

Implementation of ‘System Play’

Over the History of Japanese Basketball Techniques

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Abstract

This study intends to discuss the process in which ‘System Play’ was implemented (1933–1936) in the history of Japanese basketball. The purpose is to shed light on the studies on the developing Japanese basketball over history. In 1933, the Japan Basketball Association invited Jack Gardner from the U.S.A. for talks around Japan. At that time, he introduced ‘System Play’ which was one of the most innovative tactics in the U.S.A. at that time.

Jack Gardner also introduced the ‘Bally System’ tactic to Japanese basketball. This ‘Bally System’ also became the foundation to implement ‘System Play’ in the country. However, the skills could not be mastered at that time due to poor basic skills. To improve the basic skills, the ‘Five-Man Figure 8 Continuities’ system was introduced. The ‘Bally System’ requires varied techniques of dribbling, which is a fundamental basketball technique. However, the ‘Five-Man Figure 8 Continuities’ technique was a ‘System Play’ that could be performed without much dribbling technique. This was especially noteworthy, since the trends of that time was to consider dribbling as a deadly fruit and therefore, the climate was to refrain from implementing dribbling as a tactic. The Japanese basketball circle successfully re-confirmed the fundamental skills necessary by implementing the ‘Five-Man Figure 8 Continuities’ technique. After acquiring these skills, they later found solid grounds to incorporate the ‘Bally System’. Implementation of ‘System Play’ not only drastically improved Japanese basketball skills and strategies, but also became a factor to help win good results at the Berlin Olympics (1936).

1. Introduction

The Japan Basketball Association was founded in 1930. The Japanese basketball industry has rapidly become a competition sport thereafter. Implementation of ‘System Play’ (1933~) can be attributed as one of the factors that made this a competitive sport when reviewing skills from technical and strategic aspects. By discussing the process in which ‘System Play’ was implemented, this study intends to shed light on the process in which Japanese basketball became a competitive sport over its history.

With the organization of the Japan Basketball Association (1930), the establishment became unified. Throughout the process, many talks, seminars and workshops were offered to make basketball a competitive sport. However, as mentioned later, Japanese teams could not yield results at international games. Back in those days, the only international championship games that the Japanese basketball team was able to play at was the Far Eastern Basketball Championship games (1917~). The 3 countries including Japan, the Philippines and ROC (Republic of China) competed at the basketball games at the Far Eastern Basketball Championship. Japan was in last place 5 times of the 6 competitions that the Japanese team competed in up to the 9th Championship games in 1930, leaving extremely poor results.

Basketball became an official game of the Olympics at the Berlin Olympics in 1936. With this, the Japanese basketball industry became extremely interested in international games. As a result, they aimed to acquire higher skills on an international level. About that time, in 1933, the Japanese basketball circle was at a turning point. They invited Jack Gardner (hereinafter called, Gardner), from the U.S.A. as a special lecturer to talk about basketball. He provided talks (hereinafter called, Gardner Seminar) around the country over a period of roughly one month. During Gardner’s Seminar, he widely coached on basketball skills from fundamental techniques to team tactics. Since the Gardner Seminar, a team tactic called ‘System Play’ entered the spotlight of Japanese basketball publications. Gardner was the first one to introduce the word of ‘System Play’ in Japan¹⁾. It can be said that implementation of this structure called ‘System Play’ can be attributed as a factor allowing the Japanese basketball team to mark highly competitive results at the Berlin Olympics²⁾.

As mentioned earlier, since the Gardner Seminar, the word ‘System Play’ became a favorite highlight of publications by the Japanese basketball industry. However, there were seldom any materials that described the specifics of what it actually was about. This is because there was no one who could actually understand what ‘System Play’ was really about³⁾. Of the current references known to the author of this paper, serial books of *Basketball Research (Rokyu-Kenkyu)* (1934-1936, all 10 volumes) by Yukio

Matsumoto⁴⁾ (hereinafter called, Matsumoto) are the only publications that talked about ‘System Play’ in detail.

According to Matsui, for four years from 1933, Japan was able to solidify the tactic as a system⁵⁾. In other words, this was the period in which awareness of both coach and player became serious toward ‘System Play’ as a tactic, over the four years from 1933. This was also when the first publication of *Basketball Research (Rokyu-Kenkyu)* (1934-1936) was published. All 10 volumes of Matsumoto’s *Basketball Research (Rokyu-Kenkyu)* were published. Both first and last volumes highlighted ‘System Play’ as the headline article.

To clarify the process in which ‘System Play’ was implemented, this study reviewed this process from 3 aspects, different types of ‘System Play’, relationship between ‘System Play’ and basic skills, and details of *Basketball Research (Rokyu-Kenkyu)*. References used include the *Basketball* journal published by Japan Basketball Association and publications from those times. One characteristic of this study is that it uses Matsumoto’s *Basketball Research (Rokyu-Kenkyu)* (1934-1936) as references. *Basketball Research (Rokyu-Kenkyu)* was published by Matsumoto at his own expense in Kansai. Using such materials for a basketball research paper may shed light on new findings, especially since basketball history studies in Japan mainly took place in the Kanto area.

2. Shifting from the ‘Bally System’ to ‘Five-Man Figure 8 Continuities’

‘System Play’ according to Ichiro Miyagi meant to play a systematic offensive and defensive structured game, with formation⁶⁾. This meant that individual players did not play offensively or defensively according to individual skills, but instead to play an offensive and defensive structure in a systematic way with the team members assuming a certain formation.

After the Gardner Seminar taking place in 1933, the Japanese basketball circle tended to refer to ‘System Play’ as a sign of basketball⁷⁾. This was also when the Japanese basketball circle attempted to implement ‘System Play’ as a tactic. Kazuo Doi also indicated in 1936 that after the visit by Gardner when the so-called ‘Bally System’ was introduced to Japan, that the entire country was fixed on this system. Back in those days, the ‘Bally System’ was still called the ‘Gardner System’, however, in either case, the trend ignited with fury and created a new era⁸⁾, indicated Kazuo Doi. Needless to say, the Gardner Seminar had a great impact on the Japanese basketball industry.

The Japanese team implemented the ‘Bally System’ which was a ‘System Play’,

as they challenged the *10th Far Eastern Basketball Championship Games at Manila* (1934). However, the games resulted in complete defeat. Though an offensive/defensive structure like the ‘Bally System’ is extremely normal today, back then, it still remained to be far from being practical, especially since individual player skills and team skills were still at an immature level.

After the Gardner Seminar, it was difficult to promote and spread the concept of ‘System Play’ (‘Bally System’) as intended. Kazuo Doi talks about that situation as follows, indicating that they were at a standstill in successfully implementing ‘System Play’.

Since there weren’t enough basic skills to implement the System, we were at a standstill at an unexpectedly early stage. And since we lacked the skills to get through that barrier, we were unable to cover our shortcomings. For this reason, we jumped to the conclusion that there was a flaw in the ‘Bally System’. This eventually led to leaving the ‘Bally System’ out of the mainstream concept to go forward without it.⁹⁾

The common consensus on the ‘Bally System’ remaining at a standstill was that the system itself was defective. However, Kazuo Doi assumed the cause for lack of basic skills to effectively utilize the system. In other words, the ‘Bally System’ failed to become a new and solid tactic system of ‘System Play’ by the Japanese basketball circle because players and the team lacked basic skills to accommodate and apply the system. This was also indicated by Clarence Anderson who also visited Japan along with Gardner, as well as participate in the Gardner Seminar. Anderson indicated in a discussion featured in *Basketball* (Vol. 8) (1933) that Japanese players were skillful shooters, however, lacked dribbling and other skills¹⁰⁾, thus providing a critical evaluation on the basic skills and standards of Japanese players.

However, effort continued to utilize the newly implemented ‘System Play’ by the Japanese players who still lacked fundamental skills to level up to par. The resulting tactic implemented was the ‘Five-Man Figure 8 Continuities’ system. This tactic is a type of ‘System Play’ like the ‘Bally System’. However, unlike the ‘Bally System’ that frequently concentrated on dribbling, the ‘Five-Man Figure 8 Continuities’ system tended to be a tactic that didn’t use much dribbling, which was said to be the defect of Japanese players. In other words, ‘Five-Man Figure 8 Continuities’ was a tactic that was more suited for Japanese players. In fact, ‘Five-Man Figure 8 Continuities’ was the first paper featured in Matsumoto’s

Basketball Research (Rokyu-Kenkyu) (Vol. 1) (1934).

According to Yoshihide Makiyama, ‘Five-Man Figure 8 Continuities’ was an effective strategy employed by Waseda University around 1935¹¹⁾. In fact, Yukio Matsumoto’s *Basketball Research (Rokyu-Kenkyu)* (Vol. 1) (1934) was the only material that described ‘Five-Man Figure 8 Continuities’ from when the Gardner Seminar took place in 1933 to 1936. According to when publications of *Basketball Research (Rokyu-Kenkyu)* were dated, it is thought that ‘Five-Man Figure 8 Continuities’ appeared in attempt to re-implement ‘System Play’, since the ‘Bally System’ highlighted at the Gardner Seminar was at a standstill, upon attempting to implement ‘System Play’.

3. Details of *Basketball Research (Rokyu-Kenkyu)* and ‘System Play’

‘Five-Man Figure 8 Continuities’ appeared when implementation of the ‘Bally System’ was at a standstill, due to poor fundamental skills by Japanese players and team. In other words, it is thought that ‘Five-Man Figure 8 Continuities’ was implemented to incorporate ‘System Play’, after reviewing the reality of their basic skills. So, what did the *Basketball Research (Rokyu-Kenkyu)* published at that time have to say about applied and basic skills? We presumed that the hint to solidifying ‘System Play’ lied in that area.

Articles on skills, tactics, coaching methods and training procedures amounted to 50% of all articles appearing in all 10 volumes of Matsumoto’s *Basketball Research (Rokyu-Kenkyu)* (1934–1936). On the other hand, these areas only to 5% of all articles featured in Volumes 9–18 of *Basketball* (1934–1936) published by Japan Basketball Association. This allowed us to realize there was one characteristic on how to approach *Basketball Research (Rokyu-Kenkyu)*. It is also assumed that *Basketball Research (Rokyu-Kenkyu)* focused on 3-pillar areas which included introduction of skills and tactics, coaching and training methods, and game regulations and the referee.

On the other hand, Matsumoto’s *Basketball Research (Rokyu-Kenkyu)* tended to relate to basic skills, tactics, and training methods. This is because Matsumoto talked about basic skills and training methods with ‘System Play’ at the base, by explaining basic skills necessary to employ ‘System Play’ such as pass, shoot, turn and so on, as he indicated training methods. In other words, *Basketball Research (Rokyu-Kenkyu)* documented basketball training methods from aspects of applied tactics (‘System Play’) to very basic tactics.

What’s more, Matsumoto may have been made a point to ensure there is a relationship on these areas in each and every one of the articles published in *Basketball Research*

(*Rokyu-Kenkyu*). Though *Basketball Research (Rokyu-Kenkyu)* mainly introduced information acquired from American references, Matsumoto went ahead to document his own coaching methods instead, since it may be that he felt that details documented in the American references didn't necessarily perfectly apply to the situation in Japan¹²⁾. Matsumoto later notes the following on why he documented his own coaching methods in *Basketball Research (Rokyu-Kenkyu)* instead of quoting from American references.

There were 2 papers on training methods in Volume 15-5 of the Athletic Journal. However, I deeply apologize that I didn't directly translate and feature those articles since I failed to feel that these training methods were relevant to us. However, I'm sure you'll understand my point after hearing what I have to say. This may be my stereotype, however, I do believe that training methods should be determined according to the offensive and defensive strengths of a team. Thus, offensive and defensive structure are determined according to how the team trains. Thus, I must say that a training method that may be effective for one team, may not necessarily be the best training method for another team.

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If we assume that Matsumoto ensured that there was pertinence between articles when featuring them in *Basketball Research (Rokyu-Kenkyu)*, then we assume that 'System Play' was at the foundation of that. 'Five-Man Figure 8 Continuities' was explained in *Basketball Research (Rokyu-Kenkyu)* (Vol. 1). In the final Volume 10, Kazuo Doi's 'Bally System' also became a top article to talk about 'System Play'. Kazuo Doi¹⁴⁾ was appraised by Gardner in 1933 as fully understanding the 'Bally System'. Sang-Beck Lee was the central figure of Japan Basketball Association that first talked about 'System Play' when Gardner and Japan Basketball Association were in discussion. Makoto Mitsuhashi, the coach of the Japanese national team at the Berlin Olympics (1936) was also an author of publications appearing in the *Basketball Research (Rokyu-Kenkyu)* that Matsumoto published at his own expense. When considering these areas, it becomes understandable why Matsumoto published his *Basketball Research (Rokyu-Kenkyu)* as the root of 'System Play' that Japanese basketball was in dire need of back in those days.

4. Possibility to Solidify Foundation of 'System Play' by Implementing 'Five-Man Figure 8 Continuities'

Matsumoto talks about 'Five-Man Figure 8 Continuities' in his *Basketball Research (Rokyu-Kenkyu)* (Vol. 1). As mentioned earlier, 'Five-Man Figure 8 Continuities' was a 'System Play' that the Japanese team who lacked dribbling skills could easily apply. Needless to say, it was indeed a tactic that basically didn't apply dribbling, however, at times, dribbling was also incorporated.

The following was documented in the *Basketball Research (Rokyu-Kenkyu)* (Vol. 1).

Some teams may use dribbling. In such case, the dribbler proceeds close to the player receiving the ball. The purpose is clear. In other words, the purpose is to move away the guard watching a team player.¹⁵⁾

In other words, the strategy is to dribble when passing to a team player, to keep the opponent fixed on the dribbler, and therefore release the guard (opponent) by the fellow team member, and thereby make it easier to pass the ball. As you can see, dribbling was accordingly used even for 'Five-Man Figure 8 Continuities'.

Sang-Beck Lee thought dribbling skills had a "toxic effect"¹⁶⁾. This was a result of fearing about the great risks assumed when employing dribbling tactics, while the player's dribbling skills were extremely poor. With this, Sang-Beck Lee emphasized a certain level of hesitation, though he may have wanted to use dribbling skills for offensive measures.

There are 2 ways to move a ball in basketball. This is by a pass and dribbling. When comparing usage of these skills we find that according to references of those days, that a pass was more accurate and swift than dribbling. References even went as far as indicating that dribbling should not take place if a pass is possible¹⁷⁾. What's more, the dribbling skills of players back then tended to fall into a grand stand play (individual) play, as the author has already clarified¹⁸⁾, and there even was indication that dribbling was also a risk since it may even destroy team work¹⁹⁾. In either case, it seems that dribbling was not favored back in those times. Further documentation indicated that "shooting from a dribble was somewhat a spectacular play, and therefore, players tend to be captivated by the glory that comes with that play"²⁰⁾. Notes like this were always emphasized, and thus, the trend to refrain from using dribbling as a tactic spread.

Therefore, it seems it was difficult to solidify the 'Bally System' that required dribbling skills, especially since basic skills of Japanese players were poor around 1933 when Gardner visited and further there was widespread fear especially about dribbling. It was further assumed that 'Five-Man Figure 8 Continuities' that was

somewhat like the ‘Bally System’ , but could take place without much dribbling skills, was a ‘System Play’ that was easily accepted by the Japanese basketball circle. However, ‘Five-Man Figure 8 Continuities’ was not a tactic that was inferior to the ‘Bally System’ . This is because it had an advantage that wasn’ t available with the ‘Bally System’ .

The position of which all players start to move are the same with the ‘Bally System’ and ‘Five-Man Figure 8 Continuities’ . However, regardless of that fact, in the case of the ‘Bally System’ each offensive structure tends to be fragmented. On the other hand, with ‘Five-Man Figure 8 Continuities’ the player maintains almost the same movement since only the angle of the axis making the figure 8 changes. Therefore, it is a tactic allowing for continuous offensive structure. Those in the Japanese basketball industry tended to like the other characteristic of ‘Five-Man Figure 8 Continuities’ that allowed for continuous offensive structure. This is why it is thought that this tactic tended to be used.

Matsumoto constantly combined screen play like ‘Five-Man Figure 8 Continuities’ when he coached. He was inclined toward tactics where players remained in motion (didn’ t stop motion), to pursue basketball tactics allowing for continuous offensive structure²¹⁾. Modern basketball is also said to value “suitable floor balance between offensive and defensive structure” as one of the general team tactics²²⁾. With ‘Five-Man Figure 8 Continuities’ , the player moves in a constant manner as if to draw a figure 8 on the floor. For this reason, When compared to the ‘Bally System’ , ‘Five-Man Figure 8 Continuities’ was thought to be a more superior team tactic since it was easier to maintain floor balance upon implementing the developmental stages of ‘System Play’ .

The ‘Bally System’ was also re-implemented though it was only temporarily applied and failed to be solidified as a standard system, after acquiring ‘Five-Man Figure 8 Continuities’ skills²³⁾. This is another reason why it is thought that ‘Five-Man Figure 8 Continuities’ was one of the factors attributable to solidifying ‘System Play’ in Japan. However, we must not forget about the existence and importance of the documentation appearing in the papers published in Matsumoto’ s *Basketball Research (Rokyu-Kenkyu)*, that made this possible.

5. Conclusion

Since Gardner’ s talk in Japan in 1933, ‘System Play’ became an important strategic system to acquire and to improve the game techniques. This study discussed how ‘System Play’ was implemented in the Japanese basketball circle.

‘Bally System’ became the impetus to implement ‘System Play’ in Japan. However, it wasn’t possible to fully incorporate their strategies due to poor fundamental skills of the players. It was about this time that Matsumoto published his book on *Basketball Research (Rokyu-Kenkyu)* (1934–1936) at his own cost. Volume 1 of *Basketball Research (Rokyu-Kenkyu)* attributes ‘Five-Man Figure 8 Continuities’ as one factor that solidified grounds for ‘System Play’.

In contrary to the ‘Bally System’ that requires varied, diverse dribbling skills, ‘Five-Man Figure 8 Continuities’ was a ‘System Play’ that could be performed without much dribbling skills. This was a convenience, since back in those days, dribbling skills was considered toxic and therefore many tended to refrain from implementing dribbling in their games. With ‘Five-Man Figure 8 Continuities’ the player makes a fixed move on the court in a constant figure 8 movement. ‘Five-Man Figure 8 Continuities’ was thought to be a more superior team strategy because it was easier to maintain floor balance than the ‘Bally System’, which was especially important at the developmental stages of implementing ‘System Play’.

Upon creating the *Basketball Research (Rokyu-Kenkyu)*, Matsumoto is thought to have ensured there was a relationship in each and every article with ‘System Play’ at the foundation. Further, he also extracted fundamental skills like passes and shoots with ‘System Play’, that is an application, at the base for coaching and training.

By implementing ‘Five-Man Figure 8 Continuities’ the Japanese basketball circle were able to re-confirm fundamental techniques. It is also thought that this later lead to solidifying the foundation for the ‘Bally System’.

Though ‘Five-Man Figure 8 Continuities’ somewhat resembled the ‘Bally System’, it can be said that ‘Five-Man Figure 8 Continuities’ was more of a ‘dynamic’ strategy compared to the more ‘stagnant’ ‘Bally System’ upon continuous offensive structures by the player that was playing a game without stopping movement during the game. This dynamic and offensive continuum significant of ‘Five-Man Figure 8 Continuities’ is what captivated Matsumoto, as well as members and researchers of the Japanese basketball circle. They were also responsible in solidifying this strategy that became the foundation to develop the Japanese basketball industry.

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- 3 . Ichiro Miyagi, “Looking at the Basics” , *Basketball (Rokyu)* (Vol. 9), Tokyo: Japan Basketball Association, 1934.3, p.5.
Kazuo Doi, “Bally System” , *Basketball Research (Rokyu-Kenkyu)* (Vol.10), Hyogo: Yukio Matsumoto, 1936.10, p.1.
- 4 . Matsumoto was born in 1911 as the heir to the Matsumoto family in Harada, Nishinada-mura, Mukogun, Hyogo, Japan. His first encounters with basketball were when he was studying at Kwansei Gakuin High School. From 1930 he became the 3rd manager of the Kwansei Gakuin High School basketball team in which he served 2 years. Matsumoto’ s endeavor with basketball not only included team management, but also included coaching activities when he became a coach from 1931. He also started to study basketball at the same time. An example of his studies would be the publication of Matsumoto’ s paper appearing in *Basketball (Rokyu)* (Vol. 6) published by the Japan Basketball Association in March 1933. In the 1936 publication of *Basketball (Rokyu)* (Vol. 21) Matsumoto’ s (assuming pen name of Koichi Hayashi) paper on Offensive Training Methods was featured as the highlight paper and discussion. Further, in 1936, he was introduced as the most enthusiastic basketball researcher and theorist in a column of *Basketball (Rokyu)* (Vol. 16) on authors. (Japan Basketball Association *Basketball* (Vol. 16), Tokyo: Japan Basketball Association, 1936.3, p.86, Alumni Association of Hyogo Prefecture Mikage Teacher’ s College (currently Kobe University), *60th Anniversary Newsletter of the Hyogo Prefecture Mikage Teacher’ s College*, Hyogo: *Hyogo Prefecture Mikage Teacher’ s College*, 1936.10, p.701, Tadashi Michimori *Message of condolence*, 1973.1, Hyogo Basketball Association, *Hyogo Basketball (Hyogo-Rokyu)* (Vol. 60), Hyogo : Hyogo Basketball Association , 1973.3, pp.3-5.)
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 21. Hyogo Basketball Association, *Hyogo Basketball (Hyogo-Rokyu)* (Vol. 60), Hyogo: Hyogo Basketball Association, 1973.3, pp.6-7.
 22. John Wooden, *John Wooden/UCLA Basketball*, Tokyo: Taishukan Publishing Co., Ltd., p.150.
 23. In 1936, when the Japanese team was playing against ROC (Republic of China) at the first round of the basketball games at the Berlin Olympics, the Japanese team combined both quick and delay techniques. The plan was for all delays to put one player in front of the goal, and the remaining 4 players maintained floor balance with that player at the center. In other words, the Japanese team chose the tactic to base their plan on the ‘Bally System’ . (Japan Basketball Association, *Berlin Olympics Report*, Tokyo: Japan Basketball Association, 1938.4, pp.30-31.)