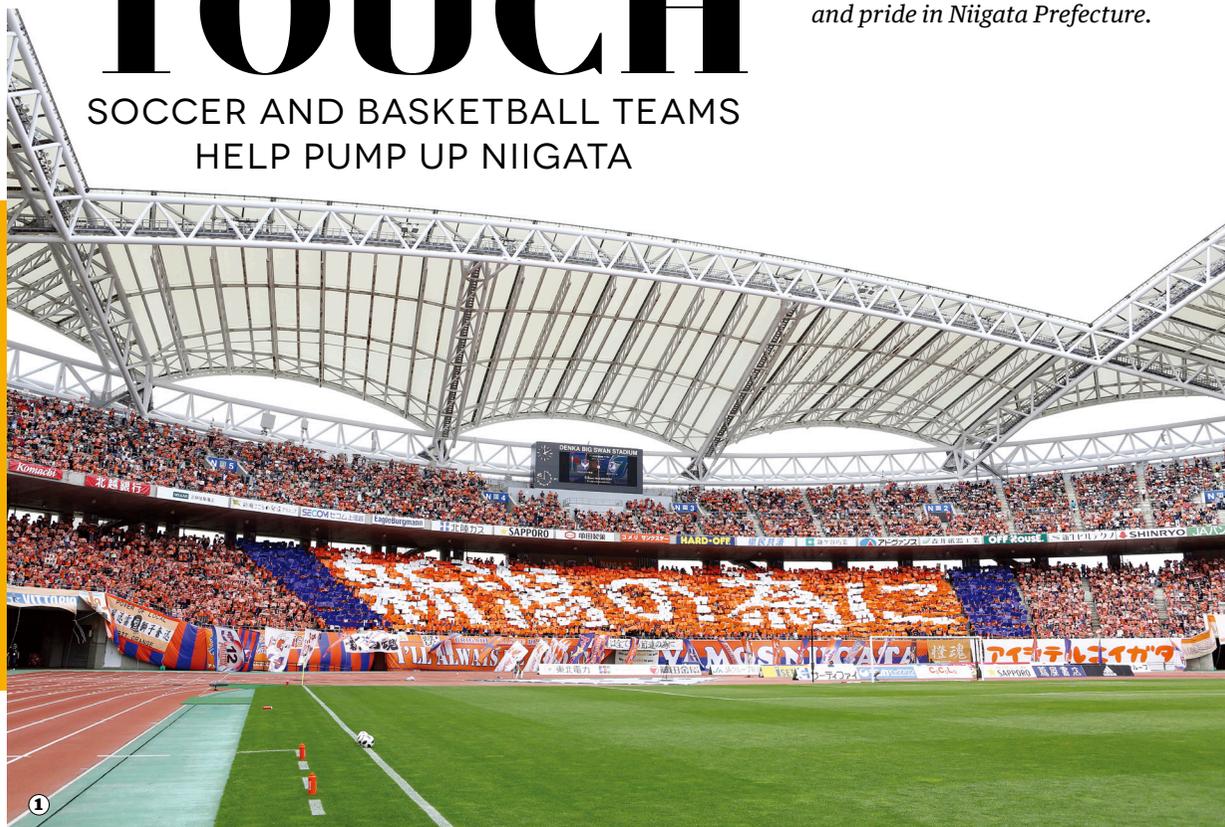


# THE PROFESSIONAL TOUCH

SOCCER AND BASKETBALL TEAMS HELP PUMP UP NIIGATA

*The Albirex Niigata pro soccer team, Niigata Albirex BB pro basketball team and other local sports squads are fostering a sense of unity and pride in Niigata Prefecture.*



## KATSUYA YAMADA

SPORTS have always been popular in Niigata Prefecture at the school and regional levels, but competition at the pro level first took root here with soccer when Albirex Niigata, which evolved from the Niigata Eleven Soccer Club founded in 1955, joined the Japan Professional Football League (J.League) in 1999.

Following the construction of Big Swan, a Niigata stadium that was a 2002 FIFA World Cup Korea/Japan venue, Albirex Niigata focused on building a fan base through measures such as distributing free tickets to people in neighboring areas. The result was a tenfold increase in attendance figures just four years after Albirex Niigata entered the J.League.

In the realm of pro basketball, Niigata Albirex BB belongs to the Japan Men's Professional Basketball League (B.League). The team makes good use of the proximity of their home arena, City Hall Plaza Aore



Basketball and soccer season are slightly out of sync, which allows fans to cheer on both teams. Sometimes Albirex soccer fans attend basketball games wearing their team shirts.

- 1 Big Swan Stadium, the home base for Albirex Niigata
- 2 Niigata Albirex BB's basketball arena, with fans sporting the team's trademark orange
- 3 Volunteering in the local community is important to Niigata Albirex BB athletes, shown here leading a basketball class for kids
- 4 The athletes join the local community for many events, such as planting rice to make sake

Nagaoka, to the train station. The arena is integrated with municipal facilities, and multiple stalls open in the event space during games. Many fans come from outside the prefecture, which contributes to regional activity in not only Nagaoka City but also Niigata Prefecture as a whole. Niigata now has twelve teams incorporating “Albirex” in their names competing in eight sports.

“One of the J.League’s three guiding principles is to foster the development of Japan’s sporting culture, as a way to assist in the healthy mental and physical growth of the Japanese people,” Albirex Niigata Inc. President Yukio Nakano says. “Naturally, this includes spreading and promoting football, but the underlying idea is that we are involved in the region through a variety of other sports as well. Rather than just being a professional football team, we consider ourselves a department within a general sports club, so we stay in close communication with other athletics for the development of sports in Niigata, and brainstorm about things we can do together.”

Manabu Kosuge, the president of Niigata Pro Basketball, Inc., also points out the importance of lateral connections.

“The timing of football and basketball league play is out of sync. When it’s the off-season in football, it’s the opposite in basketball—the climax of the season. Recently, and perhaps because of that, a growing number of people come to cheer us on while wearing their football uniforms. So it may be that fans have a sense not so much of supporting basketball but of supporting Niigata.”

Even beyond soccer and basketball, the way that team names and team colors of sports organizations including baseball, skiing and athletics and cheerleading are unified in Niigata is almost unprecedented in Japan, and provides a sense of unity between the various teams. The aim of creating a comprehensive regional sports club has led many prefectural residents to consider “Albirex” a valuable public asset of Niigata.

These collaborative efforts have integrated the



lower branches of the organization responsible for energizing and guiding the next generation of local athletes. Providing opportunities for children to find the sports that suit them and freely receive advice and training leads to the discovery of talent.

“Sports have the ability to appeal directly to the spirit and to inspire,” says Nakano. “When you have a great local team that you can cheer for passionately, communication surpasses generational boundaries and becomes smoother. It’s my belief that this will eventually help drive regional revitalization.”

That idea is certainly proving to be a winning concept in Niigata. **7**