



14 MILLION POTENTIAL FANS

Yoshikawa, a blueliner with the Tokyo Wilds, hopes to help grow the game in the country's biggest city.



Japan's new circuit aims to bridge the gap between the country's development leagues and its fully professional ranks

BY RONNIE SHUKER



ROUND-TRIP DELIGHT

The XHL gave Jumonji a chance to play at home after a year in Germany and another in the United States.

tance from the IIHF, stepped in to found the XHL, a second-tier semi-pro league currently made up of three teams: the Nagoya Orques, the Tokyo Wilds and the Shiga Blue Rise. The league is intended to provide a landing spot for college and university players who want to play pro at home but can't crack the ALIH. To help get the XHL off and running, the IIHF provided financial support from its Growing The Game fund and connected the JIHF with the German Ice Hockey Federation, using Germany's multi-tiered pro-league system as a template and emphasizing the importance of developing players in their late teens and early 20s. "Kids in Japan go from elementary, junior high, high school and then university, college, and then stop," Yamada said. "Some players go to the top league, the Asia League, but not many. So for the XHL to take the initiative to build this under-23 pool of players, this would connect the pyramid."

Among that pool of players is Hiroaki Yoshikawa, a defenseman with the Wilds. At 21, he was the youngest player in the XHL in

XHL ASCENT

OPPORTUNITY

IN IKEA'S 2025 SLEEP Report, Japan topped the list of the most sleep-deprived countries in the world, averaging barely six hours a night. Most of that is attributed to the country's culture of working long hours. There's even a term for it: *karoshi* ("death from overwork").

There's no term or diagnosis for "death from hockey." But players in Japan's Extreme Hockey League were willingly experiencing a lack of sleep as a result of early morning practices in the lead-up to the launch of the country's newest pro circuit in October 2025. With ice time at a premium in Japan's southern cities, players in the three-team XHL had been practising at the unspeakable hour of 4 a.m. three times a week before the season began – on top of their regular weekly hours as working professionals. Players would wake up between

2 and 2:30 a.m., practise for an hour or so, go to their regular jobs for 8:30 a.m., work until 5:30 p.m., go to sleep at around 8:30 or 9 p.m., and then either repeat it again the next day or go to the gym and train on non-practice days. Once the season started, practices were moved to the comparatively late hour of 6 a.m. to allow players to get some well-deserved shuteye.

Among the XHL's first crop of players is 26-year-old Yosuke Jumonji, who works in IT for a wholesaler of Japanese liquors and cakes when he isn't playing forward for the Nagoya Orques. After two years of playing semi-pro hockey overseas, first with HEC Eisbaren Heilbronn in the German Div. IV league and then with Dashers Hockey of the United States' Federal Prospects League, Jumonji wanted to come back home to Japan to fulfill his dream of playing in front of family, friends and fans. "After two seasons



YOSUKE JUMONJI

YOSHIKAWA: TOKYO WILDS/XHL-JP; JUMONJI: NAGOYA ORQUES/XHL-JP

outside of Japan, I'd done it," he said. "I had no regrets. I didn't know how good I would be in international hockey, but I wanted to experience professional hockey. Now, I want to play at home in Japan."

Like so many players coming out of college and university hockey in Japan, Jumonji had no choice but to leave home if he wanted to pursue a professional career. By his own admission, he wasn't good enough to make the roster of one of the five Japanese teams in the six-team Asia League Ice Hockey (the other team is in South Korea), which has featured former NHLers like Jamie McLennan, Joel Prpic and Derek Plante over the years. Jumonji's only options were either to play regional club hockey with a corporate-sponsored team in a company league, where many players end up, or leave home for a pro league elsewhere in the world. "There's a huge gap between college

66 THERE'S A HUGE GAP BETWEEN COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY AND THE ASIA LEAGUE – Tetsu Yamada

and university and the Asia League," said Tetsu Yamada, senior council member of the Japan Ice Hockey Federation. "Currently, a player, when you graduate from university, you go into Asia League, which is only just a couple of students per university, at most, and that's the only choice they have."

Recognizing this gap in the country's player development, the JIHF, with assis-



TETSU YAMADA



HIROAKI YOSHIKAWA

its first season. Born in Osaka, he followed the traditional Japanese development trajectory of youth hockey to high-school hockey and then one year of club play with a company team in a small league, playing just a handful of games that season before moving on to the Wilds. Right now, he's dedicating himself full time to hockey. "I want to play in front of a lot of Japanese fans and make it popular in Japan," Yoshikawa said. "Tokyo hasn't had a team, so it's a really great opportunity to expand hockey culture in here."

“I WANT TO PLAY IN FRONT OF A LOT OF JAPANESE FANS AND MAKE IT POPULAR IN JAPAN” – Hiroaki Yoshikawa

The JIHF has ambitions for the XHL beyond player development. The federation wants to broaden the domestic market. Although the game is popular in the less-populous north of Japan, especially the regions of Hokkaido and Tohoku, hockey has yet to catch on in the far more urban south, where the XHL hopes to tap into a large but latent market for the sport. "Hockey is very popular in the northern area, and that's why the teams exist there," Yamada said. "But then, not many people live there compared to Tokyo or Osaka, so it's hard to promote hockey as a spectator sport, given the distribution of where the teams are. So we felt the need to have more teams in the Tokyo/Osaka area to lessen the financial burden of travel."



Without the travel required in northern Japan, as in the ALIH, players in the XHL are able to continue their off-ice careers, working on weekdays and playing professionally on weekends.

"The XHL was engineered to try to accommodate that," Yamada said.

To attract new fans, the XHL is using a mix of education and entertainment. To help fans learn the basics, rink announcers explain rules and gameplay such as offsides, icings, power plays and penalty kills to the crowd. And to ensure fans leave wanting to come back again, they're treated to a 3-on-3 overtime exhibition after the end of each game, regardless of the score.

The players are doing their part to grow the game, too. In addition to his day job and his spot on the Orques, Jumonji also moonlights as a social-media broadcaster for the ALIH and runs his own web service to help boost the profile of Japanese hockey. He also



has experience working as an assistant GM for the Yokohama Grits of the ALIH. "My big dream is making a hockey team in Japan or making a league as a businessman, not a player," Jumonji said.

"That's one of my dreams – not only to have a hockey career but to have a hockey team in Japan. I'm not a top Japanese player. I'm just a minor-league player. I cannot represent Japan as a player, but I can as a businessman."

Currently, there is no contract between the JIHF-sanctioned XHL and the independent ALIH. Nearly 89 percent of the players in the XHL are from Japan, while the rest come from Taiwan, South Korea, Kazakhstan and even Mongolia, including the Orques' 6-foot-6, 243-pound Batu Gendunov, who was among the league's top scorers. About half of Japanese XHL players are recent college graduates, and most of the rest are pro-level players who can't make the ALIH but want to continue playing. With the XHL, they now have that option, with potential expansion franchises on the horizon.

By season's end, the Wilds had edged out the Orques for the championship in what was a two-horse race all season long, with the Blue Rise losing every game and earning just one point in an overtime loss.

Now that the XHL's first season has wrapped up, the players are able to get more sleep, while the next crop of Japanese college and university puck recruits can pursue a new, more accessible path in the game right in their own backyard. "We hope there will be more teams in the XHL next season as well," Yamada said. "Then the college graduates will have more options. They can play in the XHL for a while. If they feel they can go up to the top league, great. If not, then they may choose to work full time. But now they have more options when they graduate." **H**

EXPLANATION & EXHIBITION

XHL fans are taught hockey's basics and guaranteed a 3-on-3 overtime no matter the game's final score.

YOSHIKAWA: TOKYO WILDS/XHL-JP; SHIGA: SHIGA BLUE RISE IHC/XHL-JP; GENDUNOV: NAGOYA ORQUES/XHL-JP