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Step up to the plate: Breaking world records in Japan

(Andrew McKirdy | *The Japan Times* - December 1, 2019)

Have you ever wondered what it must feel like to be the best in the world at something?

To know how sprinter Usain Bolt or figure skater Yuzuru Hanyu feels? To know that, of all the 7.7 billion people in the world, you are the undisputed No. 1 at a particular activity?

“I knew it would be very difficult for me to become the world’s best at a sport in the Olympics, but I thought I might be able to break a Guinness World Record,” says Yui Fukuda, a 26-year-old systems engineer from Chiba Prefecture who broke the world record for most facial tissues pulled out of a box in one minute in January this year, setting a new benchmark of 135.

Fukuda is one of thousands of people around the world who hold records certified by Guinness World Records, which began life as the Guinness Book of Records in the early 1950s.

Sir Hugh Beaver, managing director of the Guinness brewery at the time, attended a shooting party and argued with his host over which was the fastest game bird in Europe.

Unable to find the answer in a reference book, Beaver later decided to publish a book of facts and figures that could be used to settle arguments, and hired researchers Norris and Ross McWhirter to compile it.

The book became a smash hit and has since been published in more than 100 countries in over 40 languages, with more than 143 million copies sold to date.

The company, which became known as Guinness World Records in 2000, is based in London and has offices in Tokyo, New York, Miami, Beijing and Dubai. There are currently around 53,000 world records in its database, and 47,000 record applications are made from 178 countries each year. Around 8,000 of those are approved annually.

Although the company does not release data based on nationality, many of those record holders are Japanese.

Fukuda had watched TV announcer Maasa Takahashi pull 116 tissues from a box in one minute to break the world record on a TV show in August last year. She thought she could do

better, so she applied via Guinness World Records' website.

"I didn't practice much," Fukuda says. "I was confident I could do it, so I only practiced two or three times on the day of the attempt. It felt like a waste of tissues.

"I was really happy when I found out I had achieved it. I had wanted to break a world record ever since I was a kid. A lot of people helped me with the record attempt, so when I found out I had actually done it, I was ecstatic."

Unlike Takahashi's record attempt, which took place in front of TV cameras and had an official adjudicator present, Fukuda's shot at glory was distinctly low-key.

Guinness World Records offers a "standard applications" service aimed at individuals who "aren't thinking about using (their) record-breaking attempt to promote a product or service." The service is free, but applicants must wait three months to receive the record attempt guidelines and a further three months to have the evidence reviewed and verified.

For those willing to pay, the company offers "priority services" to fast-track applications, and bespoke "account-managed services" that include a dedicated account manager to liaise with, immediate review of evidence, certificate presentation and the presence of an official adjudicator.

Fukuda, who paid nothing for her attempt, had to ask an acquaintance who uses a stopwatch on a regular basis to time it, and another friend to film it. She then sent the evidence to Guinness World Records, and received a verification email and a certificate in the post six months later.

"If you pay money, you can get your record attempt verified straight away," she says. "It makes it easy to attempt a record. But if you

don't pay, you have to wait about six months to find out if you've achieved the record. And you also have to find people to time your attempt and so on.

"It makes it difficult. I think that might be the reason why some people who want to attempt a record don't actually go through with it. I think they need to lower the bar a little."

For businesses looking to boost their brand or motivate employees, however, a world record attempt can be an effective tool.

Hilti Japan Ltd. is the Kanagawa Prefecture-based Japan arm of Hilti, a company that makes tools and other construction equipment. In January, Hilti Japan achieved the world record for most people screwing screws into blocks of wood simultaneously, setting a mark of 484.

Hilti Japan was looking to hold a company-wide celebration for staff members, and hit upon the idea of trying to break a world record. The company wanted to attempt a record that would involve as many of its workers as possible and, in consultation with an account manager from Guinness World Records, came up with the idea of using its own tools to screw screws into blocks of wood.

Staff members spent six months practicing together, and Hilti branding and communication specialist Kazuyo Kosaka says the whole process brought everyone together.

"With regards to the staff, it gave us some things that money can't buy, like teamwork and a sense of unity," Kosaka says. "Everyone who took part was able to feel it themselves. You can't get that just by telling someone or giving them training or paying money. Through this experience, we gained something very valuable."

So is Guinness World Records now more interested in making money than celebrating

pure human achievement? Kaoru Ishikawa, Guinness World Records' Japan manager, believes there is no need to make a distinction.

"Whether you're dealing with a big company or a school student, they're both Guinness World Records," Ishikawa says. "They both choose the record that is right for them and then try it. I think that's something very interesting. There are lots of different records and you can't say one is better than the other. People are interested in all different kinds of things, and that diversity is what makes it special."

Ishikawa joined Guinness World Records' London office in 2007 and became the company's first Japanese adjudicator, overseeing more than 500 record attempts around the world before taking charge of the Japan office in September this year.

Ishikawa has adjudicated everything from the most traffic cones balanced on a chin to the world's largest gospel choir, and she feels privileged to be able to offer people a chance to shine.

"Kids often compete in races and tests to see who's best, but one thing I really like is when Guinness World Records shines a light on a different area where someone might be the best," she says. "There was a junior high school boy who thought he was the best at making long, unbroken threads of eraser shavings, so he submitted an application. It was a new idea but we gave it the go-ahead, and he attempted it and set the record. It allows people to show things they're good at."

"Society is moving toward being more diverse and inclusive, and I think that's something Guinness World Records has always treated as being important. We've always thought people out there might be able to achieve something."

But what about me? Might I be able to achieve something? If Guinness World Records offers

everyone the chance of glory, why not give it a shot?

With dreams of greatness tantalizing my mind, I spend an afternoon flicking through the Guinness World Records book, trying to find one that looks achievable. The company also accepts proposals for new records, but these must be examined and approved, and I decide it would be quicker to try and break an existing one.

I contact Guinness World Records, and the PR manager suggests I attempt the record for most baked beans eaten with chopsticks in one minute, which stands at 71. The equipment is simple and I can practice on my own, so I agree and submit my application.

Guinness World Records sends me a set of guidelines, which are detailed and extensive. "Only one baked bean may be eaten at a time," reads one section. "This must be through a pincer movement, and may not be scooped or stabbed."

Before I start practicing, I meet the current world record-holder, a comedian named Cherry Yoshitake. Yoshitake tells me he holds 20 world records — the most of any Japanese — although throughout his career he has held around 50.

Yoshitake got his big break in late 2012 when his management company received an offer from a British TV show called "Officially Amazing," which showcased Guinness World Records. The show was looking for a Japanese comedian to attempt the record for most nuts crushed by sitting down in 30 seconds, which stood at 38. Yoshitake had no experience of world record attempts, but as his comedy act involved pulling a cork out of a champagne bottle with his buttocks, he thought he might be a suitable candidate and accepted.

He studied the then-record holder's technique and developed his own, superior method, which he used to smash the record on the first attempt, cracking 48 walnuts with his buttocks on a cold winter morning at Wakamiya Hachimangu Shrine in Kawasaki.

Yoshitake then went on to become a regular on "Officially Amazing," breaking records for most underpants pulled on in one minute, most marbles moved with chopsticks in one minute and longest time to dunk a biscuit, among many, many others.

"When you're a TV personality, you have to think of something interesting to do in your act, and that's difficult," Yoshitake says. "If you specialize in something, you can make that your calling card. 'Cherry Yoshitake' means 'the person who cracks walnuts with his butt.' And from then on, 'the record-breaking comedian.'"

I tell Yoshitake about my plan to break his baked beans record, and bring out a can of beans, chopsticks and a plate so he can show me his technique. He produces an assortment of his own chopsticks, which he buys custom-made from Hashikatsu Honten, a distinguished Tokyo store. He uses different chopsticks for different records, and each set is inscribed with the words "Thank You Cherry Much!"

The beans slip easily off my standard, convenience store chopsticks, and the process of chewing and swallowing them — "the mouth must be completely empty at the end of the minute," the guidelines state — takes time. I manage about 40 in a minute — 31 short of the record.

"The kind of records that Cherry holds are ones that seem like anyone would be able to break," says Yoshitake's manager, Hiroki Hayashi. "But if you actually try it, it's really difficult. Cherry takes it seriously. For some, he'll practice for 10 hours a day. Some TV shows get comedians to try to

break world records, but those comedians don't put in anywhere near the amount of practice that he does. That's the difference."

Unfortunately, my other work duties mean I am unable to devote 10 hours a day to eating baked beans, but I do manage to put in some practice in the week leading up to the attempt.

My colleague, Chisato Tanaka, films my efforts, and together we refine my technique. We discover that the beans are better spread flat on the plate rather than heaped in a pile, and arranged in straight lines to cut down on excess movement.

I still can't manage any more than 50, though, and the day of the attempt is fast approaching. Frustrated, I ask Chisato if she wants to try. She turns out to be a natural.

Although she is still some way short of the record, I begin to think she would have a better chance of beating it than me. She seems downright affronted by her inability to reach 71 beans, so she applies to attempt the record with me.

When the day comes, Chisato and I head to the Guinness World Records Japan office. I bring my beans, plate and chopsticks, all of which I have had to photograph and submit in advance.

I am told that we have three attempts to break the record. We decide that I will take the first two attempts and Chisato will take the third.

I sit down and pour out my beans. The adjudicator begins combing the plate with a spoon, carefully looking for rogue bean skins. The atmosphere suddenly becomes business-like and impersonal. I become acutely aware of the pressure. When I reach for my first bean, I can feel my hands shaking.

My first attempt starts badly but picks up, and soon I am flicking beans into my mouth at

lightning speed. The adjudicator announces the result — 64 beans. A personal best but still seven short of the record.

Hugely encouraged, I feel a surge of euphoria as I make a flying start to my second attempt. I am convinced I am going to do it. The feeling is incredible. I am riding a wave of sauce-coated momentum. Then, inevitably, I start to stumble. When the adjudicator reads out my score — 59 beans — I feel a disappointment stronger than anything I had expected.

I give my seat to Chisato and offer her a few words of encouragement. Her pace is noticeably quicker than mine, but it is impossible to tell if it will be enough. She makes a last-gasp, desperate final push before the timekeeper tells her to stop, then sits back and waits for the result. She has eaten 72 beans — a new world record.

My thunder has been well and truly stolen, but her reaction when she learns she has done it erases any negative thoughts from my mind. Her face is a picture of sheer joy, and for the first time I begin to understand — albeit by proxy — what it must feel like to be on top of the world.

“I’m very emotional right now, because I’ve never achieved anything greater than this,” she says. “I’m very proud of myself, and my favorite food is now beans.”
