

THE DIRECTOR

NORIO SASAKI AND THE JAPAN WOMEN’S TEAM WON A HISTORIC FIFA WOMEN’S WORLD CUP IN 2011 IN THE AFTERMATH OF ONE OF THE NATION’S WORST-EVER NATURAL DISASTERS, AND NOW THE COACH IS LOOKING TO MASTERMIND A SUCCESSFUL DEFENCE AT THE 2015 EDITION IN CANADA.

By: Daniel Pordes Photos: World Sport Group/The Asian Football Confederation

The story of the Japan women’s team at the 2011 FIFA Women’s World Cup reads like a plot written in Hollywood. A national tragedy in the March 11 earthquake and tsunami preceded the tournament by four months, but for three weeks that summer, the Nadeshiko helped bring hope back to the land of the Rising Sun.

At the culmination of the 32-match tournament, in true sports movie fashion, underdogs Japan faced the number one seeded United States of America in Frankfurt in front of near 50,000 spectators and, despite twice going behind, would claw their way back each time before going on to triumph in a penalty shootout to scenes of unprecedented joy back home.

And at the helm of the historic milestone for Asian football, which represented the first senior male or female side from the continent to lift a world title, was coach Norio Sasaki.

“The matches of the Nadeshiko always played with people’s emotions, making them nervous or excited. We never won two or three nil without any concerns, there was – and is always – some drama and excitement about it,” says Sasaki, whose own slivers of grey amidst his black hair bear a visible testament to his words.

“That’s why I call myself Steven Spielberg, because I direct all this drama and story of the team.”

Sasaki’s own backstory prior to his involvement in women’s football is relatively undistinguished. A career as a professional player for NTT Kanto Soccer Club ended with retirement aged 33 and a





move into various coaching roles at the same club which would become Omiya Ardija.

The Yamagata-native's star began to rise, though, when he took on the role of assistant to Koji Ohasi, coach of the Japan women's national team, as well as the position of coach of its U-20 team, in 2006.

Under Ohasi and Sasaki, Japan finished fourth at the 2006 AFC Women's Asian Cup before Sasaki took the U-19 team to the final of the 2007 AFC U-19 Women's Championship.

And Sasaki's continued success with the development side saw him take over the helm of the senior team a year later.

The Nadeshiko had previously finished as runners-up on four occasions at the AFC Women's Asian Cup, as well as reaching the quarter-finals at both the 1995 FIFA Women's World Cup and 2004 Olympic Games, and were routinely on the cusp of a top 10 ranking.

"When I first took over as national team coach, I felt the team had a high potential," recalls Sasaki.

"Looking at the team, they had skills and strong teamwork, and I felt we could take advantage of this aspect and add my tactics to take them to the next level.

"The strategy was to be able to play

defence and offence at the same time. To press the ball high, win it, and keep possession. And step-by-step the players began to put into practice on the field what I had imagined."

One of Sasaki's first tests as coach was the 2008 EAFF Women's East Asian Cup in Chongqing, China and the Nadeshiko passed with it flying colours after winning the tournament with a 100% record ahead of DPR Korea, China and Korea Republic.

And Sasaki and his charges were back in China for the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing where a fourth place finish after losing out on the bronze medal to Germany, represented a best ever result.

A third trip to China the following year, this time with the U-19 team, saw Sasaki successfully guide the development side to a continental title at the AFC U-19 Women's Championship, and in 2010 Japan added the Asian Games title, whilst also defending their EAFF crown.

The main focus for Sasaki that year, though, was on the 2010 AFC Women's Asian Cup, with not only a maiden title, but also FIFA World Cup qualification on the line.

And although the Nadeshiko came up short on the first target, losing to eventual winners Australia in the semi-finals, their third place

finish was enough to secure them a spot in Germany for the 2011 FIFA Women's World Cup.

"The tournaments we played in the build up to the World Cup were very important as they helped to give confidence and momentum to the team," says Sasaki.

"Being in the best four at the Beijing Olympics meant we then started to get invitations for international matches against the United States and Germany, which was a big thing for us. That's how we could improve our game further and we got a lot of lessons from playing against the United States, in particular."

Football, though, was far from many people's minds on Friday 11 March 2011 when the most powerful earthquake ever recorded to have hit Japan rocked the nation. Near to 16,000 people lost their lives as extensive and severe structural damage shook north-eastern Japan and the resulting tsunami also caused nuclear accidents in the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant complex that necessitated the evacuation of hundreds of thousands of residents.

It was a disaster on such a scale that then Japanese Prime Minister Naoto Kan labelled it "the toughest and most difficult crisis for Japan in the last 65 years".

Left 2010 AFC Women's Asian Cup

Above 2011 AFC Coach of the Year

Right 2014 AFC Women's Asian Cup

And it was with this backdrop of such a catastrophe which Sasaki and his players travelled to Germany for the 2011 FIFA Women's World Cup in June.

"We knew people back home were having a tough time and trying to cope with this difficult situation. So we were hoping we could perform well in Germany to give them hope," says Sasaki, whose side were drawn in a group with England, New Zealand and Mexico.

And the tournament began well for the Nadeshiko with a 2-1 opening victory against New Zealand with Yuki Ogimi and Aya Miyama scoring the goals. A comprehensive 4-0 victory against Mexico with a Homare Sawa hat-trick followed that seemed to put Japan in control of the group, but a 2-0 defeat by England meant Sasaki's side would finish second and up against it in the quarter-final, with reigning champions and hosts Germany their opponent.

"The team had improved a lot from the first game to the second game, although our defeat against England had seen our confidence go down massively. As we had such a short time to prepare for the game against the Germans, the most important thing was to erase the

memory of that defeat and change the mood of the team," recalls Sasaki.

"So I showed the players videos of news clips from back home of people who had lost their homes in the earthquake, who had to stay in gymnasiums instead. Despite their loss, they were still trying to restore and clean up their homes. And videos of the volunteers who were helping people to restore the towns and houses.

"By thinking about how we could work together like those volunteers, like the people back home, to help give courage to our countrymen with our performances, we gave power to the team. This motivation from the videos helped the players become united. It let the players know that it would be a joyful thing to play Germany in such a big game and I believe this change in mindset helped us get victory."

In front of a capacity crowd in Wolfsburg, Sasaki's side duly pulled off the shock of the tournament as they beat the hosts with substitute Karina Maruyama scoring with 12 minutes of extra-time remaining to secure a 1-0 victory.

The stunning result and boost in morale meant not even Sweden forward Josefine Oqvist's 10th minute opener in the semi-final that followed could hold back the Nadeshiko, who scored three times through Nahomi Kawasumi's brace and Sawa's fourth of the tournament to seal a 3-1 win.

But with two-time champions the United States defeating Brazil in the other semi-final, Japan were set to face a side they had failed to beat in 25 previous matches, drawing three and losing the rest.

"There was no real pressure for me. I always think that when it gets to matchday as a coach there is not a lot I can do during the game, so I don't think I have a lot of pressure," says Sasaki.

"I always think that preparing for the match is my job, but during the game, it's the players who need to play on the field. I can't play for them.

"But I was confident that now we are in a final, we are already in the situation that the Japanese people can praise us because we made it to there. I just hoped that the players could enjoy it."

After dominating the first half, the United States took the lead after 69 minutes through Alex Morgan before Miyama equalised from close range with nine minutes of normal time



remaining. Extra-time saw Abby Wambach put the Americans ahead again, but with three minutes of the additional 30 left, Sawa scored her tournament-leading fifth from a corner to take the game to penalties.

"The penalty takers were very nervous and they were feeling a lot of responsibility. So I went to have a conversation with the players, it was nothing special, but the team's mood made us laugh," says Sasaki, who is captured in footage from the final smiling as he talks to his players before the spot-kicks.

"In the semi-finals the United States had won in a penalty shoot-out against Brazil and we had all the details from that." Shannon Boxx, Carli Lloyd and Tobin Heath all stepped up and failed to convert for the Americans, with goalkeeper Ayumi Kaihori saving two, and although Yuki Ogimi also saw her penalty saved by Hope Solo, Miyama, Mizuho Sakaguchi and Saki Kumagai all scored to give Japan a stunning victory.

"All the penalty takers for the US were the same as against Brazil and they went the same way again. If they'd changed their tactics maybe we wouldn't have won," recalls Sasaki.

"At the time, I maybe didn't realise what a big achievement it was. I went to the US bench to shake hands, then to do the same

*Left 2011 FIFA
Women's World Cup*

with the referees, and waved to my wife and daughter in the stadium.

"But it wasn't until we got back to Japan that I realised how big what we achieved in Germany was, as all the people praised us in many ways. If I'd realised how a big deal this was, I wouldn't have been smiling before the penalty shootout!"

The entire team were granted the People's Honour Award for their achievement, only the 19th time the accolade had been bestowed since 1977, with Miyama named 2011 AFC Women's Player of the Year for the second time and Sasaki named the 2011 AFC Coach of the Year as well as FIFA World Coach of the Year for Women's Football.

Since those heady days in Germany, the Nadeshiko have continued to thrive with a silver medal at the 2012 Olympic Games, the first for a Japanese women's football team, and in Vietnam at the 2014 AFC Women's Asian Cup, Japan ended their 37-year wait for a maiden women's continental championship after defeating defending champions Australia.

"Winning the AFC Women's Asian Cup was one of my biggest projects, but the AFC

*Above 2014 AFC Women's
Asian Cup*

Asian Cup was not just a tournament in its own right, and a qualifier for the World Cup, but also a preparation for the World Cup. We were figuring out about the members of the squad and the combination of each player and also how to play tactically," says Sasaki.

"I wasn't totally satisfied by the performance of the players, for example, in some of the games we should have got better results, and the team still had a lot of work to do to improve before the World Cup."

After the AFC Women's Asian Cup, though, Japan finished a disappointing ninth at the Algarve Cup in March ahead of the side's trip to Canada for the FIFA Women's World Cup in June where they are drawn in Group C with Switzerland, Cameroon and Ecuador.

AFC Women's Asian Cup runners-up Australia, semi-finalists China and Korea Republic along with debutants Thailand, who defeated hosts Vietnam in the fifth place play-off, will also make the trip to Canada.

"As the defending champions, the tournament will be a new challenge for us. There are more teams in the tournament and it will be tougher than before," says Sasaki.

"All the teams will come to beat us and we need to use that mentality to make us stronger. I want to prepare my players with the pride of champions."