

Japanese squad wins historic rugby match

By ZILIA PAPP

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There's a fine line between friendship and rivalry, and for now, South Korea's only women's rugby team is on the friendly side of the line with its Japanese counterparts.

Making its first trip to Japan, the Seoul Sisters lost to a Japanese squad 44-10 at Tatsumino Mori Rugby Ground on Sunday. It was the first women's club-level rugby match ever between teams from the two countries.

Not only was the match the birth of a friendship between the squads, but also it may have christened what will blossom into a rivalry one day.



Historic match: Hosei University's Keiko Kato passes the ball against Seoul Sisters in Tokyo on Sunday.

BENJAMIN MIN PHOTO

"It is our first time in Japan, but Japan and Korea are so close to each other, it is important for both sides to maintain a strong relationship," said Seoul Sisters President Amanda Joyce. "We put on a strong show for the Japanese team, we hit them hard and we really worked to shut down their fast play."

The victors, led by MVP Naoko Hasabe's hat trick and two successful conversion kicks, were cobbled together from different sources. Sunday's group combined players from the Setagaya Ladies, Phoenix and Japan's only collegiate women's rugby team, Nippon Sports Science University.

In addition to Hasabe's effort, Japan national team player Marie Yamaguchi contributed a brace, and Rie Nakayama, Suzuki Ikumi and Chika Sasaki had one try each in.

Japan's game plan of spreading the ball wide proved to be a great

success.

The Korean club utilized its physical superiority in the first half, with scrum half Mary McNeil touching down with the ball in a rolling maul in the 12th minute, to be followed by teammate wing Lola Jemibewon with a try only two minutes later. McNeil missed the conversions.

According to Kelly McCallum, assistant coach during Japan's preparations for the 2009 Dubai Sevens World Cup, who was Canada's team captain in the 2006 World Cup and who coached the Japanese side Sunday, the match also had practical benefits.

The Seoul Sisters' very physical style of play will toughen up the Japanese, she said.

"It was good to play against a more physical side, it helps to train for the Fall Asian qualifiers for the 2010 Women's World Cup," McCallum said. "At the qualifiers, you have to know how to play against a more physical side, to change some of the tactics they use in the Japanese league against similar-sized girls, which won't work against a bigger side. It was a really good experience for both sides."

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