
Japanese national football team arrive at the World Cup camp in Saas-Fee

Warm welcome to the glacier village

On their arrival in Saas-Fee the 50 members of the Japanese national football team were greeted with a loud GANBARE NIPPON! (Do your best Japan!) by 110 local primary school children. A crowd of spectators and over 100 journalists from Switzerland and abroad were also present to welcome the team after their long trip.

Half an hour before the Japanese team's arrival in Saas-Fee, the square outside the village post office was already crowded with onlookers and media representatives. Some 110 local primary school children had also gathered and were waiting to greet the team. Looking eager and enthusiastically waving little flags, they entertained the waiting crowd with the Swiss songs, music and chants that they had learned especially for the occasion. For a short while they were the centre of attention, with journalists surrounding them to take photographs. However, when the footballers' bus came into sight there was a sudden commotion as journalists scrambled to for the spots with the best view of the team. The children started to cheer loudly, waving their flags and proudly raising the banners they had painted.

As the skies decided to send down a few drops of rain to welcome the foreign guests too, the weary Japanese team quickly took their places in the Allalino (a small red electric train), which would later take them to their hotel. Sheltered in their "box seats", they were able to watch the welcoming programme in comfort. After the musicians from the group Alphornfreunde vom Gletscherdorf had played the last notes of their musical programme in their traditional costumes, Felix Zurbriggen, the Mayor of Saas-Fee, gave a short welcoming speech. He thanked the whole Japanese football team for choosing Saas-Fee as their training-camp destination and wished them best of luck for the upcoming World Cup. Interpreting for Zurbriggen was Rumi Sakunaga from Switzerland Tourism Tokyo. Along with Switzerland Tourism's Regional Director for Asia, Roger Zbinden, Sakunaga will be busy supporting Saas-Fee/Saastal Tourism throughout the team's stay by providing translations and assisting the Japanese media.

Japanese Ambassador Ichiro Komatsu travelled from Bern especially for the event and took to the stage after the mayor to welcome his team.

Roger Zbinden together with Simon Bumann, the Director of the Saas-Fee / Saastal Tourism, also took their turns to greet the team and offer words of encouragement for the upcoming matches.

Unsurprisingly, it was the footballers who were the focus of the journalists' attention during the various speeches, with cameras flashing away throughout. However, when the red Allalino train eventually left to take the Japanese team to their hotel, it was time for someone else to step into the limelight. The primary school children once again gave it their all and sang and cheered for all they were worth, so that the footballers in the train – tired as they all were – couldn't help smiling and chuckling at so much enthusiasm.

Five tonnes of luggage

Once the welcome programme was over, the relief that everything went smoothly was but short-lived, for the next challenge wasn't long in coming: Just moments after the square had emptied, the team's luggage and training equipment arrived in Saas-Fee – over five tonnes of it! The people responsible for delivering it stared wide-eyed at the pile, wondering how they were going to get it to the Hotel Schweizerhof Gourmet & Spa, where the team is staying. Would they really have to load everything into electric cars as was initially planned? That would certainly be quite a feat! However, to everyone's great relief word then arrived that the truck had been granted a special permit to take the whole lot over to the hotel. Once there, the Japanese team proved their spontaneity and willingness to help. Everyone from the footballers to the officials rolled up their sleeves and helped out, and within a good half hour everything was unloaded.

Jam-packed programme for first day

What a day: arrival in Saas-Fee at 1 p.m., a short welcome ceremony on the post square, travel to the hotel, check in and unload the luggage, eat and then off to the first open training session in the "Saas-Fee stadium", which has been especially prepared for the Japanese team.

At 5 p.m. everyone who was interested was invited to watch the national team's first 90-minute altitude training session. The spectator stands were quite crowded with Saas-Fee residents, along with some guests and Japanese fans who had travelled especially to see their team. In addition, around 100 media representatives were lined up along the edge of the pitch waiting for the best picture.

The spectators weren't safe from the media either, with some film teams taking the opportunity to conduct interviews with them and the event organisers.

After the training session, journalists also had a chance to ask some of the players a few questions. However, given the number of journalists compared to the number of players, there was a lot of jostling to get to the front.

More open training sessions...

... followed on 27 May at 10 a.m. and 5 p.m. While the morning session was somewhat rainy, the players had more luck later that day: The sun came out in the afternoon, even if some of the mountains were still hiding behind the clouds.

Now that the two open training sessions on 27 May have also taken place, the team will train in private in sessions which will be closed to the public, with the pitch area shielded from view so the team can concentrate on their training. As happened for the first time on the 28th at 5 p.m.

However, according to the Japanese Football Association (JFA), the last 15 minutes of every closed training session will be open to the media. Journalists will have the opportunity to interview players in the "mixed zone" after every morning training session, whether open or closed. In general, no afternoon interviews will be scheduled, unless for some reason a morning training session does not take place, in which case the team will of course be available for interviews in the afternoon.

Journalists should be aware that this schedule could be changed at any time, however, and the head coach may spontaneously decide to change these arrangements.

The upcoming programme

Accompanied by Japanese journalists, the entire team will travel to Graz in Austria on 29 May for a friendly match against England to be held on 30 May. When they return to the Valais, they will play a training match against FC Sion in St Niklaus on 31 May.

After that two training sessions a day are scheduled to take place in Saas-Fee on 1, 2 and 3 June. According to the current plan, these training sessions will all be closed to the public. Any additional open training sessions will be decided on and announced by the head coach on the preceding evening.

The grand finale before the Japanese national team heads off to South Africa on 5 June will take place on 4 June in Sion, also in the Valais, where they will play a friendly against the Ivory Coast. And guess who will be there to cheer them on? That's right– the 110 primary school children from Saas-Fee!

Already a big hit in Japan, the little stars are sure to charm everyone with their uplifting songs and enthusiasm. Ganbare Nippon! *sf / 28 May 2010*

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