

# Saburo Kawabuchi

*Creating Sports Clubs Rooted in the Community, through Collaboration between Local Governments, Citizens, and the Private Sector*

**Saburo Kawabuchi served as the first chairman of the Japan Professional Football League (J.League).**

**The idea of “sports clubs rooted in the community” gave rise to a completely new trend in the promotion not only of football but of all sports.**

## **A long-held dream became a driver toward professionalization**

At a time when the promotion of sports in Japan depended mostly on the national government, J.League established a new model for sports promotion characterized by community-oriented operations and a collaborative support structure linking local governments, citizens, and the private sector. This professionalization of the Japan Soccer League (JSL), which consisted solely of corporate teams, was just the beginning of the proliferation of this new model.

In 1988, Kawabuchi was appointed general secretary of the JSL, which he then helped turn into J.League, later becoming its first chairman. Kawabuchi comments, “Initially, advertising agencies, which were very familiar with football events, thought that the move to professionalize the sport would fail. In fact, I did not believe myself that professionalization was feasible, given the relatively low popularity of football, low skill levels of the players, and the poor stadium environment in Japan at the time.”

Less than half a year later, however, Kawabuchi had completely changed his mind. Remembering a long-held dream, he decided to go ahead with professionalization.

As a player, Kawabuchi, along with other national team members, once participated in a training camp held at a *Sportschule* (sports school, i.e., national training center) in West Germany. On the grassy athletics field, surrounded by a forest of white birch trees, local residents were running around chasing balls, and inside the arena, people in wheelchairs were playing ball games. In Germany, there are about 90,000 sports clubs, including large clubs that sponsor football and various other sports teams.

“In Germany, there was an infrastructure in place, enabling men and women of all ages to enjoy sports at any time,” recalls Kawabuchi. “I wanted to create a similar environment in

Japan. It occurred to me that it might be possible, if we used the professionalization of football as a starting point for a larger concept: promoting sports rooted in the local community. I believe that this clear philosophy and vision were key to the initial success of the J.League.”

However, it was an unprecedented challenge, and Kawabuchi thought that a bold shift away from the trappings of corporate-sponsored sports was essential. For example, teams would no longer be named after companies as in the days of corporate teams, but instead would combine the name of the city or town and a nickname. Management of broadcast rights, merchandizing, and rights to use game footage would be consolidated in J.League, with the proceeds distributed to each of its clubs to help strengthen the teams, develop players, and promote sports in the community.

In order to heighten the excitement and thrill of the game, J.League became the first league in the world to adopt, with FIFA's approval, a “V-goal system,” in which the game ends whenever either team scores a goal in extra time.

## **The next challenge is to create a “sports culture”**

By 1998, the initial boom following its inauguration was over, and J.League was facing various challenges, such as problems associated with the merger of club teams. Still, Kawabuchi remained unwavering. Convinced that this was the time for reform, he formulated the “Chairman's Guidelines” and went ahead with various initiatives to ensure sound club management. The tasks he addressed were both specific and extensive: achieving transparency in club management, promoting the activities of the management advisory committee, developing and strengthening general managers, diversifying club shareholders, and implementing J.League's 100-year initiative.

In 2015, Kawabuchi was appointed chairman of the taskforce launched by the International Basketball Federation (FIBA), which sought his abilities in integrating its divided league and achieving the professionalization of basketball in Japan. His success in doing so was again founded on the crucial element of obtaining the support of the local community. “Without nurturing an attachment to the local team in the community,” Kawabuchi says, “neither professionalization nor sports promotion will work.”

When the J.League was inaugurated in 1993, there were only 10 clubs. Today, there are 54 clubs in 37 prefectures. The total number of spectators at league and cup matches combined has grown from approximately 4.12 million to 10.33 million. No one imagined this level of success.

“There are three ways of enjoying sports,” Kawabuchi says. “You can play them, watch them, or support them. I believe that a rich sports culture will develop naturally if you build strong connections with sports, rooted in the community where people live.”

Now, Kawabuchi is affectionately referred to as “the Captain.” The Captain's challenges are not over yet, though, as he continues to pursue improvements in the sports environment in Japan.



**Saburo Kawabuchi**

Born in 1936 in Osaka Prefecture. Was a member of the Waseda University team which won the Kanto University Football League, and later earned a place on the national team. Joined Furukawa Electric Co., Ltd. in 1961. Participated in the 1964 Tokyo Olympics as a member of the national team. Was appointed general secretary of the Japan Soccer League in 1988. Established J.League in 1991 and became its first chairman. Was appointed president of the Japan Football Association in 2002, and has served as its top advisor since 2012. Has also served as head of the Alliance of Japan Top Leagues (JTL) since 2015.