

## Winter Sports... Hokkaido Style!

Have you ever found yourself descending a frozen hill at 80 to 90 km/h on a pair of abnormally long skis, only to find the hill come to a sudden end resulting in your body being propelled through the air over 140 meters forward? Or, raced against others around a track on a pair of specially designed skates at superhuman speeds reaching upwards of 60 to 70 km/h? Ski jumping and speed skating are just a couple of winter sports for which athletes from Hokkaido are famous.

In fact, three quarters of the Japanese men's national ski jumping team which competed at the 2010 Vancouver Olympics came from Hokkaido. The success of Hokkaido's athletes at international ski jumping competitions goes all the way back to Yukio Kasaya, Japan's first ever Winter Olympics gold medalist who earned this title by winning the men's ski jumping event at the 1972 Olympic Games in Sapporo, Hokkaido. What started with Kasaya has continued with numerous World Cup and Olympic champions and medalists such as Masahiko Harada, Kazuyoshi Funaki, Takanobu Okabe, Noriaki Kasai, Hideharu Miyahira and Daiki Ito. Many young world-class competitors such as Shohei Tochimoto and Yukiya Sato are training hard to keep the Hokkaido tradition alive and well.

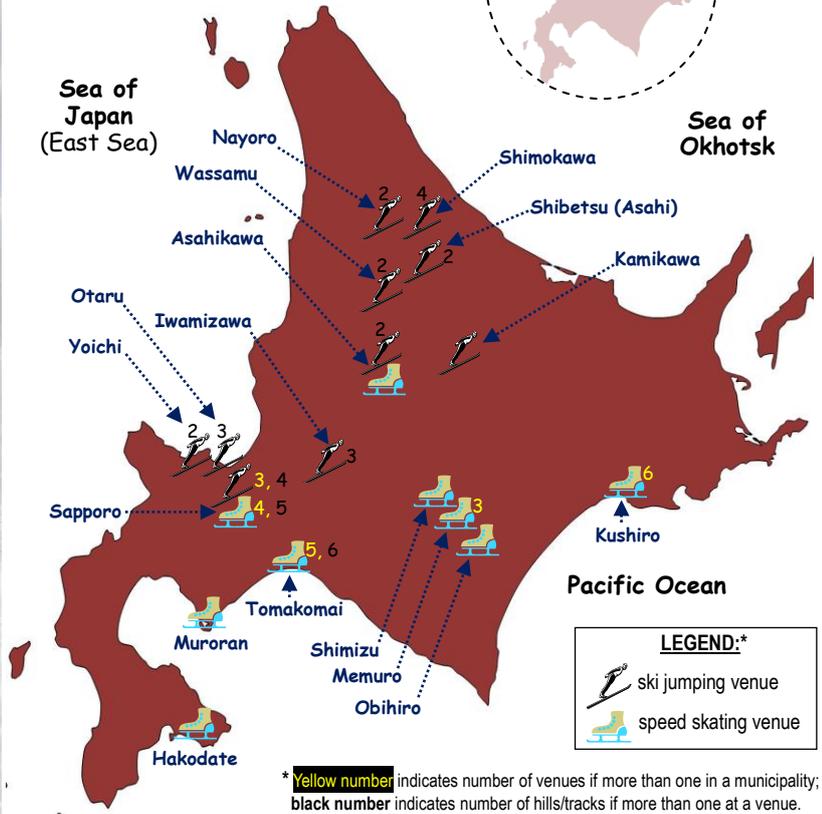
Although unable to compete in the last Winter Olympic Games, it has been confirmed that women will be soaring through Sochi's (Russia) skies in 2014. The inaugural women's Olympic ski jumping event will surely garner a lot of attention from around the world. Hokkaido will be no exception given its own 16 year-old sensation, Sara Takanashi, took home the gold medal for women's ski jumping at the inaugural Winter Youth Olympic Games this past January in Austria and also finished second at the women's Ski Jumping World Cup competition in Germany just before the Winter Youth Olympic Games. Together with an increasing number of young women such as Yuki Ito and veteran Ayumi Watase, women's ski jumping in Hokkaido is poised to reach extraordinary heights.

From mini training hills where stars are born to internationally certified hills where stars are made, Hokkaido currently boasts a total of 25 hills at 12 ski jumping venues located in 10 different municipalities. There are also a total of approximately 40 annual domestic and international ski jumping competitions held across Hokkaido. I have been able to experience a variety of them by helping out at and watching several youth competitions, as well as cheering on competitors from all over the world at international competitions. Most recently, I watched Hokkaido's Daiki Ito take first place against the World Cup's highest ranking competitors at the 2012 FIS Ski Jumping World Cup in Sapporo. The competition was held at Sapporo's famous Okurayama venue, which along with Sapporo's Miyanormoi and Nayoro's Piyashiri venues, are particularly noteworthy as they are equipped to meet international standards and regularly host major international competitions.

Whereas ski jumping thrives primarily in Hokkaido's northern and western regions which lie inland or on the coast of the East Sea, the prefecture's southern and eastern regions found inland or along the Pacific coastline are defined by speed skating. In 9 different municipalities, there are a total of 23 ice skating venues housing 25 tracks which play host annually to a wide range of domestic and international speed skating competitions for children, youth and adults. During the 2011-2012 season, Hokkaido has been scheduled to host at least eight, a fair amount given the same venues are required for many other sports (figure skating, ice hockey, etc), and a number of prefectures also have impressive state-of-the-art venues.

Background: Ski jumper flying high at Sapporo's famous Okurayama Ski Jump Stadium, Hokkaido.

## Map of Hokkaido: Ski Jumping & Speed Skating Venues by the Numbers

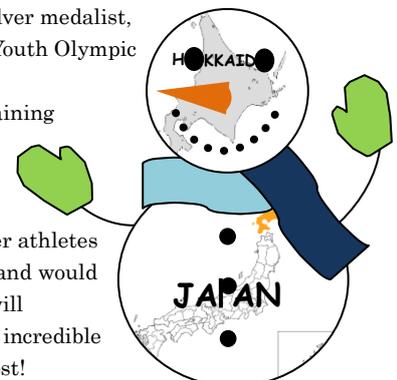


Above: Daiki Ito (center) following back-to-back victories at the 2012 FIS Ski Jumping World Cup, Okurayama Ski Jump Stadium, Sapporo.

There is no shortage of internationally competitive speed skaters from Hokkaido, which is where approximately two thirds of current national team members come from. Some legendary women who have won Olympic and World Cup medals include Seiko Hashimoto, Hiromi Yamamoto, Tomomi Okazaki, Maki Tabata and Sayuri Osuga (also national cycling team member). Beginning with current national team member, Miho Takagi, and Winter Youth Olympic Games silver medalist, Riho Harada, Hokkaido's speed skating women show no signs of slowing down!

Their male counterparts also have an impressive track record. Toru Aoyanagi and Yoshihiro Kitazawa were some of Hokkaido's early stars and Hiroyasu Shimizu, former Olympic and world champion, remains the 100 meter world record holder. Men's speed skating heroes continue to be born in Hokkaido, most recently represented by 2010 Olympic silver medalist, Keiichiro Nagashima, and 2012 Winter Youth Olympic Games silver medalist, Toshihiro Kakui.

Given the high number of excellent training facilities, the abundance of world-class instructors and the long history of ski jumping and speed skating in Hokkaido, it is no surprise that so many high caliber athletes call Hokkaido home. Trying them first hand would undoubtedly be amazing, but for now I will continue to experience the thrill of these incredible sports vicariously through Hokkaido's best!



## A City Close to Home – Nayoro (amalgamated with Furen since 2005)

Background: Sunflower field, Nayoro;  
© Hokkaido Sun Pillar Park.

Known as the city of glittering stars, glistening snow and glorious greens, Nayoro has quite a reputation to live up to. Fortunately, Nayoro's natural gifts together with its over 30 thousand inhabitants are more than capable of doing so.

Although I found walking outside on clear nights in Nayoro was enough to marvel at the beauty of the stars, the Nayoro Astronomical Observatory (aka Kitasubaru) takes star gazing to another level. Opened in 2010, Kitasubaru is equipped with one of the largest apertures in Japan and makes it possible for academics and non-academics alike to observe stars and enjoy the wonders of outer space. Already known for having Japan's northernmost public university (Nayoro City University), Nayoro has become even more firmly established among Hokkaido's academic community thanks to Kitasubaru.

Perhaps more close to our tangible senses is Nayoro's exceptional snow quality. Long known to skiers and snowboarders in Japan, increasingly common are rave reviews from overseas visitors. Nayoro's Piyashiri Ski Resort is open to visitors four to five months a year and also hosts an array of skiing competitions throughout the winter, from alpine and cross country to Nordic combined and ski jumping, the latter two sports in tandem with Piyashiri Ski Jump Stadium.

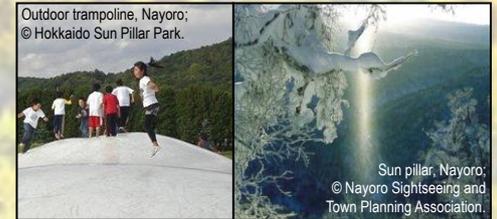
Together with its diverse topography, Nayoro's



winter temperatures which fall below  $-20^{\circ}\text{C}$  are a major contributing factor to the formation of Nayoro's high quality powder snow. Freezing temperatures also play a critical role in forming specially shaped ice crystals which occasionally reflect sun or moonlight, resulting in the formation of extraordinary visual phenomena called light pillars (sun or moon pillars).

In contrast to winter, summer temperatures exceed  $20^{\circ}\text{C}$  and even surpass  $30^{\circ}\text{C}$ . This drastic temperature difference gives Nayoro's residents a toughness mostly hidden behind a veil of kindness; the warm weather also makes Nayoro very colourful in the summer. Used for both leisure viewing and oil production, sunflowers can be found in abundance and light up the landscape all season long. The hillsides are also complimented by Hokkaido's second longest river, Teshio River, and Nayoro River, which flow through and around the city and make the region a popular destination for hobby fishers.

The diverse charms of Nayoro are perhaps best embodied by Hokkaido Sun Pillar Park's impressive indoor and outdoor facilities. When winter ends, the curling hall and tobogganing hills become a vast recreation center, a water park, a skate park, a pond, playgrounds and flower fields. A community center, a craft workshop and a children's play area are also open all year long. My personal favourite is the playground-friendly outdoor trampoline!



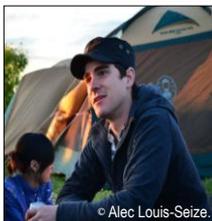
Created in May 1899, the city of Nayoro has a long history both with its surrounding area and afar, namely Lindsay (City of Kawartha Lakes), Ontario, Canada. Since becoming sister cities in 1969, both have actively engaged in various exchanges. For example, a high school exchange program which began in 1972 sent two students from Lindsay to Nayoro just last July and two students from Nayoro will go to Lindsay this year. Although each city has undergone significant changes such as recent amalgamations, their unwavering relationship is stronger than ever.

## Canadians



## Hokkaido

Wanting to try something new and different, Alec Louis-Seize started studying Japanese at the age of 22 while specializing in anthropology. Alec's life would change soon there-



after following an encounter with a Japanese exchange student to whom he is now engaged.

As a student at Carleton University in Canada's capital city, Ottawa, Alec participated in a 10 month-long student homestay program in Osaka, located on the southern region of Japan's main island called Honshu. It was there where Alec first heard of Hokkaido, Japan's northernmost island and prefecture. More fascinated by natural landscapes than cityscapes, Alec was far more interested in the idea of visiting Hokkaido during the winter holidays. When they came back, they told Alec all about **Hokkaido charm** – serene natural landscapes, delicious specialty foods, and countless spectacular events!

After returning to Ottawa to complete his studies and graduate from university, Alec quickly went back to Japan in fall 2010 as an Assistant Language Teacher through the Japan

Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme. Although he wanted to return to his homestay location – what had become his second home – the JET position landed Alec in Nayoro, Hokkaido. Alec was admittedly disappointed but looking forward to the new experiences Nayoro and Hokkaido would have to offer him.

### “Hokkaido is my home... one of ‘em!”

Asked about his first impressions, it seems Hokkaido reminded Alec of Canada in stark ways. Most pronounced were views of farm fields and hay stacks and a surrounding abundance of nature. Alec humbly added that Hokkaido's people were also very friendly and welcoming.

Strikingly familiar surroundings and kindness helped Alec adjust to his new environment, but being far away from loved ones in Canada and southern Japan was challenging. However,



Above Left: Alec (left) at the Nayoro Snow Festival international snow sculpture competition with team from France, Nayoro; Above Right: Alec (center right, kneeling on top of float,) at the Furen Furusato Festival, Nayoro.

Alec has been able to overcome his loneliness by getting involved in various ways and taking on numerous responsibilities.

For starters, Alec joined a local judo club. It was his first attempt ever at martial arts and although he admits he has struggled, it is through this hobby that he has also made his best friend in Hokkaido. Alec is also a skilled guitarist and has performed multiple times since arriving in Nayoro; he also hosts a local radio show bilingually in Japanese and English. Hoping to help other non-Japanese residents adjust to their lives in Hokkaido, Alec also became a regional representative for the Hokkaido Association for JET (HAJET), putting to use his coordination skills while also learning more about and becoming increasingly connected to his local and wider communities.

With such strong ties locally, it is no surprise Alec's favourite place in Hokkaido is Nayoro and his favourite festivals include the Furen Furusato Festival and the Nayoro Snow Festival. By escorting Canadian high school exchange students to the former and translating for French snow sculptors at the latter, Nayoro has offered Alec a variety of memorable opportunities and experiences. Although Alec plans to move south this fall to be with loved ones, Hokkaido will always be his home... at least one of ‘em.

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