

J.LEAGUE 2011 SPECIAL

THE KIDS ARE ALBRIGHT

Hot newcomers look to fill gap left by overseas exodus

By Sean Carroll
Special to The Daily Yomiuri

The J.League kicks off its 19th season Saturday minus a dozen players who have moved to European clubs to further their careers in the past year.

The mass migration may cause some to assume that the J.League will be weaker this season, but the youngsters left behind are ready to prove them wrong.

Nowhere is this truer than in Nagoya, where last year's champion Grampus have been given a huge boost after winning the race to sign highly rated striker Kensuke Nagai from Fukuoka University.

Nagai, who turns 22 on Saturday, has had previous tastes of the J.League in brief spells at Vissel Kobe and Avispa Fukuoka. He was the top scorer at the Asian Games in Guangzhou, China, last November and has also already been involved with the full national team—having made his debut against Yemen and been included as a "support member" at the World Cup finals in South Africa last summer.

The striker has a strong-mindedness that belies his youth, and in the buildup to the Asian Games, his individual style meant that his ability to function in tandem with his teammates was frequently called into question by the media.

Such belief in his own abilities was a key attraction for Dragan Stojkovic, and the Grampus boss is confident that he has pulled off quite a coup.

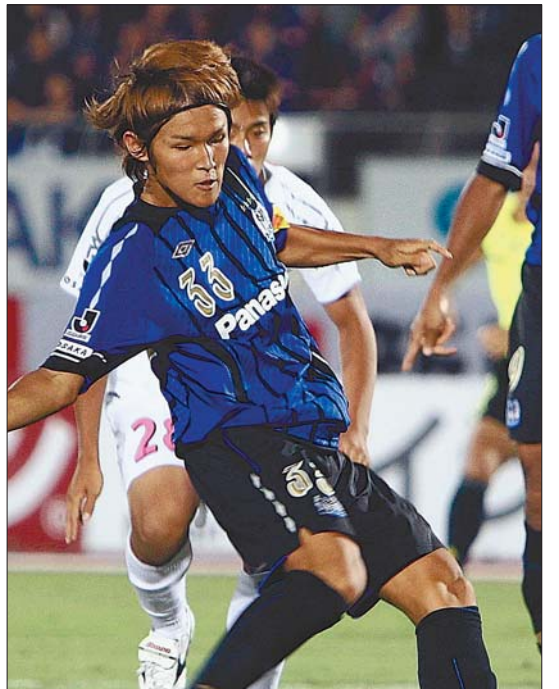
"He is a player with huge potential," the 2010 Manager of the Year told The Daily Yomiuri at the J.League's gala Kick Off Conference last week. "I think he will be very useful for the team. I think we made a good choice to bring him to Nagoya and it was a good choice to become a member at our club. He has a very good future."

Although Stojkovic expects Nagai to take time to adjust to the difference between the university league and the top of J1, he has a lot of confidence in him and predicts that he will catch a lot of people out over the coming season.

"This is a new life for him and of course he needs a little bit of time to adapt—to my work and to the Grampus style," Stojkovic said. "But my opinion is that he is intelligent enough and he does everything at 100 percent. Sometimes this is not good, but this is his style. This year I have to be very careful about that and I have to think about his condition."

Grampus' closest challenger last season, Gamba Osaka, possess in Shoki Hirai and Takashi Usami their own pair of incredibly gifted young players who look set to be key figures in the next generation of Japanese football.

Hirai was Gamba's most prolific player last season with 14 goals, and if he, like Kanazaki, had not



Gamba Osaka's Takashi Usami, left, and Yokohama Marinos' Yuji Ono are among the next generation of young stars the league will rely on to fill a hole left by the recent loss of top players to European clubs.

Nagoya's Super Cup victory last weekend. "Once he gets his chance, he'll show what he can do. He's extremely fast and he'll always cause problems."

In addition to Nagai, Grampus have fellow youngster Mu Kanazaki—also just 22—and after being desperately unlucky with injuries last season, Stojkovic feels that he must take better care of the former Oita Trinita wide-man.

"Last year he refreshed our play," Stojkovic said. "He is a very specific player and he does everything at 100 percent. Sometimes this is not good, but this is his style. This year I have to be very careful about that and I have to think about his condition."

One of the "platinum generation" Usami will struggle to replace, but he will be Ono, who burst onto the scene toward the end of last season.

The 18-year-old has now officially graduated to the top team from the youth ranks and will be instrumental as Yokohama F Marinos look to live up to their head coach's lofty ambition of winning the trophy for the first time since 2004.

Cerezo Osaka enjoyed an incredible return to J1 last season, sealing third place ahead of Kashima Antlers, but it is the latter which looks the stronger coming into 2011.

Oswaldo Oliveira's side has strengthened as a result of bringing in Takuya Honda from Shimizu S-Pulse, Daigo Nishi from Consadole Sapporo and Brazilian forward Carlos.

Cerezo, meanwhile, has had to deal with losing two of its standout performers from 2010 in Akihiro Ito, who moved to Mallorca in Spain, and Adriano, who defected to cross-town rival Gamba.

The Kansai side does welcome back South Korea under-23 international Kim Bo Kyung, who earned many admirers while on loan at Oita Trinita last year, but will do very well to replicate its

suffered with fitness problems in 2010, he could have been sitting pretty at the top of the league scoring chart as well.

The 18-year-old Usami's precocious talent, meanwhile, has seen him repeatedly linked with a move to Europe over the offseason, but he will continue his education in Osaka for now, having penned a new deal with Gamba.

The 2010 Young Player of the Year is certainly not short of confidence, and declared when asked his goal for the season, "I want to take all of the titles if possible."

Usami also suggested that the steady stream of youngsters appearing on the scene—dubbed by some as the "platinum generation"—could be set to continue over the coming months.

"Our age group does have many talented players and strong personalities," Usami told The Daily Yomiuri. "At the moment it is me and [Ryo] Miyaichi and [Yuji] Ono who are playing regularly, but maybe this year other players will emerge."

The spotlight may be roving at the moment as football fans tap up the plethora of Japanese talent on display, but Usami insists he will not take his eye off the ball.

"I try not to think too much about what other players are doing. I am impressed with them, but I just try to focus on myself."

"Yamada... is a big talent, a good talent, but you don't achieve your targets only with talent," the former Reds midfielder said at the Kick Off Conference. "There are many players in the world with big talent, but you also need good mentality, to change your mind and play seriously."

The Montenegro international affirms an almost fatherly affection when discussing his young star, saying, "I think he has the drive. He's a nice guy but he's also very hard. He looks nice, he looks like a baby, but I like him, he's a big talent."

J.League fans would be well advised to adopt a similar stance in 2011 and, like every good parent, fans should make sure to keep an eye on the kids.



All photos by The Yomiuri Shimbun

J2's silver lining

League legends Kazu, Gon still kicking in 2nd tier

By Sean Carroll
Special to The Daily Yomiuri

While the kids are taking over in the top flight and breathing new life into the kindergarten of J1, the second division will take on a far more mature air in 2011, boasting as it does several of the J.League's most seasoned professionals.

As the Samurai Blue's impressive showing at the 2010 World Cup provides more and more Japanese players with opportunities to move overseas, it is particularly fitting that Masashi "Gon" Nakayama—the first Japanese player to score at a World Cup finals—will be kicking up his boots this season for Consadole Sapporo for an incredible 19th J.League season.

And yet the 43-year-old Gon is not the most senior player to be taking to the field in the coming season.

That honor is reserved for the irrepressible Kazuyoshi "Kazu" Miura, who turned 44 last weekend. The golden boy of the league's early days will be looking to extend his record as the oldest scorer in league history, part of his swan song in the upper echelons of Japanese football with Yokohama FC.

Yokohama couldn't make a strong enough claim for a promotion spot last season, eventually finishing 15 points behind third-placed Avispa Fukuoka, but head coach Yasuyuki Kishino is convinced that Kazu's vast experience can be a key factor in his side making the grade this time around.

"He's incredible, 44 years old," Kishino gushed at the J.League's Kick Off Conference last week. "He's a leader and he understands the life of soccer. Stoic soccer. The things to eat, how to care for his physical condition. He has a strong heart, a soccer heart."

And Kishino doesn't believe that the beat will be slowing down any time soon, predicting that the man who brought the "kazu dance" to the world will be around for a while longer yet.

"He will keep going. After this year I don't think he will finish. He always wants to play soccer. Next year he will work hard again," Kishino said before



Consadole's Masashi "Gon" Nakayama, left, and FC Yokohama's Kazuyoshi "Kazu" Miura, 40-somethings who both won J.League MVP awards in the 1990s, have kept their careers going in the second division.

adding the caveat, "I don't think it is possible for him to play in the J.League until he is 50, though."

One team that will bring experience of a rather different kind to the party will be FC Tokyo, coming off its shocking relegation in 2010, which many had expected the club to build on its Nabisco Cup triumph of the previous year by making a concerted title challenge.

In Shuichi Gonda, Yuhei Tokunaga, Yasuyuki Konno, Naohiro Ishikawa and Sota Hirayama, the Gas Men possess a handful of veteran Japan internationals, and with the likes of Naotake Hanyu, Takuji Onomoto and former Albirex Niigata and, briefly, Gamba Osaka striker Pedro Junior also in its ranks, Tokyo will have to do a lot wrong to not be restored to J1 at season's end in December.

They will do well to heed the example of JEF United, though, with the Chiba club having last season failed to earn an instant return to the division it called home for 17 years.

JEF finished fourth in 2010 and seems to have taken stock of the levels of experience on display at its rivals in opting for a

similar approach this time around.

New head coach Dwight Lodeweges has arrived along with veteran Dutch midfielder Sander van Gessel and 33-year-old Norwegian striker Tor Hognes Aaroy, and the former Nagoya Grampus coach is in no doubt as to what he wants to bring some wise heads around for such a battle.

"Sander van Gessel is 34, experienced and a very special guy," Lodeweges said. "The team accepts him and he's a very nice guy and also a very good player—a leader."

"Young players can get upset. If we want promotion to J1 and it doesn't work out and we lose a game—and you will always lose a game, [Manchester] United, Real Madrid lose games—you must not get upset, you must recover from that. Those older players like Tor and Sander have seen the world and know it all and they can help us in this way."

Indeed, knowledge is power, and J2's professors of the game will be looking to utilize all of their expertise to ensure they are in a position to graduate to J1 come the end of the season.

J1 TEAM CAPSULES

Nagoya Grampus
Manager: Dragan Stojkovic
2010: 23-3-8 (1st)
Signing to watch: Kensuke Nagai. Grampus beat numerous clubs to the signature of the direct and confident Japan U-23 striker.
Prospects: Dealt smartly in the transfer market. With Junjo Fujimoto and Mu Kanazaki creating from wide positions, Nagai bolstering the experienced forward-line of Keiji Tsumami can match their form of last season, Gamba certainly have enough quality to maintain their usual push for the title.

Gamba Osaka
Manager: Akira Nishino
2010: 18-8-8 (2nd)
Signing to watch: Adriano. Acquired from Brazilian side SC Internacional after scoring 14 goals in 2010 on loan at local rival Cerezo. Will face his old teammates in opener.
Prospects: Shoki Hirai and Adriano present a very strong front line, and if experienced Yashuhiro Endo and precocious Takashi Usami can match their form of last season, Gamba certainly have enough quality to maintain their usual push for the title.

Cerezo Osaka
Manager: Levir Culpi
2010: 17-10-7 (3rd)
Signing to watch: Kim Bo Kyung. Returns after a year on loan at Trinita, with whom he won many admirers for his enterprising approach play.
Prospects: Last year was sensational but Cerezo may struggle with "second season" syndrome. Akihiro Ito, who moved to Mallorca, and Daigo Nishi arrives from Consadole and Takuya Honda has been recruited from S-Pulse. Expect Antlers to make Grampus work for the championship.

Kashima Antlers
Manager: Oswaldo de Oliveira
2010: 16-12-6 (4th)
Signing to watch: Carlos. Brazilian scored freely in Portugal last season. Replacing Marquinhos means big shoes to fill, but, at 1.90 meters, that shouldn't be a problem.
Prospects: Lost the fewest games of any team last season (6) but drew 12 times. As well as Carlos, fullback Alex Martins from JEF Daigo Nishi arrives from Consadole and Takuya Honda has been recruited from S-Pulse. Expect Antlers to make Grampus work for the championship.

Kawasaki Frontale
Manager: Naoki Soma
2010: 15-9-10 (5th)
Signing to watch: Koji Yamase. F Marinos fans were not happy to see Yamase leave. Has the potential to become a key figure at Todoroki.
Prospects: Featuring Eiji Kawashima and Chong Tse, the middle of last season deflated Frontale's campaign and now have followed this winter. Yamase and Yusuke Tanaka arrived from Mainz but it appears that looks like a long slog lies ahead in 2011.

Shimizu S-Pulse
Manager: Afshin Ghorbi
2010: 15-9-10 (5th)
Signing to watch: Naohiro Takahara. Much-travelled front-man hopes to follow in the footsteps of former Reds teammate Shoji Ono and reignite his career at S-Pulse.
Prospects: Shoji Okazaki, Junjo Fujimoto and Hiroshi Kato scored over half of S-Pulse's league goals in 2010, have all moved on. Daigo Kobayashi, Toshiyuki Takagi and Alex Broeze kept all attempts but it looks like a long slog lies ahead in 2011.

Yokohama F Marinos
Manager: Kazuishi Kimura
2010: 15-9-10 (5th)
Signing to watch: Hiroki Taniguchi. Suffered at Frontale after the arrival of Junichi Inamoto, but regular minutes could see him rediscover his best form.
Prospects: Masashi Oguro is not the man many would choose to lead the strikeforce of a club vying for a championship. Yuji Ono does provide a ray of hope, but the best Marinos can realistically hope for is to challenge for an Asian Champions League spot.

Sanfrece Hiroshima
Manager: Mihailo Petrovic
2010: 14-11-7 (6th)
Signing to watch: David Mujiri. Expect the experienced Georgian international to prove to be the latest of Mihailo Petrovic's inspired signings.
Prospects: It will be interesting to see how the defense copes with the loss of Tomoaki Makino and Ilija Stanoyevic, but Mujiri and Cristian Ante Tomic will look to complement the sprinkling of former youth teamers and an attack of Hisato Sato and Tadanari Lee.

Albirex Niigata
Manager: Hisashi Kurosaki
2010: 12-13-9 (9th)
Signing to watch: Bruno Lopes. Albirex fans will hope Brazilian striker is as prolific in orange as compatriots Edmilson and Pedro Junior were.
Prospects: Mitsuru Nagata, Marcio Richarides and Daigo Nishi have all moved on and will be huge losses. Naoki Ishikawa and Seiya Fujita have arrived from Consadole, but Niigata will do very well to match their success of the past couple of seasons.

Jubilo Iwata
Manager: Masaaki Yanagishita
2010: 11-11-11 (10th)
Signing to watch: Yoshiaki Fujita. Adaptable defender was brought in from Trinita to shore up a backline that conceded 49 goals in 2010.
Prospects: Should not be too concerned about relegation in 2011, but any ambitions for a finish much above the trapdoor are probably best shelved. Transfer activity was fairly unproductive, but Ryoshi Maeda's inevitable double-figure goal tally should see Jubilo survive the dip.

Omiya Ardija
Manager: Jun Suzuki
2010: 11-9-14 (12th)
Signing to watch: Kota Ueda. The 24-year-old midfielder from Jubilo impressed in preseason with his industrious and intelligent play.
Prospects: Could be the surprise package this season. Have brought in some promising signings in Ueda, Kim Young Gwon from FC Tokyo and Oita Trinita's Japan U-23 Keigo Higashi, and did very well to keep hold of Rafael. Expect a comfortable top-half finish at least.

Montedio Yamagata
Manager: Shinji Kobayashi
2010: 11-9-14 (13th)
Signing to watch: Hugo. Brazilian defender joins after stints in Poland, Portugal and Romania, where he sampled the UEFA Champions League with CFR Cluj.
Prospects: Have punched well above their weight for the past two seasons and 2011 could be make or break for them. Yuzo Tashiro and Chikashi Masuda have returned to Kashima after 134 spells and another relegation battle looks to be in the cards.

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Vissel Kobe
Manager: Masahiro Wada
2010: 9-11-14 (15th)
Signing to watch: Kenji Haneda. Defender spent several seasons struggling to establish himself at Antlers before becoming a fixture in the Cerezo defense.
Prospects: Masahiro Wada worked wonders to save Vissel last season and had the team playing some wonderful football to boot. Whether he can inspire the same level of performance over a full season remains to be seen, and another relegation battle could await.

Kashiwa Reysol
Manager: Nelsinho
2010: 9-11-14 (15th)
Signing to watch: Akihiro Hyodo. Hard-working midfielder brought in from S-Pulse adds some guile to the ranks.
Prospects: Nelsinho has made some intelligent additions to a squad full of confidence after losing just twice in route to the J2 title last season. Hyodo, An Yong Hak and Jorge Wagner will boost Reysol's midfield options, while a fit-again Koki Mizuno should see them settle safely above the drop zone.

Ventfore Kofu
Manager: Toshiya Miura
2010: 12-19-13-2 (2nd)
Signing to watch: Daisuke Kashiwa. Former Japan defender brings much-needed J1 experience after 13 years at S-Pulse.
Prospects: Despite having earned them promotion to J1, Ventfore replaced head coach Kazuo Uchida with Toshiya Miura for 2011. The former Kobe boss will need his new defensive recruits to work wonders and Mike Havenaar to match his 20-goal haul of last season to avoid the drop back to J2.

Avispa Fukuoka
Manager: Yoshiyuki Shinoda
2010: 12-21-6-3 (3rd)
Signing to watch: Norihisa Shimizu. Former Japan defender brings much-needed J1 experience after 13 years at S-Pulse.
Prospects: The last side to come up and so, naturally, everyone's first choice to go down, losing last season's top-scorer, Genki Nagasato, doesn't exactly help matters, although the acquisition of Kenmao Shigenatsu from FC Tokyo should give them a fighting chance.

MARCH				JULY					
14:00 Kofu vs Iwata	YamanashiBank	14:00 Niigata vs Kobe	Tohoku Denryoku Outourcing	27 (Wed)	19:00 Shimizu vs Yokohama M	Outsourcing Hiroshima Big Arch	16 (Sun)	Fukuoka vs Sendai	Level-5
14:00 Nagoya vs Yokohama M	Toyota	15:00 Shimizu vs Hiroshima	NiDoSoft	30 (Sat)	19:00 Hiroshima vs Niigata	Kashima	22 (Sat)	Kashiba vs Yamagata	Kashiba Todoroki
14:00 Hiroshima vs Sendai	Hiroshima Big Arch	15:00 Nagoya vs Yokohama M	NiDoSoft	7 (Sun)	19:00 Kashima vs C Osaka	Kashima	28 (Sun)	Kashiwa vs Yamagata	Kashiwa Todoroki
14:00 Fukuoka vs Niigata	Fukuoka	14:00 Kobe vs Kawasaki F	Mizuho	19:00 Kashima vs Kawasaki F	Kashima	18:00 C Osaka vs Urawa	18:00 C Osaka vs Urawa	Kashiwa Kawasaki F vs Niigata	Kashiwa Todoroki
14:00 Kawasaki F vs Yamagata	Todoroki	15:00 Omiya vs Niigata	Mizuho	19:00 Kawasaki F vs Urawa	NiDoSoft	18:00 Kobe vs C Osaka	18:00 Kobe vs C Osaka	Yamagata vs Niigata	Yurtec NiDoSoft
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13:00 Kobe vs Urawa	Home's	19:00 C Osaka vs Sendai	Kincho	31 (Sun)	18:00 Hiroshima M vs Shimizu	Nagoya	23 (Sun)	Hiroshima M vs Urawa	Hiroshima Big Arch
15:00 Kashima vs Omiya	Kashiba	14 (Sat)	18:00 C Osaka vs Kashima	14 (Sat)	18:00 C Osaka vs Kashima	Home's	29 (Sat)	Kashiba vs Sendai	Yurtec NiDoSoft
13:00 Sendai vs Iwata	Yurtec	13:00 Sendai vs Iwata	Yurtec	18:00 Sendai vs Kashiba	Yurtec	18:00 Sendai vs Kashiba	18:00 Sendai vs Kashiba	Kashiba vs Sendai	Kashiba Todoroki
13:00 Shimizu vs Kashima	Outsourcing	14:00 Niigata vs Yokohama M	Yurtec	19:00 Kashiba vs Niigata	Level-5	19:00 Kashiba vs Niigata	19:00 Kashiba vs Niigata	Yokohama M vs G Osaka	Yurtec NiDoSoft
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