

*You Gain from Both
Victory and Defeat
If You Enjoy the Fight*

Mana Iwabuchi

Mana Iwabuchi is the ace striker of INAC Kobe Leonessa in the Japan Women's Football League, commonly known as the "Nadeshiko League," as well as the women's national football team "Nadeshiko Japan." She has been a leading force in improving the level of women's football in Japan. Her current focus is on achieving victory at next summer's Tokyo Olympic Games.

My Competitive Disposition Is the Energy for Growth

When she plays, the ball follows her foot movements, as if magnetically drawn to her. She skillfully dodges her opponents, securing a line of sight to the goal, and makes a powerful shot. The speed and accuracy of her dribbling skills have earned her the honorary nickname "Manadona," after football superstar Diego Maradona.

Iwabuchi, however, comments laughingly, "I've never been called by that nickname by someone close to me, so that's irrelevant to me." Whether the nickname is appropriate or not, she is undoubtedly the ace striker of INAC Kobe Leonessa and Nadeshiko Japan.

She is also a player who can brighten the mood of a team and bring it good luck. Since being registered in 2010 at age 16 as a member of the "A" National Team, she has played in 72 international "A" matches and scored 29 goals (as of March 31, 2020). Of 23 matches in which Iwabuchi successfully scored goals, the team saw 20 victories and only three defeats. This trend led fellow team members to expect that, "If Iwabuchi scores, we can win."

It is Iwabuchi's indomitable spirit and her sheer enjoyment of the sport which encourage such expectations. When she was a second grader in elementary school, she began kicking balls around, mimicking her

brother who was always practicing at a football club in their hometown. Watching her play, the club's coach asked her to join them even though it was a boys' team, saying, "She's got a great aptitude for football."

Iwabuchi comments, "Back then, it was so much fun to play with the ball, and I wanted to win if the game was about winning or losing. I've never accepted being defeated by boys and always made all-out efforts to beat them, be it tag or a relay race."

Recalling those days, the coach says, "I always made her compete with boys one or two years older. That indomitable spirit that defies her seniors' skills and physical stamina was at the heart of her growth."

When Nadeshiko Japan was crowned world champion at the FIFA Women's World Cup in Germany, 18-year-old Iwabuchi was the team's youngest member. The following year, in 2012, she joined Germany's Bundesliga club TSG 1899 Hoffenheim and scored four goals in nine games, which contributed to the team's promotion to Division 1. In 2014, she transferred to Bayern München, which was crowned the Bundesliga champion for the first time in 39 years.

Injuries During My Years in Germany Showed Me Football's Importance in My Life

Despite her excellent performance, Iwabuchi suffered many injuries in her four-and-a-half-year career in Germany before returning home in 2017. She says, "Each time, I thought, 'Not again,' and felt it was a hassle [to continue], and that I'd quit playing football if I got injured again." The reason she continued was that her friends encouraged her, saying, "Let's play together again."

Iwabuchi adds, "If you take football away from me, I'm an empty



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Mana Iwabuchi

Born in Musashino City, Tokyo, in 1993. She began playing football when she was a second grader and made her debut in 2007 at age 14 in the Nadeshiko League after becoming a registered member of NTV Beleza. She was a member of the National Under-16, Under-17, and Under-19 teams, and in 2010, when she was 16, was registered as a member of the "A" National Team. She also played in the FIFA Women's World Cup in Germany and in Canada, as well as in the London Olympic Games. Beginning in 2012, she played for both TSG 1899 Hoffenheim and Bayern München before moving to INAC Kobe Leonessa in 2017.

person. My time [in Germany] taught me how heavy the weight of football is in my life. In the end, although I had to come home because of my injuries, I wasn't feeling negative."

She resumed her career in Japan by joining INAC Kobe Leonessa, wearing the number 10 — the team's ace striker's shirt. Currently, she is focused on competing in the Tokyo Olympics. "I'll think about what to do next after the Games are over." At the age of 27, Iwabuchi is now expected to deliver excellent captaincy.

"Nadeshiko Japan is still a team without much experience, so there is much to be gained from each game — win or lose. I think the most important thing is to play football in a way we enjoy. Of course, it's more fun if the game ends favorably. There were games that we lost but still enjoyed playing."

Iwabuchi adds, "One of the most enjoyable things about football is that the number of goals you can score is unlimited, so the number of things you want to try is infinite, too." These words indicate that she is determined to keep growing.

