

TARGET: OLYMPICS AT 15

Japanese club coach says race experience at young age is key to nation's pool success

Nicole Chia

The Rio Olympics concluded two weeks ago, but Tokyo Swimming Club head coach Yoshida Takahiro is already preparing his charges for the next two editions of the quadrennial competition.

Their road to the 2020 and 2024 Games starts with this weekend's inaugural Chinese Swimming Club (CSC) Super Junior Swimming Invitational.

Takahiro, together with fellow coaches Kambe Daisuke and Sugaya Masayoshi, will lead a nine-strong team of Japanese swimmers aged between 11 and 12 at this meet. Daisuke and Masayoshi are head coaches of their clubs, Aqlub by Empower Kaneko and A&A Sports respectively.

Takahiro hopes the meet will help the young swimmers, who are the top in their age group in the country, gain some racing experience as they prepare for the next two Olympics.

The 42-year-old has over 20 years of coaching experience, and he believes early preparation is part of the reason for Japan's swimming success at the 2016 Games.

He said: "The Japanese Swimming Federation has provided good support for young swimmers. They start in the five-year training programme at age 10, and the target is that they are prepared to enter their first Olympic Games at age 15."

For instance, four-time Olympic gold medallist Kosuke Kitajima made his breakthrough at age 17 when he finished fourth in the 100m breaststroke final at the 2000 Sydney Olympics. He then went on to win back-to-back 100m and 200m breaststroke titles at the next two editions.



And 21 of Japan's 34 swimmers in Rio were first-time Olympians. The youngest in the team, Natsumi Sakai, was only 15 years old, and the team's average age was just under 23.

Takahiro added: "Japanese swimmers have been trained since young, and I think it is because of this that we have had some success at the Olympics."

Japan was the top-performing Asian country at this year's Olympic swimming competition, finishing fourth with two golds, two silvers and three bronzes. China was second-best in the continent, finishing sixth with a 1-2-3 haul.

Apart from starting early, Japan's swimmers also attend two month-long training camps each year in Tokyo and Osaka, on top of mini training camps that are held almost every month.

All bases are covered, including ensuring that these young swimmers learn to cope well with pressure.

Said Takahiro, head coach of the Itoman Showanomori Swimming School in Tokyo: "During training, the swimmers work on body, technique and heart.

"So they don't only work on technique, but also stress response and mental skills training."

Despite jumping into the deep end of competitive swimming at such a young age, there are no fears that the swimmers will suffer from burnout or exhaustion.

"The whole team works very well together. We are united," said Takahiro. "If one of them feels demoralised, the others will encourage them, and the coaches will also help in providing psychological support."

He insists that Asian swimming can still excel on the world stage despite Asian swimmers having less power than their Western counterparts as they are smaller in size.

"The short-distance races are not so good for us because we don't have as much power, but we can do well for a mid-distance course like a 200m race," added Takahiro.

The CSC Super Junior Invitational takes place today and tomorrow.

The meet will feature 430 young swimmers from local and overseas clubs, including those from Malaysia, Indonesia and India.

Among the 393 Singapore representatives is nine-year-old Lynette Some, who won five golds at the 47th Singapore National Age Group Swimming Championships in March.

Tokyo Swimming Club head coach Yoshida Takahiro (left) with (from right) Reon Kashiwagi, Chishina Wada, Kokomi Maekawa and Hijiri Yamada during a training session at the Chinese Swimming Club yesterday. Nine Japanese swimmers aged between 11 and 12 are here for this weekend's CSC Super Junior Invitational.
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