

1. The Birdie Prince

Is Japan's new golf superstar ready to take on Tiger Woods? Well, maybe not yet, but 15-year-old Ryo Ishikawa is making a name for himself both in Japan and overseas. The mild-mannered, good-looking golfer from Saitama has just become the youngest player to ever win a professional golf tournament.

"My dream is to actually break Tiger's record and become the youngest player to win the U.S. Masters title", he says, "I'll have to really work hard to reach this goal but I'm pretty sure I can do it". A handsome and talented young golfer is exactly what Japanese golf needs right now as the sport's popularity has been declining recently because of the lack of top-level male players. Even the Prime Minister has shown an interest in this rising star by inviting him to his office and offering Ishikawa some encouragement: "You are still young and have the talent to brighten up Japan", said the Prime Minister.

In the meantime, Ryo will continue to practice 4 hours a day while still trying to find time to study for his high school tests. "My plan is to win the Junior Golf World Championships...but first I really need to pass my midterm tests", he says with his trademark smile. Judging by this young athlete's rapid rise to fame, we may someday see his name on the scoreboard alongside his heroes.

2. Smiling at Life

I had so many great experiences last year when I was studying and living abroad in Vancouver. When I first arrived at the airport, my new host family gave me a great big hug! I wasn't expecting this and I was so surprised that I forgot how to introduce myself in English and said, "My name is Japan", by mistake! I was really embarrassed at first, but everyone just smiled and said, "It's ok, it's ok".

For the first few months, communication was really hard and I couldn't say exactly what I wanted. Every time I got frustrated or said the wrong thing, my host mother would just smile and encourage me. Through her example, I learned that sometimes humour is the best remedy for difficult situations. Instead of getting upset when I made a mistake, I learned to 'look on the bright side', as my host mother would always say.

I learned a lot of English during my year in Canada, and by the time I had to leave, I felt totally comfortable and could express my feelings clearly in English. "Thank you for all you've done for me", I told my host mother as we waited together for my plane back to Japan. "You taught me to smile and see the positive side of everything". This time I gave her a hug and saw that, even through the tears, she was still smiling.

3. Does Faster Mean Better?

It seems that no matter where you go in the world these days, fast food is there, tempting you with its convenience and low prices. People are busier than ever, and this often makes it hard to find the time to prepare a healthy, home-cooked meal. But does this mean that a burger, fries, and a soft drink are a good alternative?

“Most people don’t realize how much salt and cholesterol is in fast food”, says one doctor. “Eat two cheeseburgers, a large fries and a cola, and you’re already over your daily fat quota”. For many young people though, the threat of health problems is not enough to stop them from eating out everyday. “I’m just too busy to cook”, says one college student, “And besides, fast food is cheap and burgers *do* have vegetables in them”.

As these American restaurant chains continue to grow, there is a much smaller food revolution going on. Many organic restaurants are now popping up and offering customers a healthier choice. “We serve ‘slow food’ that is low in cholesterol”, says the manager of a new health food restaurant in Tokyo. “We’re not as big as some of the more famous restaurants yet”, he laughs, “But as more people become concerned with their health, I think we’ll become more popular”. In this busy world of convenience, it’s nice to know that there are healthier options.

4. English as a Second Language

When I first started studying English I would imagine myself being able to talk to all my favorite actors like Johnny Depp and Orlando Bloom. I wanted to be able to communicate with people from English-speaking countries and make friends with them. My dream came true when I got to spend a year doing a homestay in New Zealand. I met so many awesome people and made lifelong friends, and I did it all in English.

I now feel confident talking with people, whether they’re from America or Australia, New Zealand or Canada. My English ability, however, has also had a very unexpected benefit. Last summer I went to a youth conference in Singapore where young people from all over the world gathered to talk about environmental issues. My narrow idea of who I was able to communicate with was about to change.

Students from 18 countries attended the conference. Everyone spoke a different first language so I was worried that interaction would be impossible. I was totally wrong! The one thing we all had in common was English. I used my English to talk to and make friends with people from India, Korea, Germany, Sweden, Mexico, and many other countries. “It’s awesome to be able to talk with you!”, my new Swedish friend said. It was through this experience that I realized that English really has become a world language.

5. Animal Fashion

I saw the strangest thing the other day. My friend Sarah and I went to the local pet shop to check out all the cute little critters for sale and found that there was a 'Dog Fashion Show' about to start. I had never heard of such a thing, but it sounded interesting so we decided to sit down and watch. "I wonder what this is all about", my friend asked. "Let's find out", I replied.

Loud music came on and proud dog owners started to lead their dogs down the platform. Some of the dogs were wearing the same clothes as their owners, and a few even had their hair dyed the same color! There were dogs in Burberry coats, Prada skirts, and even high-heeled shoes. One little Labrador had a diamond necklace and diamond earrings.

"That was a bit weird", I said, after the show finished. "What do you mean?", Sarah asked. "Well...those poor dogs having to wear all that stuff." She didn't share my opinion. "Really?", she said. "If people can wear fashion, then why not dogs? I want to buy something for my dog." We wandered over to where they were selling accessories and saw a leather Chanel collar. Sarah looked really excited until she saw the price - it was seventy-thousand yen! She looked at me in disbelief. "Actually, I think I like my dog just the way she is."

6. Living With Science Fiction

When it comes to technology, Japan has a lot to be proud of. Japanese cars and computers are famous of course, but did you know that we are also world leaders in robotics? Thanks to Japan, the world has entered a kind of robotic revolution. We now have everything from robotic dogs that can recognize words and objects to robots that can walk on two feet just like you and I can.

We have seen human-looking robots ever since the World Expo in Aichi where there were many realistic robots on display. Many visitors could be heard saying "Wow...she looks so real!" and "Are you sure that's a robot?" Now that they look and move like we do, the next step is making them practical for everyday life.

The newest robot on the scene is waterproof and can even walk on slippery surfaces and use a screwdriver. Although it is very exciting, developing new types of robots is not just fun and games. "We hope that our robots can improve the lives of everyday people", says one developer. Robots have already been introduced in hospitals where they can help people. Some of these robots have even become 'friends' with the elderly patients, and help them eat their meals and play games with them. Can you imagine playing cards with a robot? Welcome to the future!

7. Follow Your Dreams

Can you imagine being famous by the time you are twenty? For most people, this is just a dream, but for others, it's reality. Avril Lavigne is one of these people. Avril was born in Belleville, Ontario, Canada in 1984. When she was only fourteen years old, she won a singing competition and went on a concert tour. When she was my age, she was already on her way to becoming famous! Her first CD was called *Let Go* and her biggest hit was the song *Complicated*. "My dream was always to hop up on stage in front of my fans every night and perform", says Avril.

Her second album did even better and she was soon famous all over Europe and Asia too. Her third album has just been released and the single *Girlfriend* can be heard on the radio. With her worldwide fame, Avril has also decided to make her songs available in many languages.

We have something in common then because I also see the benefit in learning new languages. Now Avril can bring her music to people in their native tongue and this will open many doors for her. Similarly, I want to learn English not only because it's fun, but because it'll open many doors for me too! I too could be famous by the time I'm twenty. Am I dreaming? Maybe, but to be successful, you have to follow your dreams.

8. Japanese Culture in the World

"I can't believe how different Japan is now", my grandfather said to me one day. "When I was a boy, my mother often wore a kimono and I didn't even know what a hamburger was". That's true, I thought. Ideas from other countries have changed Japanese life. I wonder if ideas from Japan are changing life in other countries too?

I guess people all over the world watch Japanese made TVs and drive to work in Japanese cars. Millions of people have watched *The Last Samurai* and *Memoirs of a Geisha*, and the movies made by Hayao Miyazaki. Judo and karate are Olympic sports and the world seems to love Japanese food! Japanese restaurants are everywhere and cheap sushi and ramen shops serve lunches to office-workers across Europe, America and Australia.

Many Japanese words like *sashimi*, *futon*, *origami* and *tsunami* are also used in other countries. Of course they often sound a little different! For example, English speakers say 'saki' instead of *sake*. It sounds a bit funny at first, but then again, I guess it also sounds funny to English speakers when Japanese people say '*Maku Donaruldo*' instead of McDonalds!

I agree with my grandfather. Japan is a very different country now, but I'm happy that all over the world, people are also learning about Japan and enjoying some of the great things that come from Japan too.

9. New Zealand, Island of Birds

New Zealand is famous for having 40 million sheep and only 4 million people. However, 1,200 years ago, before the first people discovered New Zealand, it was a country of birds. That's right. Only birds! There were no other animals. No cats, dogs, rats or horses - and definitely no sheep, not one!

Many of New Zealand's birds couldn't fly. Without danger from animals, they lived on the ground. Their bodies grew bigger and their wings grew smaller, until they couldn't fly at all. The biggest bird that has ever lived was a New Zealand bird called a *moa*. It looked a little like an ostrich, but it was much bigger and stood over three meters tall. Can you imagine that? That's a bird much taller than a basketball player! Another smaller bird that can't fly is called a *kiwi*. The *kiwi* bird has since become a symbol for New Zealand and its people.

The first people who came to New Zealand hunted the birds for food. The birds that couldn't fly were easy to catch and soon all the *moa* disappeared. The dogs, cats and rats that man brought to New Zealand killed many other birds too. Luckily, the *kiwi* is still alive. If you ever see a kiwi, you are seeing a living memory of a special time long ago, when New Zealand was an island of birds and the forests rang with the chorus of a thousand bird-calls.

10. The Earth from Space

I have a dream. One day, I want to see the Earth from space. I've heard people say that leaving home makes you most appreciate your family and that traveling overseas helps you to better understand your own country and culture. I wonder then, how it would feel to leave the Earth and look back on our only home and the only place we know where life exists.

I heard an astronaut talk of his awe when watching the sunrise over the Earth. The earth was a shining ball of silver cloud and blue ocean in the blackness of space. He said, "From space you realize how special and fragile the Earth is. If all people could see this, they would surely realize how important it is to take care of and protect all life on Earth".

Last week, I read that Richard Branson, an English entrepreneur and the owner of Virgin Airlines, is going to build 5 'spaceliners'. They will be the world's first commercial spaceships made to take passengers into space. It will cost over 20 million yen for a single ticket, but 7000 people have already booked, so it seems that many other people share my dream. That's way too expensive for me, but I will keep dreaming, and saving my money! One day, I will see the sunrise over the Earth from space and I hope that one day all the world's people will be able to see that special view.