

The Voltex are nothing if not entertaining, although fans would probably prefer they carved out a few more clear-cut results, rather than frequently living on the edge. At least the 'ledger' came out in their favour last term, with the side winning four of the seven matches they featured in (from a regular season of 14 games) that were decided by seven points or less, as well as drawing another. This was an improvement on the previous year when four of the Voltex 11 regular season games were decided by seven points or less, and they lost all of them!

Last Year:

While they achieved two more wins than the previous year, such was the level of competition, the Voltex still needed a win on the final day, as well as another result to go their way, to ease clear of the Replacement Battle. The cards fell their way, with a 24-15 win over Kamaishi allowing Voltex to finish with 25 points, splitting Red Dolphins (26) and BLUE SHARKS (24) on the point's table. Voltex were ultimately saved by the bonus points they picked up in the three close matches that they did lose during the campaign, after the three sides ended the regular season with five wins.

What to Expect:

Given that the Voltex have been so competitive since their promotion, another year of consolidation is likely in Fukuoka, maybe even with a challenge for the top four. The key to the team's stability in the section has been its defence, last term conceding less points than each of the RED DOLPHINS, BLUE SHARKS and Seawaves, with whom they were competing to avoid The Replacement Battle. Scoring more would help though as only the bottom placed Seawaves accumulated less through the season, and the gap between the two on that measurement was just one point.

SHIMIZU KOTO BLUE SHARKS



**SHIMIZU KOTO BLUE SHARKS v SAYAMA SECOM RUGGUTS
in The Replacement Battle**

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 International Test Representatives:

Harrison Goddard (Australia), Billy Burns (Ireland), Sione Talitui (Tonga), Siale Piutau (Tonga)

The Head Coach:

Head Coach Yoshihiro is currently in his third season in Blue Sharks. He spent 14 seasons as a player with the NEC Green Rockets before retiring and joining the Blue Sharks. In his first year with the club, he worked on the management side, and despite having no prior coaching experience, he was appointed head coach in his second year.

In his first season as head coach, he led the team to promotion, and in his second season, successfully kept the team in the division2.

During his playing career, he also gained overseas experience in Christchurch, which has helped him build strong communication with foreign players.

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 Division three times before achieving back-to-back promotions in the 1987, 1988 and 1999 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 Electric Power Red Regulators 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 two years ago gained promotion for the restructured eight-team Division Two.

Propped Up:

While last year left plenty for the BLUE SHARKS to work on, one area in which the side has no excuse for failing to excel, is with its' scrum. The set-piece fell under former Wallaby prop Sekope Kepu's brief last term, and he has now been joined on the coaching staff by ex-All Black front-rower Greg Feek, which should ensure the side's scrummagers are as well prepared as they can be. Feek won Super Rugby titles with the (Canterbury) Crusaders in 1999 and 2000 when Brave Lupus boss Todd Blackadder was captain, and Saitama's Robbie Deans the 2000 team's coach. He joins the BLUE SHARKS after a period mentoring the All Black scrum.

Lima's Lean Pickings:

After two seasons that promised more than they delivered, veteran former 16-test All Black and Samoa flyhalf Lima Sopoaga has left Japan, returning to New Zealand where he turned out for Waikato in the national provincial championship. While the 36-year-old



Coenraad VanWyk

was part of the side that achieved promotion out of Division Three in his first season, injury restricted the former Super Rugby winner from the (Otago) Highlanders, to just nine appearances for the BLUE SHARKS across the campaign. His appearance tally rose slightly last term, featuring on 12 occasions, but injury again intervened when it mattered most, with the BLUE SHARKS forced to negotiate a tense end-of-season promotion/relegation series without their star recruit. Sopoaga's departure will see the flyhalf reins handed over to Billy Burns, the brother of the recently departed Shuttles star Freddie. While Freddie played for England on five occasions, the younger of the siblings capitalised on the family's Irish heritage via his grandfather to earn selection for Ireland in 2020, featuring in seven tests. Bath-born, Burns played 101 matches for his family's local club Gloucester, 114 for Ulster, and 11 for Munster last term, before taking his brother's lead to experience the rugby scene in Japan. Sopoaga is not the only Samoan international to have departed Koto, with backrower Murphy Taramai also moving on.

Conrad's Still Kicking:

He might be 37, but Conrad van Wyk continues to show he packs plenty of punch in his boots, cracking a century of points for the second season running last term, despite Sopoaga's presence at the club. The former Lions (Johannesburg) fullback picked up five tries (the same as Sopoaga) amongst his haul of 107 points where, despite the BLUE SHARKS struggles, he was one of just six players in the section to achieve three figures. This followed a remarkable return during the BLUE SHARKS' promotion season two years ago, where he not only finished as Division Three's leading accumulator of points with 156 from 11 outings, but his 11 tries were more than anyone else as well. Van Wyk scored a hat-trick 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 his stint with the Lions in Super Rug-

by, 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, and it continues to show its willing, van Wyk is sure to have a home at the BLUE SHARKS for as long as he wants.

Last Year:

With the RUGGUTs within striking distance in the series, just five points behind, the last 14 minutes of the season must have seemed like an eternity for the BLUE SHARKS players, coaches and fans, as they held on for a 31-28 win in the second leg, surviving The Replacement Battle as a result. The Division Two side had had a similarly dramatic finish in the first leg, when an 80th minute try by Essendon Tuitupou, which van Wyk converted, snatched a 17-15 win at home. It wasn't to be known at the time, but the try was probably the single most important play of their season. Had the BLUE SHARKS been relegated, they would have had cause to wonder how, after finishing with an identical five-win, eight-loss record as the two placed immediately above them, RED DOLPHINS and Voltex. Ironically it was a one-point loss to Hino the week before the promotion/relegation series started, which was also decided by an 80th minute score, that sent the BLUE SHARKS into The Replacement Battle in the first place!

What to Expect:

While the loss of a player of Sopoaga's background would ordinarily be seen as a major blow, the fact that the BLUE SHARKS had to live without the dual international for much of his stay in Japan should serve them well, now that the playmaker has returned to New Zealand. With Burns an experienced hand to take over, and van Wyk one of the hottest goalkickers in the competition, there is still plenty to be positive about as they eye up their second season in the grade.

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 Toyota 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 International Test Representatives:

James Gaskill (England), Taleni Seu (Samoa)
Noah Lolesio (Australia),
Christian Lealifano (Australia)

The Head Coach:

It might have been his maiden season in the job, but Yoichi Tokuno didn't let that stop him, guiding the Shuttles to the Division Two title. Inheriting the team on the back of two third-placed finishes, and subsequent two-zip elimination in the promotion/relegation battles, Tokuno oversaw a 24-20 win over title rivals Hanazono Kintetsu Liners first up, which was the first building block in what became the Shuttles most successful League One season to date. Tokuno is a rarity in professional rugby in that he did not play at the highest level himself. First season Samoa test coach Tusi Pisi and former Kobelco Kobe Steelers boss

Nick Holten are among his assistants. Both Pisi and Holten played Super Rugby during their playing careers.

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 competition but was placed in Division Three for Japan Rugby League One's kick off, before winning promotion after the maiden edition.

How Do They Replace the Main Man?:

The day had to come, but the outcome of the Shuttles season will rest on how they compensate for the departure of their former England flyhalf, Freddie Burns. As well as being the divisions leading point-scorer in each of the last two seasons, and leading try-scorer last term, the Shuttles talisman has had his hands on virtually every success they have had, including in their thrilling one-point win over Urayasu D-Rocks during the first leg of last term's Replacement Battle. The series didn't provide a fairytale ending, despite the Division Two champions' valiant effort in the return match where Burns was again the most domi-

nant player on the field. The 35-year-old, who played the last of his five tests for England in 2014, and is now playing in the Romanian professional league, ended his time in Japan having scored 430 points from 33 outings at the impressive average of 13 points per game. Whoever takes over the number 10 jersey, they have big boots to fill.

Chancing His Arm:

He brings an unusual background, having spent some of his youth on the relatively isolated Chatham Islands, 541 miles off the east coast of New Zealand's South Island, but Chance Peni overcame the distance to forge a reputation as one of the finest finishers in League One. After living briefly on New Zealand's most isolated outpost, Peni moved with his family to Western Australia and then Newcastle, playing junior rugby and rugby league, before he was signed by the Newcastle Knights in the latter code. He played for two clubs in Australia's National Rugby League competition before returning to rugby union, where he made his way to Japan via stints at the Western Force and the Brumbies. The 31-year-old created a big impression at Hino, scoring 18 tries from 25 matches across



Chance Peni

four seasons, before being snapped up by the Shuttles where he has shown that he has lost none of his razor-sharp instincts when a scoring opportunity presents itself. While Burns finished top try-scorer last term, Peni was not far behind, scoring nine from as many appearances to take his tally to 27 from 34 games since he first appeared in Japan. The Shuttles need Peni to maintain that level of production, if not raise it, if they are to give themselves another shot at promotion.

Testing Their Mettle:

The regular season might consist of 14 matches, but the Shuttles may get an accurate picture of how they measure up during the section's first three rounds, when they face the two teams that finished right behind them on last season's standings, Hanazono Liners and Green Rockets Tokatsu, as well as the Red Hurricanes who beat them on the second weekend last term. Get through that period successfully and a successful defence of their Division Two title is well and truly on.

Last Year:

Pacemakers throughout the season, the Shuttles lost just once (to the Red Hurricanes) in their first 11 games, before faltering with the winning post in sight. While losses to the Green Rockets and Kintetsu Liners raised doubt about their ability to succeed in The Replacement Battle, the Shuttles sealed the section title on the penultimate weekend of the regular season when they hammered the RED DOLPHINS 61-24. It was the sec-

ond time the Shuttles had hit Hino for more than 50 points, and the fifth occasion where they exceeded the 40-point barrier for the campaign, which included a 42-0 wipeout of the Green Rockets, alongside a 75-28 romp against the BLUE SHARKS. Their 43-42 win over Urayasu marked the second year in a row that the Shuttles had won one half of the promotion series, but the 80rd minute converted try that sealed that victory proved in vain, after D-Rocks held their nerve in a 27-21 home win in the second leg. This allowed the Division One side to hold onto their status by five points, leaving the Shuttles to once again contemplate what might have been.

What to Expect:

With the departure of the talismanic Burns, it's hard to escape the feeling that the Shuttles have missed their chance as far as promotion is concerned. Although the Aichi side qualified for The Replacement Battle in the sole League One season to date where they did not have the services of the English flyhalf, the gap between themselves and the Dynaboars was sizable on that occasion, with the Division One side posting 59-21 and 43-14 victories to sweep the series by 67 points. If this is going to be the season where the Shuttles push on to Division One, other players must step up.

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. 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:

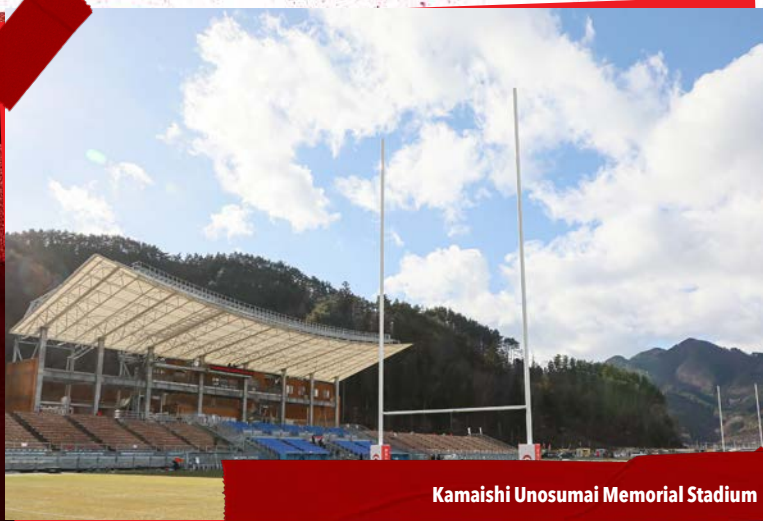
Formerly known as Nippon Steel Corporation Kamaishi when it was established, the club took on its current name in 2001 to reflect one of the major natural features of its home city, which is by the sea. Kamaishi is located in the Kitakami mountains on the Sanriku coast and has a population of just over 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 International Test Representative:
Ben Nee-Nee (Samoa), Paula Mahe (Tonga)

The Head Coach:
A 60-test veteran backrower for Australia, and more recently coach of Tonga between 2016 to 2023, Toutai Kefu has taken over in charge at Kamaishi after having acted as forwards coach at Kintetsu last year. The 51-year-old, who succeeds Yasuo Suda, was part of the Australian squad that won



Kamaishi Unosumai Memorial Stadium



Toutai Kefu

the Rugby World Cup in 1999 and beat the British & Irish Lions two years later, before ending his playing career in Japan, when he spent six years with the Kubota Spears. Kefu began his senior coaching on the Sunshine Coast in Queensland, the state for whom he played 103 times, before he moved from club to international ranks by acting as an assistant for Tonga at the 2011 World Cup, where the Pacific Islands shocked the eventual finalists France during their pool match. He returned to Japan after the World Cup, leading his old club out of the regional Eastern League, back to the highest level in the Top League. After four years at the Kubota helm, the former Wallaby ascended to the head role coach with Tonga, taking the Ikalé Tahi to both the 2019 and 2023 Rugby World Cups. He ended his time as the country's longest serving coach, having held the role for seven years. Kefu coached the Pacific and First Nations XV that lost narrowly 24-19 against the British & Irish Lions during their tour of Australia earlier in the year.

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 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.

Home Discomforts:

For the team that requires easily the longest journey for opposition sides to visit, you would think playing at home would provide the Seawaves with a major advantage. Think again. Instead Kamaishi are the most 'welcoming' of hosts, having won just four regular season matches in the Iwate prefecture since League One began. It is a statistic they must improve if they are to avoid their seemingly annual promotion/relegation jeopardy.

From Romania with Love:

Japan Rugby League One attracts players from all around the globe but few who feature in Romanian club rugby subsequently wind up in Japan. Tongan winger Paula Mahe has done exactly that, landing in Iwate after having played for Dinamo Bucuresti in the Romanian capital Bucharest last year. Ironically the Shuttles' flyhalf ace Freddie Burns went the other way, leaving Aichi to join Mahe's former club. Kamaishi's new winger is one of five signings, with the other notables 23-year-old utility forward Connor Seve, who has arrived from Super Rugby outfit Moana Pasifika, while 22-year-old hooker Lulu Paea was formerly with Ricoh BlackRams Tokyo. Aside from their former coach, veteran midfielder/winger Jamie Henry is the other main departure having left after two useful seasons wearing the red jersey. The now 35-year-old accumulated nine tries in his first year with the Seawaves.

The Benefits of the Beach:

While Mie Honda Heat didn't work out for Mitchell Hunt, the ex-(Canterbury) Crusaders

and (Otago) Highlanders flyhalf thrived playing by the seaside during his maiden stint with the Seawaves last season. The 30-year-old contributed 123 points on debut (fourth in the division), including 33 across the two-legged Replacement Battle to help his side home against Mazda. Hunt ended his Super Rugby career three games short of a century of appearances, spread across the (Canterbury) Crusaders (45) and the (Otago) Highlanders (52), when he signed for Honda two seasons ago. Hunt joined with high hopes, but these never eventuated, moving on after a deflating experience where he appeared 14 times, but contributed 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, Hunt still scored an impressive 396 points (247, Highlanders, 149, Crusaders), alongside 562 at the next level down for Tasman.

Defend, Defend, Defend!:

If the Seawaves are going to turn the tide on recent results, one thing they must do better is defend. Kamaishi conceded points at an average of 36 per game throughout the last

regular season, a concession rate not likely to win too many matches. The Seawaves only held their opponents below 30 points on five occasions, and one of those was a 29!

Last Year:

Groundhog Day played out for the third straight year as Kamaishi were drawn into the Replacement Battle, albeit against a different opponent, this time seeing off Mazda SkyActiv Hiroshima, after having shredded Kurita Water Gush Akishima's promotion aspirations in the previous two seasons. While the Seawaves won just twice (from 14) during the regular season, they were way too good for the Division Three champions, taking the two-legged tie 84-38, after a 33-14 win at Iwate, which they followed up with a 51-24 demolition in Hiroshima.

What to Expect:

While they continue to average just one win at home per-season, and keep conceding 30 plus points per game, it's hard to predict anything changing for the Seawaves, in what is arguably the most competitive of League One's three divisions. The arrival of Kefu could 'spice' life up at Reconstruction Stadium though, putting a bit more steel into the defensive backbone of the 'Iron Men' of the north.

HANAZONO KINTETSU LINERS



Quade Cooper & Will Genia

Where:

Based in Japan's second city, Osaka, Hanazono Kintetsu Liners play at the city's boutique Hanazono Rugby Stadium, which has a 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 Osaka roots at the commencement of Japan Rugby League One.

Brave Blossoms Squad Members:
None

Non-Japanese International Test Representatives:

Manie Libbok (South Africa), Akira Ioane (New Zealand), Peter Umaga-Jensen (New Zealand)

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 in 1929. 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 Business Group tournament champion in 1936 and went on to win the national Company tournament eight times between 1948 and 1975, including a remarkable achievement in the 1957 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 national competitions. The club has won the Japan championships three 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 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.

Floss the Boss:

Kintetsu have made some significant moves off the field, with Ross Filipo joining to work under supervisor Haruki Ota after a successful stint with Waikato where he won New Zealand's national provincial championship in 2021, and the famed Ranfurly Shield this year. The former Crusaders second rower guided the Maori All Blacks to wins over a Japan XV in each of the last two seasons. Tai Lavea has also joined, continuing a nomadic career path which has involved rugby and rugby league spread across New Zealand, Australia, Samoa, England and France. Quade Cooper and Will Genia will act as an attacking coach and skills coach respectively.

Iron loane:

The exits of Cooper and Genia from the playing roster have raised the stakes for Akira loane as he suits up for his second season in League One. The rampaging backrower, who jetted in with a point to make after being overlooked by All Black coach Scott Robertson, managed just three tries from 10 appearances in his maiden season, and will need to step up to fill the leadership gap left by the departing Wallabies. The 30-year-old, whose younger



Akira loane

brother and All Black centre Rieko Ioane is also trying his hand offshore during a loan move to Leinster this (northern hemisphere) winter, may not have given up on a return to test footy, but he needs to prove himself a leader alongside being a great player. Ioane played 21 tests for New Zealand alongside 119 appearances for the (Auckland) Blues, and 61 for Auckland in the national provincial championship, departing last year after helping the Blues to their first Super Rugby title since 2003. His 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.

Is Manie the Man?:

Mercurial South African Manie Libbok is used to filling big boots, and there is more to come as the 28-year-old replaces the 80-cap Cooper as the attacking coach at Hanazono Rugby Stadium. Libbok has regularly worn the Springbok flyhalf jersey in the place of veteran Handre Pollard and is used to the pressure that accompanies such an assignment. His loan to Kintetsu is a great opportunity to try something new while taking on leadership in an environment where his communication and organisational skills will be tested, with his progress certain to be watched closely by Springbok coach Rassie Erasmus. Libbok debuted for South Africa in 2022 and featured earlier in the year when the Boks inflicted a record 43-10 defeat on the All Blacks in Wellington on their way to back-to-back Rugby Championship titles.

Pistol Pete:

Peter Umaga Jensen might only have played one test for New Zealand, but that is more a reflection of the backline depth available to the All Blacks than the 27-year-old centre's ability, which he will be keen to show in League One. Umaga Jensen appeared for his country during a 27-7 win against Australia in 2020, following in the footsteps of his uncles, Tana Umaga and Jerry Collins, who played a combined 122 tests for the All Blacks between

1997 and 2007. The newcomer, who departed the (Wellington) Hurricanes with 53 appearances to his name, will team with bulldozing South African Burger Odendaal in the mid-field, with the pair understudied by Englishman Tom Hendrickson, who returns after playing for North Harbour during New Zealand's national provincial championship. The former Exeter Chiefs centre will start his third season in League One, having accumulated 26 appearances for Kintetsu since he arrived in Japan.

Last Year:

Promoted out of The Replacement Battle three seasons ago, Kintetsu was unable to repeat the trick last term, falling over two legs against Honda. The team had been bidding for a return to the top tier to cap the careers of their departing Wallaby legends but were unable to complete the job after having missed out on the Division Two title by a point. Qualifying for The Replacement Battle still represented a meritorious effort after Kintetsu was only able to win one of its first four matches, which left it chasing both the Shuttles and Green Rockets. Doing the double over the latter, as well as administering a 38-7 hammering against the section winners on the final weekend, allowed Kintetsu to pip the Green Rockets, despite finishing level with the Tokatsu-based side, with both having achieved 10 wins.

What to Expect:

The departure of Cooper and Genia, as well as veteran Brave Blossoms fullback Semisi Masirewa, dramatically changes the picture at Liners passing the baton onto a new generation to lead the club back into Division One. Hanazono should again be fun to watch as Libbok's arrival promises 'Cooper-like' excitement, while the club's two All Blacks both have much to prove. Although last season's slow start didn't prove ruinous, Ota will be determined to ensure this is not repeated in what again promises to be a dogfight for the top two positions.

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 International Test Representatives:
None

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, ex-Springbok Andre Pretorius.

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. A triumphant return two years ago in Division Three put that memory to bed, returning the club to the second tier.

Is the Grass Greener?:

After another quiet off-season recruitment, Hino has seen the departure of internationals, Australian Rory Arnold and dual Tongan and New Zealand test scrumhalf Augustine Pulu. Into Arnold's place comes South African Wynand Grassmann, who arrives from Major League Rugby where he featured for the Houston SaberCats for three seasons. The 30-year-old, who hails from Port Elizabeth on the Eastern Cape, was a Currie Cup winner with the Bulls in 2018.

Goodbye to Mister Versatile:

When the RED DOLPHINS step out for their season opener against Voltex, a name will be missing from the squad list for the first time since 2018. There will be no Augustine Pulu. The 35-year-old, who played for Tonga against Japan in this year's Pacific Nations Cup, arrived in Tokyo seven years ago after a distinguished career in his homeland. Pulu played two tests for New Zealand in 2014, alongside stints in Super Rugby for each of the (Auckland) Blues and (Waikato) Chiefs, which ended just 12 games short of a century of appearances across his two teams. He also represented Counties Manukau in the national provincial championship, and the All Black



Towa Taniguchi

Sevens on the world circuit. Although primarily a scrumhalf, Pulu's versatility will be missed, as he played virtually every position in the backline at some point during his time on the Hino roster.

Points Deductions:

Such were the Dolphins' troubles last season that they failed to make an impact on the personal points rankings. New Zealand flyhalf Simon Hickie, who will be central if Hino is to avoid a Replacement Battle fight, finished as the side's leading point-scorer, but managed just 48 from nine appearances. This was only good enough for 11th in the individual rankings, with the 31-year-old returning an average of five points per outing. A year earlier, Hickie produced 95 points from seven games at a tick under 14 per game during Hino's promotion run. The statistics were just as barren on the try-scoring front, with hooker Towa Taniguchi leading the way with six, which rated equal ninth for individual tries in the division. Winger Sora Ouchi, who touched down nine times two seasons back, only crossed the goal-line four times in 14 appearances. This was equal 28th for the grade.

Holding the (Goal) Line:

If the RED DOLPHINS are to have any chance of steering clear of The Replacement Battle, one thing they must do better is defend. While three teams finished below them on the standings, they each conceded less than Hino's 507 points. The RED DOLPHINS leaked more than 30 points in 10 of their 14 matches, with the Shuttles (twice) and Green Rockets each surpassing a half century in engagements with

Hino. Even when they were winning, the RED DOLPHINS proved 'generous' opponents, twice conceding over 30 points in 46-35 and 41-39 wins over the Seawaves, alongside a 36-33 success at the expense of the Voltex.

Last Year:

Hickie might have only scored 48 points, but the last three were a season saver as his 80th minute penalty goal on the final weekend of the regular season grabbed a dramatic 22-21 win over the BLUE SHARKS. The win allowed the RED DOLPHINS to escape the Replacement Battle, but it was a near thing, with the four log points gained pushing them two above their rivals. Survival had seemed unlikely after the RED DOLPHINS had to wait until February for their first win, losing six of their first seven. Fortunately, they held their nerve when it mattered most, with three of their five wins coming by margins of three, two and one point respectively. It was enough.... just!

What to Expect:

Given the minimal changes to the playing roster, and last season's desperate fight to avoid being sucked into The Replacement Battle, it's hard to see anything but another hard slog ahead. With the prospect of a season on a knives edge, Hino can ill afford another slow start, especially with each of the Voltex, Seawaves and BLUE SHARKS – the three teams that finished below them last term – to play in the opening four rounds of the competition. Early wins will be crucial to keep themselves above the bottom two, but also to provide belief for the playing group that survival is again possible.

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 International Test representative:

Henry Taefu (Tonga), Lotu Inisi (Tonga), Elliott Stooke (England)

The Head Coach:

Isao Matsukawa takes charge for his second season with a big job on his hands to arrest a trend that has seen the Red Hurricanes twice lapse into a season ruining runs of defeat after promising beginnings. Two years ago, the Kansai club opened with back-to-back wins before the season subsided when they slumped to six defeats on the bounce, which condemned them to The Replacement Battle. While the promotion/relegation series was a fate Merit avoided in his first season at the helm, he was unable to prevent history repeating, as the Red Hurricanes again fell from the playoff calculations after having promised much at the start of their journey. Matsukawa, who took over from Australian Matt Cockbain, heads up an all-Japanese coaching team, with the New Zealand-born Japanese representatives Bryce Robbins and Colin Bourke both having left the club.

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 before 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, with their current stay in the competition's middle tier entering its' third season.

Northern Lights:

The arrival of JP du Preez from Edinburgh Rugby will see the Red Hurricanes field a heavy northern hemisphere influence in their second row throughout the campaign. The 31-year-old South African teams up with the ex-Bath man Elliott Stooke, who traded in the possibility of a Premiership title with the English west-country club to try his hand in the fourth edition of League One. While this meant the 32-year-old missed out on the opportunity to be part of last season's champion Bath outfit, after appearing in the Premiership final the year before, Stooke quickly established himself as a key man in Osaka last term, going on to appear in all but three of the Red Hurricanes matches in his debut year. The second row pair add to the international flavour of the forward pack, which also features foreign backrowers in the form of Munster's Jack O'Sullivan as well as the (Auckland) Blues,

(Wellington) Hurricanes and Tokyo Sungoliath's Blake Gibson. The New Zealander, who begins his third season with the Red Hurricanes, debuted in New Zealand's national provincial championship as a 19-year-old in 2014 before taking his maiden bow in Super Rugby a year later. After an injury hit introduction to Japan at Sungoliath, and more trouble on debut in Osaka, Gibson has established himself as a major player at the Red Hurricanes, stringing together 11 matches last season, after injuries restricted him to just eight across his first two years in League One.

Where Have all the Tries Gone?:

After a super impressive promotion campaign two years ago when they totted up 76 tries in 12 outings, it's a solid indicator of just how tough the time since has been for the Red Hurricanes, that they have managed one less try in total than their Division Three title-winning campaign across the following two seasons. On the plus side is an improving defensive record, which saw them concede 356 points in 14 matches last term, at an average of 25, after having been hit for 389 from just 10 outings on their return to Division Two.

Can Jooste Provide a Boost?:

He arrives with a glittering pedigree, but former Australian Schools representative Nick Jooste is chasing a career reboot after failing to have lived up to his promise so far. The centre-cum-flyhalf joined a select group, made up of Kurtley Beale, Quade Cooper, James O'Connor, Luke Jones and Chris Feauai-Sautia, when he became the sixth Australian to earn a Super contract while still at school. While the others subsequently kicked on to the Wallabies, the West Australian-born Jooste has yet to emulate the five, after wanderings that have included three Australian states as well as Kamaishi Seawaves, and San Diego Legion in America's Major League Rugby. A replacement for departed Aussie veteran Bryce Hegarty, Jooste was last sighted in Japan during his single season at Iwate in 2018 and will need to hit the ground running on return if he is to make a personal statement, while ensuring that the Red Hurricanes steer clear of the bottom end of the table.

Raw Power:

The Red Hurricanes will boast one of the

heaviest second row combinations in the division, with du Plessis and Stooke weighing in at a collective 238 kilograms, but their midfield pairing of Mifiposeti Paea and Tongan test centre Henry Taefu are no lightweights either! Together, the Tonga-born pair tip the scales at 209 kilograms with Paea, who is an ex-Brave Blossoms representative, weighing in at 109, while Taefu boasts a 100-kilogram frame. The latter joined the Red Hurricanes last season from Moana Pasifika in Super Rugby.

Last Year:

Shock early leaders after opening Division Two with four straight wins – which involved success against each of the Green Rockets (34-13), Shuttles (30-22), Kintetsu Liners (36-17) and BLUE SHARKS (38-19) – the Red Hurricanes weren't beaten until February when upset by the underrated Kyuden Voltex. While the Kansai-based side bounced back to

eclipse the RED DOLPHINS in the following round, their fifth win of the season proved to be their last for seven matches, as they slipped from the head of the standings to an eventual fourth placed finish. Adding just one further win to their tally, on the penultimate weekend of the regular season against Kamaiishi, the Red Hurricanes wound up 21 points astern of the promotion series places, finishing with six wins and eight defeats.

What to Expect:

Last season's free fall after the bright start highlighted a lack of depth on the Red Hurricanes roster, which they have endeavoured to address with some interesting acquisitions. While at best the side can be a match for any in the grade, keeping their key players on the field is a must if they are to sustain a promotion challenge.



Henry Taefu

DIVISION

3

PREVIEW

The status quo might have remained, but if last season is any guide, Division Three will be no less exciting.

New entrants SAYAMA SECOM RUGGUTs, Yakult Levins Toda and LeRIRO Fukuoka all made their mark on their maiden League One journeys, with the RUGGUTs falling just six points short of what would have been a remarkable promotion in their two-legged playoff against Shimizu Corporation KOTO BLUE SHARKS.

In qualifying for the Replacement Battle after finishing second in the regular season, the RUGGUTs unseated Kurita Water Gush Akishima, who had made the promotion playoff in each of the previous two years.

That setback will have stung Wycliff Palu's men, and the ex-Wallaby backrower is sure to have his team fired up to take down both the RUGGUTs, and last season's division winners Mazda SkyActivs Hiroshima.

The section's six teams play three matches against each of the other teams in the division, with all teams having three bye rounds.

The teams that will contest Division Three of the league are:

Kurita Water Gush Akishima



Where: Akishima-shi (Tokyo) **Last Year:** Third (9 wins)
Star Player: Back-rower Teariki Ben-Nicholas (New Zealand)

While losing two of the last three finally finished off Akishima's chances of earning a third consecutive shot at promotion, it was their false start that ultimately cost ex-Wallaby backrower Wycliff Palu's men as they were forced to settle for third and an absence from post-season play.

Kurita began with three losses, the first of which proved the costliest, as they were edged 24-15 by newly promoted SAYAMA SECOM RUGGUTs on opening day.

While Water Gush had their revenge when the sides met again, prevailing 40-33, the RUGGUTs had the last laugh, although the playoffs make up had been sorted by then, with the competition 'newbies' already qualified at Akishima's expense.

Alongside their twin defeats by SAYAMA, Water Gush also lost twice to SkyActivs, the first a 57-13 hammering.

While they gained momentum following that defeat, winning seven of the next nine, a shock 37-26 defeat by LeRIRO Fukuoka – an opponent they had twice put more than 50 points on earlier in the season – proved fatal.

Akishima had plenty of points in them, totalling 40 or more on six occasions, but they also showed frustrating inconsistency by losing to all three new entries.

This meant providing the league's highest point-scorer, winger Yuta Sugiyama (134), as well as the equal third top try scorer in backrower Taisei Nakao (10), was in vain. Palu's role has been changed to the advisor and Masafumi Uchiyama took over as a new head coach.

Uchiyama will be desperately hoping the pair can maintain that level of performance in the new season, while coaxing a bit more from their teammates.

He's going to need it, as the RUGGUTs should only be better from their impressive debut, while after three difficult years, the SkyActivs have found their mojo and will be hard to stop again.

SAYAMA SECOM RUGGUTs



Where: Sayama, (Saitama prefecture), Honshu **Last Year:** Second (11 wins)

Star International Player: Fullback Chase Tiatia (New Zealand)

While it didn't end in promotion, not much else went wrong for the RUGGUTs in their maiden journey, following up their second-placed regular season finish with a heroic effort against the BLUE SHARKS in the promotion/relegation series, where the margin of an unconverted try separated the sides over the two legs.

The RUGGUTs' success owed much to the outstanding debut by fullback Chase Tiatia, whose 16 tries in as many outings tied Wild Knights winger Koki Takeyama and boom BlueRevs scrumhalf Shuntaro Kitamura for the most by any player across the league's three divisions.

The well-travelled Tiatia had previously played for Wellington, Hawke's Bay and Bay of Plenty in New Zealand's national provincial championship, alongside the (Waikato) Chiefs, (Wellington) Hurricanes and Western Force in Super Rugby, and the quality of his performance showed that he had lost none of the ability he had shown in those arenas.

His club's League One debut benefited from astute recruitment, with Tiatia being joined by ex-(Canterbury) Crusaders Super Rugby title-winner, loose forward Whetukamokamo Douglas (who featured in all 17 matches), as well as former (Auckland) Blues midfield back TJ Faiane, former Taranaki flyhalf Daniel Waite, and ex-Wales second rower Cory Hill.

While Hill has departed, veteran backrower Adam Parker remains, with the 37-year-old proving he was still a force in the division by starting in all but three matches last term.

Guided by the experience of ex-New Zealand Sevens representative Scott Pierce, alongside former Queensland Reds backrower Van Humphries, SAYAMA lack for nothing in coaching craft, which should make sure that they avoid the scenario of becoming 'one season wonders' as they aim to give promotion another crack.

Having given the BLUE SHARKS a scare in 17-15 and 31-28 defeats during a heart-stopping Replacement Battle, the RUGGUTs look a good bet to give the section title a nudge, while qualifying for the promotion shootout again.



SkyActives Hiroshima



Where: Hiroshima (Chūgoku), Honshu **Last Year:** First (12 wins)

Star International Player: Backrower Jackson Pugh (Australia)

After struggling in the first three editions of League One, the SkyActives brought the good times back to Hiroshima following a memorable run which saw the side win more matches than they achieved in the previous three seasons of the competition combined.

Despite being well beaten by Kamaishi in The Replacement Battle, winning the section title was grand reward for a solid body of work which saw the SkyActives finish six clear of the Rugguts on the points table, a win in advance of the Saitama-based side.

Central to the SkyActives success was an increased attacking potency which yielded 91 tries from 15 regular season matches, at an average of six per game, after having managed just 47 from 12 the previous year.

The arrival of veteran South African Clynton Knox played a big part in that, with the 32-year-old former Honda midfielder marshalling the attack expertly, while contributing a handy nine tries.

Australian backrower Jackson Pugh, who weighed in with a team-high 10, and former Ealing Trailfinders second row Andrew Davidson, who featured in all 17 matches, were other key figures as the SkyActives dropped just three matches in the regular season.

Importantly, two of their wins came against city-mates China Electric Power Chugoku Red Regulions, which allowed the SkyActives to clinch derby bragging rights for the third consecutive season.

With the core of last season's championship-winning team still in place, both their cross-town rivals and the rest of the Division Three field could find themselves looking skywards again.

Chugoku Red Regulions



Where: Hiroshima (Chūgoku), Honshu **Last Year:** Fourth (5 wins) – Division Three

Star Player: Hooker Kentaro Iwanaga

Rising to fourth, with the achievement of four additional wins from last term, represented a vastly improved showing from the Red Regulions, after three straight wooden spoons to start their League One journey.

While the campaign began ominously, suffering a 61-26 drubbing by the SkyActives on opening day, the Red Regulions recovered to win back-to-back matches in each of January and February, before running out of puff, with a failure to win in the last seven killing off any promotion hopes.

The collapse was in no small part due to the loss of flyhalf Hayato Miyazaki, after last season's star rookie had returned even better.

The Hotoku Gakuen Ritsumeikan University product ran up 115 points in the league's third season, and was on course to surpass that, having contributed 81 in just six games – including six tries – before injury cruelly ended the 25-year-old's campaign.

With Miyazaki kicking the goals and directing operations, the Red Regulions won four of six, including a 26-22 'revenge' win in the season's second Hiroshima derby.

His departure left a gap that proved impossible for the side to fill, as the Red Regulions' title bid quickly subsided, gathering just one further win without their main man.

While the return of a fit and healthy Miyazaki seems essential if the Red Regulions are to push on and qualify for The Replacement Battle this time, keeping try-gobbling hooker Kentaro Iwanaga in harness will also be critical.

The indestructible Red Regulions front-rower has scored 20 tries in the last two seasons.

Twelve of those came last term when he crossed the goal-line twice on five separate occasions on the way to finishing the section's second highest try-scorer.

The Nagasaki-educated 30-year-old is one of two talisman driving the side, with veteran Australian backrower Edward Quirk having added a layer of international quality after the former Queensland Reds man from Super Rugby made the move to southern Honshu.



LeRIRO Fukuoka



Where: Fukuoka, Kyushu **Last Year:** Sixth (3 wins)

It might have been a tough League One initiation for LeRIRO Fukuoka – a club that didn't even exist five years ago – but the Kyushu-based outfit showed that better things could be on the horizon after a strong finish to their inaugural season, winning two of their last three matches.

Despite losing the opening 10 matches, LeRIRO steadily improved, which made their pivotal 37-26 upset of Akishima a well deserved if shock result, which derailed their well-fancied opponent's promotion hopes.

While Fukuoka, which was founded without any major corporate support in 2021, fielded a squad almost entirely consisting of local Japanese, the one exception was 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.

Hesketh scored the match-winning try on that occasion, and while now 40 years old, he showed the value of his experience, having joined the rookie club after 12 years at Sanix Blues.

The New Zealand-educated utility back missed just one game throughout the season, scoring four tries.

That effort complemented the standout performance of flyhalf Syoutarou Matsuo who finished as the section's second highest point-scorer, and one of just two players who exceeded a century for the season, finishing on 109.

This included 22 points during the win over Water Gush, tying Tiatia for the most points by a player in a single game, Tiatia having scored his 22 against Fukuoka.

Tongan-raised winger Amanaki Lisala also showed promise, with the 26-year-old contributing nine tries in just his second season in League One.



Yakult Levins Toda



Where: Toda City (Saitama prefecture), Honshu **Last Year:** Fifth (5 wins)

While they avoided the wooden spoon, the Levins' maiden season delivered less than it initially promised, after the Toda-based side opened with back-to-back wins over Fukuoka and Akishima. Their strong start quickly dissipated, with the next eight matches yielding just one win which killed off any hope of qualifying for the Replacement Battle.

Wins over the Red Regulions and RUGGUTs ensured the Levins avoided bottom ranking, with the latter the most remarkable game in the section as the two sides shared 14 tries during Yakults' 50-47 victory over The Replacement Battle-bound outfit.

This was particularly so given try-scoring was one of the Levins' biggest challenges, twice coming up empty during heavy defeats against the RUGGUTs (36-6) and SkyActives (48-3) respectively.

The Levins were not helped by the absence of flyhalf Moses Jones, with injury meaning a player for whom the side had high hopes, failed to appear during the season.

On the plus side, they were well served by 31-year-old flyhalf Nick Evemy, who picked up 97 points from 15 appearances, while powerful centre Antonio Mikaele Tu'u, who also appeared in every match, and second rower James Tucker, showed promise too.

Consistency will be required across the board if the Levins are going to cash in on that promise, having shown last term that when caught in the right mood, they have the capability to lower the colours of every side in the division.

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 Ms 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 competition's fifth season 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 Managing Director, 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 five 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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