

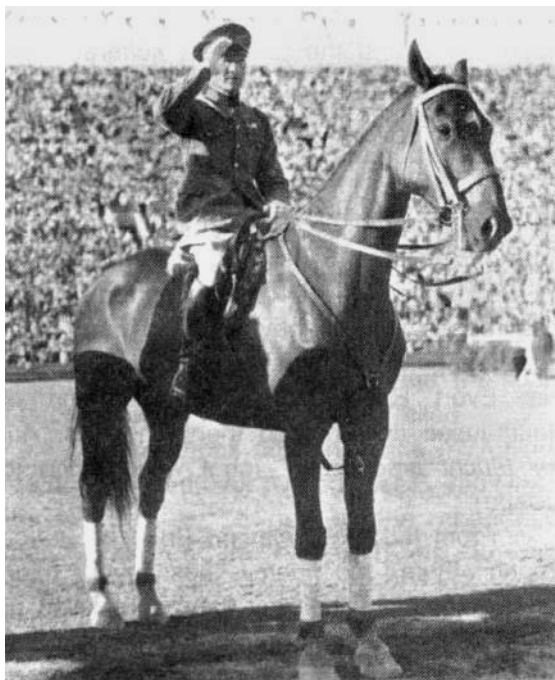


## BARON NISHI

### 1932 OLYMPIC GOLD MEDALLIST FOR JAPAN

by *Katsumi Takahashi*

Ιππασία  
Equestrian



1902 was the centenary of the birth of Japan's only Equestrian Gold medallist: he was born on July 12, 1902 as Takeichi NISHI, in Furuya (Aichi Prefecture).

His life story is worth re-telling, as he showed that politics and sport do not have to mix.

His father (Baron Tokujiro NISHI, one time Japanese Foreign minister was already 56 when Takeichi was born.

His father had already lost two children so this new son was very welcome. The youngster grew up 'like a bamboo'.

When he was almost ten years old, on March 13, 1912, his father passed away and young Takeichi inherited the title of Baron NISHI.

Two years later, at the age of twelve, Takeichi NISHI became an orphan, when his mother Mine passed away on October 30, 1914. Takeichi now inherited his father's immense fortune and many properties, but this wealth, which should have given him economic independence and a carefree youth, could never replace the love of his parents.

Quick tempered, a speed-devil, a lover of thrills, as a youngster he had a camera airgun and a motorcycle. Even as a 15 year old he flew through the suburbs of Tokyo.

Although NISHI entered junior high school in 1915, he attended for only one year. He

dreamed of becoming a military man and entered the *Army Cadet School* in September 1916. In April 1921, he was admitted to the Military Academy. He bought a *Harley Davidson* motorcycle and later a *Chrysler Convertible*, so at an early age showed to be impressed by American workmanship.

In his first year as a cadet, he had to learn to ride a horse. But on the first day of their training, NISHI climbed upon his horse and jumped right over the fence with it. The instructor and his classmates were flabbergasted.

Later, one of NISHI'S friends sat in his (NISHI'S) *Chrysler Convertible*, and challenged NISHI to a wager, and before the friend could react, NISHI on top of his horse jumped right over the car with its occupant. Another demonstration of NISHI'S quick tempered and sometimes even violent character.

In April 1922, NISHI was ordered to join the first regiment of the Japanese Cavalry. It was an opportunity for him to fully concentrate on equestrian sport, whilst continuing his military career.

On July 18, 1924, he graduated from the Military Academy, and on October 25, 1924 he was promoted second lieutenant in the Cavalry.

On December 27 that same year, he married Takeko KAWAMURA. A year later, in November 1925, his a daughter was born and in July 1927 a son.

In October of that year he was admitted to *Chiba Narashino* (a special cavalry training school), and was promoted to the rank of first lieutenant. He continued his military and equestrian training until September 1929. Because of his way with horses, he was selected in March 1930 as a possible for the Japanese team in Los Angeles in 1932.

He was even permitted to visit Los Angeles in April 1930, to inspect the Olympic equestrian facilities.

During this visit he met many celebrities and even got acquainted with filmstars like Douglas FAIRBANKS and Mary PICKFORD.

NISHI liked the good life and many nights were spent drinking with his friends at the bar. He met young officers from Belgium, Scotland and Great Britain, and became fluent in English.

In July 1930, he bought the horse *Uranus* (*Uranusu* in Japanese) in Italy. With this horse, he passed all selection criteria in 1931 with flying colours, and was formally chosen to represent Japan as a member of the Olympic team for 1932.

In May 1932, the Japanese team including NISHI travelled to Los Angeles, arriving by ship at Long Beach. The equestrian team had rented a house near the *Riviera Country Club*, which enabled them to have regular practice there for two months before the games.

NISHI again played the role of a playboy: he got himself a *Packard Convertible* with a radio, which he always used to drive from his lodgings to training at the *Riviera Country Club*. This, of course, attracted not only many women, but also made him into some sort of celebrity and with his fluent English language made him a wellknown partygoer, who regularly called on his friends amongst them FAIRBANKS and PICKFORD.

It must be said, that there were quite a few compatriots who did not regard NISHI'S behaviour as quite suitable (and honorable) for a Japanese Army officer! Jealousy?!

Then came the highlight of Baron NISHI'S equestrian career.

On August 14, 1932, at the final day of the Olympic Games in the *Los Angeles Memorial Colosseum*, and with glorious weather and a crowd of over 87,000 people watching him, Lieutenant Baron Takeichi NISHI won the first and so far only equestrian Olympic gold medal for Japan in the individual jumping event with 8 faults.

It was a day of glory for Japans equestrian community!

Ever since equestrian sports were introduced during the 1912 Stockholm Olympic Games, it was tradition to have the jumping contest as the last event before the start of the official closing ceremony.

The participating horsemen (eleven in total) came from the United States (3), Sweden (3), Mexico (3) and Japan (2). The course contained eighteen obstacles, requiring twenty jumps with varying heights from 4 feet 3 inches to 5 feet 3 inches.

When the starting flag went down, NISHI on his chestnut *Uranus* took off. The first five obstacles were cleared without problems, even the sixth which was passed over with a beautiful jump. The public was entranced and



gave the rider and his horse an applause, immediately followed by a cry from the public because the hind legs of the horse had slightly touched the water of the obstacle. At the tenth obstacle, which was adorned with a branch of a eucalyptus, *Uranus* refused once, but NISHI remained calm, reversed and tried again. The next effort was successful and the remaining part of the course was completed with no further mishap.

Takeichi NISHI had one refusal (penalty 7 faults); and completed the course in 2 minutes 42 1/5 seconds, (time penalty 1 fault) for a total of 8 faults, which gave him the Olympic gold medal, ahead of CHAMBERLIN of the United States with 12 penalty points for the Olympic silver medal, and Von ROSEN Jr. of Sweden with 16 penaltypoints for the Olympic bronze medal.

Watching NISHI'S exploits from the stands of the Olympic Stadium were the other new gold medallists for Japan: Chuhei NAMBU (triple jump), Yasuji MIYAZAKI (swimming, 100 metres free style); Yoshiyuki TSURUTA (swimming, 200 metres breaststroke); Masaji KIYOKAWA (swimming, 100 metres backstroke); Kusuo KITAMURA (swimming, 1500 metres free style) and the team members for the 4 x 200 metres free style relay.

Most of the medal winners were in the Olympic Stadium to attend the Closing Ceremony, during which the Victory award ceremonies would take place.

Of course, NISHI'S victory in the final event was a big surprise for most of the people, as everyone had thought the American CHAMBERLIN to be the favourite.

The Games of the Xth Olympiad were a high success for the Japanese team, mostly because of the fantastic results gained in the swimming pool by the male swimmers (eleven medals overall).

NISHI became extremely popular after the Games were finished. He received invitations

from all over California and he was also invited to the groundbreaking ceremony for the *Santa Anita Racetrack*.

He received a honorary citizenship from the City of Los Angeles.

In 1933, the year after the Los Angeles Olympics, Japan left the *League of Nations*, and distrust of the nation grew amongst the international community.

Against the background of these times, the victory won by NISHI in the last event of the Games was very important. In addition to his personal appearance he was taller than most Japanese, he had a fluent command of the English language, a baron's title and the acquaintance of many Hollywood celebrities, he may have given his country Japan a better image in the eyes of the world during 1932.

In the situation where anti-Japanese voices were mounting, NISHI showed himself to be an unique diplomat.

NISHI'S return home to Japan was also magnificent. The ship carrying the Japanese team arrived in Yokohama on September 8, 1932 and after disembarking, all were transferred to Tokyo by special train.

At the Tokyo Railway station, thousands of spectators greeted the homecoming Japanese Olympic team, shouting: "*Banzai, Banzai*".

The Mayor of Tokyo, the Chairman of the *Japanese Amateur Sports Association* and the Minister for Education had all gathered in the great hall of the station and gave them a big welcome party, before they were allowed to go home.

On July 31, 1936, a day before the start

of the Berlin Olympic Games, the *International Olympic Committee* awarded the Games of the XIIIth Olympiad in 1940 to Tokyo, Japan.

NISHI again competed in Berlin with his horse Uranus, in both team and individual-jumping events. This time he met with little success: the Japanese team finished in 6th place with 75 faults, and NISHI came in 20th place with 20.75 faults.

In December 1936, NISHI was ordered to Manchuria for military duty.

Upon his return from his duties in 1937, Baron NISHI was elected on the commission for the equestrian sports of the Organizing Committee for the 1940 Olympics.

However, this was not to happen because war broke out with China on July 7, 1937, after the clash at the Marco Polo Bridge.<sup>1</sup>

The IOC had its next session in Cairo, Egypt in March 1938 and the Chinese IOC member WANG proposed a change of the host nation because of the Japanese aggression against his country.

In spite of renewed assurances from the Japanese Organizing Committee that they would organise the 1940 Olympic Games; on 16 July 1938, under pressure from the Japanese government, the Organizing Committee relinquished its mandate and gave the 1940 Olympic Games back to the IOC.

In August 1940, NISHI was temporarily transferred to an administrative official to the *Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry*.

On December 7, 1941, the war broke out between Japan and the United States (and many other countries, like Great Britain,

---

<sup>1</sup> *Lugou Qiao*, also known as the *Marco Polo Bridge*, is one of earliest segmented stone arch bridge about 16 km in the outside of Beijing. The bridge is 260 meters long and has 250 marble balustrades supporting 485 carved stone lions. First built in 1192, the original arches were washed away in the 17th century. The bridge is a composite of different eras, widened in 1969 to span the Yongding River near the town of Wanping. In the Mingchang period (1190-1208) of the *Jin dynasty*, the bridge was listed into the "*Eight Scenic Spots of Yanjing (Beijing)*" under the title "*Lugou Xiaoyue*" (*Moon Over Lugou at Daybreak*), which has remained throughout the *Yuan*, *Ming*, and *Qing dynasties*. In 1751, Emperor QIANLONG of the *Qing dynasty* (1644-1911) personally edited the poetic titles for the 8 views, and wrote the inscriptions for the steles, including the "*Lugou Xiaoyue*" tablet which still stands by the bridge. The *Lugou Bridge* has been standing over the Yongding River for 800 years. The entire bridge is made of huge granite blocks, with carved stone lions crouched along the railings on both sides. No two lions are alike, and smaller carved lions can be found strategically placed on and beside them. In ancient times the bridge was renowned for its spectacular views of the moon during the *Mid-autumn Festival*. On July 7th, 1937, the bridge featured in China's history when the Japanese Kwantung Army began its war to conquer China. It is known for the "*Marco Polo Bridge Incident*". During the next 8 years, Japan occupied most of China and killed millions of Chinese. On July 7, 1937, Japanese troops illegally occupied a railway junction near Wanping and fighting erupted. This is considered by many to be the date when the war between China and Japan began. The war ended with the end of WWII.

Australia, New Zealand, and The Netherlands). Not much is known as to exactly when NISHI was called back into the Japanese Army, but it is known that in March 1942, he departed to join the headquarters of the tank division in Neian as a major.

In August 1943 he was promoted to Lieutenant-Colonel and on June 26, 1944, he was assigned as commanding officer of the 26<sup>th</sup> tank regiment at the isle of Iwo-jima. Iwo-jima lies 1250 kilometres to the south from Tokyo. It is one of the Ogasawara Islands.

He was transported to his regiment at Iwo-Jima by a small battleship, which was later sunk by an American submarine.

On February 19, 1945, the United States Forces landed at Iwo-Jima and heavy fighting broke out all over the island. The story of this epic battle can be read in the book: *The Rising Sun – The Decline and Fall of the Japanese Empire*, by John TOLAND (Published by Random House, 1970).

As commander of the 26<sup>th</sup> Tank Regiment, Baron Takeichi NISHI defended his positions to the very end of the battle. According to the book by John TOLAND, NISHI had carried his whip, the one he had used during his Olympic victory in 1932, through the whole period of the fighting, and he also carried a lock of *Uranus*' mane in his breast pocket.

Some sources<sup>2</sup> claim that American officers, having learned that NISHI was on the island, tried to contact him to induce him to surrender. The message was: "*Baron Nishi, you received great honors in Los Angeles. Surrender is not a disgrace. We will greet you, who have fought bravely, with respect.*" Baron NISHI never answered.

Another, more 'fantastic' tale told that the Americans even had a Motor Gun Boat circling

the island using loudspeakers with a call on NISHI to surrender, but this story has never been confirmed.

NISHI died a honorable death on March 22, 1945. The exact way he died is not known, but many officers and men preferred death above surrender, even if it happened by their own hands.

Seven days after the anniversary of Baron NISHI's death, his favorite horse *Uranus* died of an illness. The horse was 25 years old.

The Olympic gold medal, which Takeichi NISHI won in Los Angeles in 1932 now rests in the *Prince Chichibunomiya Memorial Museum* in Tokyo, together with his riding boots (made by the *Hermès* Company in France).

The mane of *Uranus* was discovered to be in the United States in 1990, and it is now stored, according to the Hokkaido folk-customs, in a monument in the town hall.

NISHI remains the only Equestrian gold for Japan to this day. The full record of Japanese success is as follows.

- In judo: 23 Olympic goldmedals
- In wrestling: 20 Olympic goldmedals
- In swimming: 15 Olympic goldmedals
- In athletics: 5 Olympic goldmedals
- In volleyball: 3 Olympic goldmedals
- In weightlifting: 2 Olympic goldmedals
- In boxing: 1 Olympic goldmedal
- In rifle-shooting: 1 Olympic goldmedal
- In equestrian: 1 Olympic goldmedal.

---

<sup>2</sup> WALLECHINSKY, David, *The Complete Book of the Summer Olympics*. Sydney 2000 edition, p. 414; and KLUGE, Volker, *Olympische Sommerspiele - Die Chronik I - Athen 1896-Berlin 1936*, p. 763.