

# A third-place finish in the World Rafting Championship

## Hitotsubashi University Rafting Club

### “To stand on the podium”: reaching for the sky in our first international competition

Riding on a rubber boat as it rushes down a river—this is how rafting is known to the world. It is a popular outdoor leisure activity that enables you to feel the thrill of rowing through rapid torrents. Although rafting has enjoyed considerable media exposure such as through TV programs, not many people realize that it is also a competitive sport in which participants battle to achieve the top position.

At a recent international competition, the Hitotsubashi University Rafting Club achieved the third place overall in the under-23 age division. The World Rafting Championship, organized by the International Rafting Federation, was held on the Iguazu River in Parana, Brazil over three days beginning on October 10, 2014, with the participation of a record number of 20 countries (10 competing in the under-23 division). Representing the Hitotsubashi University Rafting Club was Team Tama, whose members—Rei Tanaka (fourth-year student, Faculty of Economics), Takahiro Umamoto (fourth-year student, Faculty of Social Sciences), Shota Takihana (third-year student, Faculty of Commerce and Management), and Yohei Saito (third-year student, Faculty of Economics)—did us proud by achieving the third position in the world.

“Teams from other countries had not only student but also adult competitors. Even though we were surrounded by powerhouses such as the host country of



Brazil and teams from Europe, where river sports are really prominent, our goal was to finish within the top three places and be able to stand on the podium. This might sound like reaching for the sky, but after studying footage from the previous championship, we felt confident that this goal was achievable with our ability.” (Tanaka)

Team Tama was already unrivaled in Japan after claiming victory at both the 1st All-Japan Race Rafting Championship and Representative Selection Meet in April and the 38th River Venture Championship in May. They went into international competition with the firm belief that a top three finish was not an impossible mission.



Rei Tanaka

### Being always focused on “image sharing” and efficiency made us different and gave us the power

Four disciplines exist in competitive rafting, and in a championship competition, points are awarded according to your place and time in each discipline. The total points earned then determine the overall ranking. To attain the best possible time, in addition to strong paddling, “image sharing” between members is absolutely essential, says Tanaka.

“There are a many tactics that you can use when two boats are starting in an H2H [head-to-head] situation or downriver, so the ability to strategize is very



From left: Takihana, Saito, Umamoto, Tanaka

important. But more than that, in rafting, you have to be able to move the boat according to your mental image, to 'swim' down the river. It is a sport that requires the overall strength of a team, where all four members must share the same correct image." (Tanaka)

Hitotsubashi University Rafting Club is now considered to be a formal athletic club; in fact, it has been around for 40 years as a "circle," which is a less formal form of student gathering in Japan. For part of its long history, Hitotsubashi University's team produced some of the best national representatives in rafting and recorded top-class results in domestic competitions. However, our achievements in recent years were less than remarkable. Even the team that represented Hitotsubashi University at the World Rafting Championship was formed not of elite competitors who had received training from a young age, but of rafting beginners who had picked up the sport at the university.

For a team like this to attain third place in the world, much of the success must be attributed to their coach, Mr. Hiromi Oda, a former Japan national team representative in canoe slalom. Mr. Oda became the team's coach after Tanaka approached him while working part-time at his canoeing school. The team was transformed by his coaching.

## Anxiety disappears when you are battling overseas competitors: Relentless training gave us confidence that grew into conviction

Members of the Hitotsubashi University Rafting Club train every weekday morning and all day on weekends on the Tamagawa River near Mitake Station. The students strived during training because the harmonization of paddling rhythm and image by all four persons on the boat is pivotal.

"When this team was first formed, we needed the



In canoe slalom, time and staying on line through the gates are the essence, so the competitor must learn how to "read" the flow of the river to paddle the one-person kayak efficiently and smoothly through the race course. Knowing how important it is to make the boat "swim," Mr. Oda taught the team members a paddling technique that set them apart from other competitors and helped them to break through in an international competition filled with powerful rivals.

"We have become aware of moving the boat more efficiently by looking closely at the river flow. I believe this is what makes our team different from other student rafters for whom power paddling is still the main focus." (Umamoto)



Takahiro Umamoto

two members in the front to look at the river flow and give instructions, but in the end, all four members have become able to share the same mental image of "this torrent should be passed in this way." Even without saying anything, we are all thinking the same thing. That's pretty much the condition we are in right now." (Umamoto)

The ability to attain the highest form of coordination, that is, to move the boat as if paddled by only one person, is considered to be the biggest weapon when competing at the international level. Even though strength enhancement is essential for acceleration and maneuvering, team members have not included extra muscle strength training in their schedule. This is because they believe that in rafting, basic strength training is sufficient for paddling. Their high level of unity, which has always been the focus in their relentless training, gave them the winning edge at both domestic and overseas competitions.

"The body size of some foreign competitors was so huge that it was hard to believe we were the same age (laugh), so yes, it was a bit intimidating. However, as soon as the race started, that anxiety went away. No matter how disadvantaged we were in muscle strength, the techniques we cultivated through training and our ability to 'read' the river showed us how strong we can be on a global stage." (Umamoto)

Competing for the first time in an international competition, it is not unusual to feel nervous beforehand. Nevertheless, the team members' growing self-confidence eventually transformed into conviction and helped them overcome anxiety as soon as the race started. Tanaka says that he shared the same thought.

"It is true that we had a preconception that foreign competitors were better than us. However, we believed that what we had done so far was right and that the Japanese can still compete globally. This is the message that we would like to pass on to younger competitors." (Tanaka)

## Coordination and organizational skills gave us this result that shocked the world

Saito was a sophomore when he participated in the World Rafting Championship. He states that the charm of competitive rafting lies not only in the



The four members of the Japan National Team and, at far right, substitute member Shun Mizukami from Niigata University.

emphasis on teamwork but also in the opportunity to pursue your own limits.

"For the four members to become one and achieve the best time, you must keep the boat on its course by balancing the paddling force on both sides. In that situation, you are not the only one paddling your heart out, but all four members are challenging their own physical limits at the same time. I think that's rafting's biggest charm." (Saito)

Hence, in a rafting competition, each competitor is exerting his or her maximum physical strength while sharing the same mindset to reach one common goal. Undoubtedly, this sport requires great organizational skill; nevertheless, it was still a considerable shock to overseas competitors that a team



Yohei Saito



from Japan could achieve the third position while relying not on physical strength but on coordination as its primary weapon.

"The reputation of the Japanese team before the competition was definitely not so favorable, so when we got the third place, everyone was shocked. A lot of competitors from other countries told us, 'That was amazing!'" (Tanaka)

The students confronted challenges with confidence in one's own strength, and achieved the desired result through mutual respect. They believe that the experience gained at such international sport exchanges has become their greatest reward as they get ready to step out into society in the near future.

"Before going into the competition, I did not believe that we could get along with overseas competitors who speak a different language and come from different cultures, but that prejudice went away as I saw how people who love the same sport became friends with each other. We were able to interact with each other in a friendly way, and it was such a delightful experience." (Takahana)



Shota Takihana

## One's "core values" and confidence gained through rafting are imperative when stepping out into the world

After this experience, Takihana states that he has become more interested in exploring the world and also hopes to study abroad. While still slightly nervous about his language skills, Takihana believes that if you are doing something that you love from the bottom of your heart, and if you are confident in it, then you can always build relationships with others through that common ground.

"I think it is essential to have a core value of 'this is who I am' when you are out in the world. What I have learned this time is that, as long as you have something that can give you confidence, no matter what kind of environment you are in, you will never be overwhelmed and will always be able to show your true self when building relationships with different people. For me, my core value is rafting. Working on rafting has allowed me to gain confidence." (Saito)

Utilize your strength, exert your maximum force with confidence, and get the best possible result while respecting each other. This is what the team members have learned through the sport of rafting. The World Rafting Championship in Brazil not only brought a prestigious result for the Hitotsubashi University Rafting Club but also gave the team an invaluable opportunity to learn what it feels like to be on a global stage.

\* The school years indicated for each student are from December 2014, when the interviews were conducted.

\* The Hitotsubashi University Rafting Club achieved the third position again at the 2015 World Rafting Championship, held on the Citarik River, Indonesia, from November 30 to December 3. We shall expect more such successes from them in the future!

# Importance of one's university major and long-term career planning as seen by someone from a naturally global environment

Completion of master's program in the Graduate School of Social Sciences in 2013

## Petr Klicka

### Tanizaki novels in Czech awakened my interest in Japan during my high school years

Petr Klicka, who grew up in the Czech Republic, first came into contact with Japan as a 17-year-old high school student. A keen reader, Petr became interested in Japan after reading a Japanese novel translated into Czech, which he found at a small library near his home.

“That novel was *Naomi* by Junichiro Tanizaki. I fell in love with Japanese novels after reading that and began to search like crazy for others. I read novels by authors such as Kenzaburo Oe and Yasunari Kawabata, but eventually, I decided that I wanted to read them in the original Japanese rather than in translation, so I started to learn the Japanese language.”

During his fourth and final year of high school, Petr considered majoring in Japanese at the university. However, his parents disapproved of his idea, asking him instead to “pick something that will be more useful in the future.”

“Because I agreed with my parents’ opinions, I selected the University of Economics, Prague, and majored in international trade. Nevertheless, I still wanted to learn Japanese; I did not want to give up that dream. So, after one year at the University of Economics, I also enrolled in Japanese studies at Charles University in Prague.”

Unlike in Japan, tuition is waived at public universities in the Czech Republic and students are allowed to simultaneously enroll in two different universities to pursue an individual curriculum. Utilizing this system, Petr began his study of the Japanese language alongside economics. He visited Japan for the first time as a university freshman and again during summer vacation the following year. Then in 2007, at the age of 22, Petr applied for a scholarship from Japan’s Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology and became an exchange student at Kanazawa University.

“During my first year at Kanazawa University, I became interested in studying at a Japanese graduate school. Therefore, I started to look around to see what kinds of universities and teachers were available. Because I was really fascinated by economic history



when I was a student at the University of Economics, I searched for researchers in this particular area. That’s when I found Professor Yutaka Nishinarita and decided to study at the Graduate School of Economics, Hitotsubashi University.”

To meet Professor Nishinarita, Petr came all the way to Tokyo from Kanazawa. He expressed his interest in studying at Hitotsubashi University before returning to the Czech Republic. After graduating from the university in 2010, Petr applied for another scholarship from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology and enrolled at Hitotsubashi.

### The sense of fulfillment and differences between Japan and the Czech Republic that I felt during my study at Hitotsubashi University

Now that he is realizing his dream of studying in Japan, which started with his love of Japanese literature, we asked Petr whether living in Japan as a university

student has had any surprises and how it differs from life in the Czech Republic.

“I wasn’t too concerned about speaking Japanese because I was capable of normal everyday conversation to a certain degree. I also had some understanding of Japanese culture, so there wasn’t much surprise. However, after coming to Hitotsubashi University, I was impressed by the degree of enthusiasm among the graduate school students here. This is very different from the Czech Republic. There, ‘graduating from university’ normally means getting a master’s degree. In that sense, a master’s program is not regarded as much different from an undergraduate program. I think this is the biggest difference between the Czech Republic and Japan.”

Petr states that, unlike the process in Japanese universities, where you learn general knowledge and basic disciplines of a specialized field in an undergraduate program and then move on to more professional training in a master’s program, educational programs in the Czech Republic enables you to start your professional training from day one as an undergraduate. While noting this difference, Petr recalled how the occasions in Japan when he studied all night in the research office and how such experiences, though tough at times, had become some of his best and most fulfilling moments. Following his admission into Hitotsubashi University, he first studied economic history in Nishinarita’s research group and then embarked on research on labor markets in a research group led by Associate Professor Fumiko Nishino at the Graduate School of Social Sciences.

“I started to think about continuing with my doctoral program after enrolling at Hitotsubashi University. I



With a colleague from Professor Nishino’s research group

was fascinated by how the labor market in Japan had evolved into this intriguing structure, so I chose Prof. Nishino’s research group because it enabled me to research this topic at length.”

Petr felt that the development process of the Japanese labor market was “mysterious.” He explained the reasons for this mysteriousness, its connection with the differences in how people approach undergraduate and

master’s programs, and how the Japanese labor market affects people’s mentality as they choose a university.

## The differences in the process of deciding a major and Japanese students who try to “enter a company”

“In the Czech Republic, ‘what major to choose’ is considered to be a more important question than ‘which university’. Furthermore, for the university entrance exam in Japan, in many cases, students wanting to study philosophy would also have to know mathematics, and students wanting to major in physics are forced to study the modern Japanese language. This is largely due to Japan’s centralized examination system where you must study all general subjects, regardless of your intended major. In contrast, in the Czech Republic, this type of system does not exist and exam topics are decided by teachers from each faculty or major area. For example, I was tested on mathematics and my first two foreign languages for my entrance exam at the University of Economics; for admission into Japanese studies

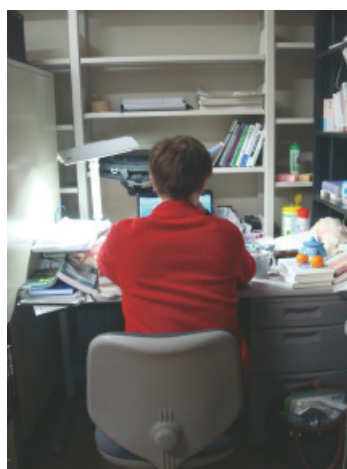


at Charles University, I only had to complete a simple linguistic test and pass an oral exam in which I was asked what books related to Japan I had read and what I wanted to do in the future.”

Considering the content of entrance exams in the Czech Republic, we can see the stark contrast with how we view education in Japan. As opposed to Japanese universities, where overall academic ability is emphasized, Czech universities place more value on the reason for choosing a particular major and students’ knowledge of related subjects. As for the university curriculum, in Japan, the first two years represent a continuation of general education, whereas in the Czech Republic, general education is covered during the four years of high

school and students begin working in specialized fields as soon as they enter their undergraduate program. Learning in the Czech Republic entails identifying your interests and aspirations in high school so that you can immediately undertake formal study upon arriving at the university.

“In the Czech Republic, high school students are given a lot of free time. Classes usually finish at one o’clock in the afternoon with no after-school extracurricular activity, so you can go looking for what interests you have outside school time. Without such freedom, I would not have had the opportunity to encounter Japanese literature, so I think this experience



At his research office

was very important in choosing a major.”

This emphasis on a major is evident not only in the university entrance exams but also after graduation when students start job hunting. Companies in the Czech Republic do not hold the types of generalized annual

recruitment programs that we see in Japan; rather, they recruit according to specific job type. This difference was also mysterious to Petr and was a major factor prompting him to begin his research on the Japanese labor market.

“Specifically, in Japan, ‘job hunting’ is more like ‘company hunting’. The fact that salary does not necessarily reflect the weight of a position is also quite unique. I was deeply fascinated by this facet of the Japanese system. From there, I began to wonder why is the Japanese labor market so different from those in Europe and the United States? How has it evolved into this ‘intriguing’ system? Eventually, I decided to research its historical transformation.”



Diving with colleagues from his research group



At the graduation ceremony (Commencement ceremony)

## I began job hunting after completing my master’s program to understand the reality of Japanese corporations

When he first arrived at Hitotsubashi University, Petr said he had pictured a future career path that would have a connection to both Japan and the Czech Republic. This meant that he would either work for a Japanese company in the Czech Republic or become an interpreter or translator. Although he considered entering a doctoral program while attending graduate school, in the end, he chose to work for a Japanese company instead. Currently, he is working for Mitsui’s aircraft finance department.

“Initially, I wanted to do something that I found most enjoyable from my area of expertise. However, while researching the Japanese labor market and its organization, I became more and more interested in seeing with my own eyes how a Japanese company actually operates.”



Besides wanting to see a Japanese company from the inside, Petr said he chose an aircraft-related job because of his fondness for airplanes ever since childhood. “I thought I could kill two birds with one stone,” he laughed. He said that this would not have been possible in Europe where recruiting is based on specific job-related skills.

“Working in Japan is very different from working for a European company, where jobs and responsibilities are clearly divided and where work is completely separated from private time. Japanese companies are more ‘communal’ in that you get to converse with all types of people and have a fair idea of what everyone is doing. This ‘communality’ is an advantage for Japanese companies.”

First, Petr said, he was uncomfortable with a promotion system based solely on seniority, and other people’s “kindness” toward him, which went beyond what he con-

sidered normal hospitality, made him a little uncomfortable. However, now, he can finally find delight in these differences.

“Despite the fact that Japanese companies operate on different principles from those of other countries, I was surprised in the beginning at how they were still able to establish such thoroughly integrated organizations and systems. Even the airlines, which conduct business by a completely different process than those of other countries, are still able to provide the same service and output in the end. This was very intriguing for me.”

The organization and systems of Japanese corporations may not be what one would call the global standard, but it is exactly this unique style, resulting from the distinctive development of Japan’s society and labor market, that captivates Petr’s interest as a researcher and has led him to discover other appealing aspects of working inside a Japanese company.

## Be determined and act: The important thing is to think about where you want to be in the long run

Now that Petr has experienced working in a Japanese company, we wondered what type of career plan he has in mind. In response to this question, Petr says that he does not have a clear image of himself 10 or 20 years down the road, but he is considering several options.

“Eventually, I would like to do something for my home country, the Czech Republic, but it does not have to be situated inside the Czech Republic. I want a job that I enjoy doing, no matter where it is.”

Due to his father’s work, Petr lived in many different countries as a child. As an experienced globetrotter, he wrapped up our conversation by giving some advice on how to survive in a global society: “The important thing is how determined you are. Even if you have no overseas experience, once you decide to seek an opportunity in another country, you must be very determined and act on that determination. Then you should be able to find several possible career options.”