



Takino Fumie in rehearsal, Tokyo, 2020

All Photos: Courtesy of Takino Fumie

Japan Pom Pom Still Going Strong

Cheerleading as an activity and sport enjoys widespread popularity in Japan, even among senior citizens.

SATO KUMIKO

CHEERLEADERS' beaming smiles, brightly colored costumes and energetic performances charm spectators and generate excitement at sports events around the world. Originating in the 1860s as a way for students to encourage their teams at American college football games, cheerleading has evolved to become a sport in its own right and is now practiced in many countries.

There are many cheerleading teams active across Japan including university, high school, community and corporate teams. Among them, one small group of enthusiasts has attracted special attention. Japan Pom Pom was formed in 1996, with membership restricted to those aged 55 years and over. In 2019 the team had twenty-four members, with an average age of 72. While teams for elderly people are not uncommon nowadays, in 1996, when Japan Pom Pom was established, no such group existed in Japan.

Japan Pom Pom was started by Takino Fumie, who was born in 1932 and is now 89 years old. While recent years have seen the

management of the team gradually delegated to the younger members, Takino is still lead representative of Japan Pom Pom and continues to perform in high-tempo routines.

"I don't do cheerleading for the sake of my health or any other particular purpose. All of us do cheerleading just because it's fun and we enjoy it," says Takino.

After graduating from college, Takino got married and had two children. Japanese society at the time expected that women would stay at home and support their husbands and children. Unable to accept this traditional women's role and not wanting to die with regrets, Takino eventually decided at the age of 52 to follow her own path and began to live alone away from her family.

At the age of 53, Takino went overseas to study gerontology, the study of various aspects of aging, at the University of North Texas, where she earned a master's degree. After returning to Japan, she learned through a book sent from the United States that there was a senior cheerleading team over there. Keen to see if she



Japan Pom Pom performing in the USA (United Spirit Association) Nationals; 2010, 2018 and 2019

could do the same in Japan, she approached her friends with the idea and the five of them started up Japan Pom Pom. They continue to hold intensive practice sessions with a professional coach once a week, readying themselves to perform before an audience.

At first, the group enjoyed cheerleading for personal satisfaction. However, the members' attitude to cheerleading began to change when they held a charity show to celebrate their seventh anniversary. After the performance that day, they received many comments from the audience saying that they felt energized and encouraged.

"It made me realize for the first time that this was what cheerleading was all about. The word 'cheer' does indeed mean all those things—cheerfulness, joy and cheering people on," reflects Takino.

Since then, Japan Pom Pom has participated in various competitions as a guest and exchanged with senior teams in the United States, adopting the team motto of "providing dreams, energy and hope."

Says Takino, "I never use my age as an excuse for not starting something new." She now enjoys performing on the ukulele, which she took up at the age of 80.

2020 marked the 25th anni-

versary of the formation of Japan Pom Pom. The team had been practicing for a charity show, but when COVID-19 began to spread the event was canceled, and some members stopped coming to practice. Currently, the number of active members has dropped to sixteen.

Nevertheless, Takino says she is keen to hold another show in 2021 to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the team's formation.

Over the years, many people must surely have been "cheered" by Takino. On the occasion of her group's 25th anniversary show, the audience is sure to be cheered again. 