

I spent the first few days of my Golden Week holiday practicing with Tsu Nishi's tennis team. I never played tennis before I came to Japan, but I wanted to get more involved with the students at school now that I am there 4 days a week this year. I always wanted to play tennis, and it seemed like a non-contact sport that wouldn't be too strenuous, so I decided to go for it. When I was a child, I was always on a sports team. I played volleyball in the fall, basketball in the winter and softball in the spring and summer. I was a pretty bad athlete. From a young age, it was clear that sports really weren't my forte, but my parents encouraged me to play anyways. I learned that it doesn't matter if you aren't very good at something, as long as you try your best and have fun. When I was in high school, we used to have a "spirit award" for one athlete on every sports team. The spirit award didn't have to mean that the person was particularly good at the sport, but just believed in the team and had a positive attitude. I often got this award, so I became less embarrassed about the fact that I was bad at sports.

Even so, I was a little bit nervous to join a club for a sport that I had never played before. When I decided to begin, I talked to the students on the tennis court, and they told me not to worry, that they would help me learn to play. The first day, about a month ago, was pretty bad. I don't know who was more nervous—the kids to speak English, or me to play tennis. The fact that I understand Japanese better than they realize made things a little more entertaining, but I still spent most of the time trying in vain to actually hit the ball. Luckily, the students and the coach have all been really encouraging me to improve at tennis. Although at first I didn't want to dedicate a lot of free time to the club, I decided that it would be a waste of my time and theirs if I never improved! For the first few weeks at least, I tried to go to practice as much as possible, and I think I have improved to the point where I can generally make contact with the ball when I swing (even if it's not so good).

I am excited about the fact that I am gradually improving at tennis, but the best part of being on the tennis team is spending time with the students. By now, they have come to realize that I understand and speak Japanese a lot better than they thought, but even so, they almost never rely on Japanese when I come to practice and they are explaining what is going on. There are a few students who didn't talk to me much at first, but I sometimes heard them asking their classmates how to say certain things in English so that they could talk to me. I realized that just because students don't come up to me in the hallway or talk to me after class, it doesn't mean that they aren't interested in English. Even though I have some of the students in my English classes, I have found that they are totally different during tennis practice. Students

who don't participate in class seem excited to see me and speak English in a less formal situation, even if they don't think they are very good. I like to think that when they see me embarrass myself on the tennis court, it makes them less shy to try to speak English. Maybe I'm wrong, but I am getting to know students who probably wouldn't talk to me otherwise and I can see their improvement every day. That means a lot more to me than perfecting my backhand.