

# I Want to Make Children Smile and Foster the Great Athletes of the Next Generation

— The Story of Laos' First Football Instructor from Japan —

Stories from the field

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Laos is a landlocked country on the Indochina peninsula. One of the nation's most popular sport is football, and from September 2011, JICA Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteer (JOCV) Mr. Kei Honma took up a position as the country's first ever Japanese football instructor. From that point on, he has worked days and nights trying to improve the level of play in Laos.

Mr. Honma was born in Kochi City in 1985. After graduating from Japan Soccer College (Niigata Prefecture), Mr. Honma started a career as an instructor for domestic football clubs. From 2008 until 2011, he stayed in Shanghai, China, where he was the first instructor at a football school for Japanese nationals and was involved in the creation of the school's club team. He is currently active in the Lao Football Federation, and serves as head coach for both the U-14 (for under 14-year-old players) and Lao women's team.

In spite of his success today, prior to taking up these positions, Mr. Honma admits that he used to have the impression that Laos was a football wasteland. And so he was surprised to find upon visiting the country that football was extremely popular and that the actions of players were agile and skilled. Every primary school in regional villages has wooden football goals set up. And in the evening, Mr. Honma regularly saw barefooted children enjoying themselves by kicking a football around rough and unpaved streets. He came to realize that Lao football was characterized by skills fostered through such daily practices.

In 2012, the Laos national team was among the eight national teams to make it through the preliminary league and be selected for the ASEAN Football Championship held in Yangon, Myanmar. Although the team lost its matches, it put up a good fight against the strong players from Malaysia and Singapore. Mr. Honma highly praises the plays of the Laos team, while also pointing out areas for improvement.

"The players from Laos appear to be weak-spirited – they give up easily. They also seem to be poor at thinking on their feet during matches. These are things that are often instilled in them through their upbringing. It is no easy task in changing

these behaviors once they have become adults." For that reason alone, Mr. Honma's role as a children's teacher does not stop at merely teaching football skills. He commented on how the spread of football is necessary for the healthy development of the youth.

"Through football, I hope that the children will come to feel the importance of never giving up until the very end; that they will play while thinking by themselves; that they will understand the fun of playing with their peers, the fun of achieving something, the fun of learning, the thrill of victory, and the agony of defeat. This is education through football. Football involves more people in each team than any other competitive sports. So even if it is difficult, it is a sport from which people can learn a lot, including the ability to share with friends the joy of achieving a goal through cooperation. And being such a popular sport, it has had a great effect on Lao society as a whole. I think that a big issue for this country is the creation of an environment in which children can get involved in something."

A "Grassroots Festival" is being implemented by the Lao Football Federation to hold football classes for the young boys and girls of the various regions of Laos. At the venue, in addition to the football classes, there are also workshops for school teachers and parents, as well as football instructor training sessions. The Federation plans to open four festivals in different regions, starting with the capital city of Vientiane. Mr. Honma will run the festivals while also working as a coordinator and instructor. He explained how he feels when teaching children.

"No matter which venue I go to, I am greeted by the smiles of children who love football. I think it is important for us to increase the number of those smiles and keep working to give children great memories. I hope that we will see the emergence of some national level players from among the children who came to love football thanks to this support from JICA."

One of the Laos teams coached by Mr. Honma showed good results at the YAMAHA ASEAN CUP U-13 FOOTBALL held in May 2013, finishing third among eight participating teams.



Mr. Honma at the practice grounds of the Lao Football Federation. (Photo: Kei Honma)



Mr. Honma instructs girls at the Grassroots Festival (at Luang Prabang Stadium). (Photo: Kei Honma)