

Very strange but true sports history by Phuong Le

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Following the philosophical tennis documentary *John McEnroe: In the Realm of Perfection*, Julien Faraut is back with yet another unusual, enigmatic sports film, this time tracing the extraordinary journey of the undefeated Japanese national women's volleyball team in the 1960s. Assembled from a group of factory workers, these young, initially amateur athletes went to extraordinary lengths to hone their skills, under the stern and ruthless training of head coach Hirofumi Daimatsu. Winners of the gold medal at the 1964 Tokyo Summer Olympics, the team enjoyed a streak of 258 victories, earning the "witches" sobriquet abroad and inspiring a string of pop culture tributes, most notably Chikako Urano's *Attack No 1* manga series.

In retelling this stranger-than-fiction chapter of sports history, Faraut's choice of materials ranging from interviews with surviving members of the team, now in their 70s, to archival footage of their practices and matches, all juxtaposed with scenes from the anime adaptation of *Attack No 1*. By pairing real-life events with their animated interpretations, the film not only offers a fresh approach to documentary style but also draws out the tension between reality and artifice, private and public memory. One of the most mesmerising sequences is a training montage where Faraut deftly deconstructs an old newsreel showing the team at their fabric factory. The rhythm of the women's movements as they roll on the floor to catch the ball – their training includes reimagining their bodies as roly-poly dolls – mirrors the factory machines churning out fresh cotton, to swoony, heady effect.

The image of the machine is especially significant here, as the film contextualises how the team's success was central to the reinvention of postwar Japan, eager to regain its footing on the international stage. The final Olympics sequence keeps viewers on the edge of their seats, despite us knowing the outcome. Hanging over these young women's shoulders is not just their pride, but the nation's too. ♦

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ABOUT THE FILM

How did a group of humble factory workers become a phenomenal sports success story and the pride of an entire nation? Julian Faraut's (*John McEnroe: In The Realm of Perfection*) ferociously innovative and visually stunning *The Witches of the Orient* tells the tale of the Japanese women's volleyball team's thrilling rise, unbelievable 258 games winning streak, and eventual Olympic gold at the 1964 Tokyo Olympics.

United by their jobs in a textile factory, the Japanese women's volleyball team chased absolute perfection under the guidance of their grueling coach Hirofumi Daimatsu. His methods were so tough that in Japan, he was known as "the Demon," with his intense, endless practice sessions, shaping the team into a force to be reckoned with. While the west viewed Japan as an alien upstart in the postwar years, it didn't prevent the team from striking fear in the hearts of their competitors, earning them the racist and dismissive moniker "oriental witches." Less an underdog tale than a saga of overwhelming determination that simultaneously subverts and feeds an orientalized mystique, *The Witches of the Orient* conjures the tenor and tone of the team's grip on the imagination of an entire nation seeking renewal and acceptance on the world stage of the post-war era.

Faraut's sparkling documentary uses fantastic manga and anime sequences, such as *Attack no 1* (1968), with archival footage of blood-curdling matches, intense training sessions (driven by rhythmic editing and great music from French musician K-Raw, as well as two original songs by Granddaddy's Jason Lytle) with testimony from the now-octogenarian teammates. The result charts the Witches' meteoric rise without losing their overwhelmingly vital spirit. The joy of the Witches' success is infectious and offers a hopeful prelude to the 2021 Tokyo Olympic Games. *Co-presented by MUBI, UniFrance, and the Yanai Initiative for Globalizing Japanese Humanities.*

100 min. | France | 2021

The Witches of the Orient by Neil Young

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The curveball cinematic career of Julien Faraut continues to quietly delight via his third sport-themed feature-length documentary *Witches of the Orient*. A world premiere in the Big Screen competition at Rotterdam, it lovingly chronicles the all-conquering exploits of a female volleyball team from Japan in the first half of the 1960s. tells which types of stories. While this French production may lack the marquee-name factor of Faraut's unlikely 2018 festival breakout *John McEnroe: In the Realm of Perfection*—which

scored theatrical distribution in several territories — it's still a solid crowdpleaser elevated by Faraut's mildly experimental streak.

The writer-director's approach to his material always feels fresh, as befits an individual whose route to film-making was highly unorthodox. A history graduate, he started working in the well-stocked archival department of France's elite athlete-training and sports-research institute INSEP in 2003. His ten documentaries assembled from the archive's holdings (including 2013's 80-minute *Regard neuf sur Olympia 52*) made little impact beyond the non-fiction circuit. The McEnroe film, minutely analysing passages of the 1984 French Open final, quickly established his name internationally.

Faraut and McEnroe editor Andrei Bogdanov once again unearth and showcase wonderful archival materials, chiefly newsreel reports and documentaries shot during the team's 1960-64 heyday. Colour celluloid footage of sparkling clarity shows the players for Nichibo Kaizuka, which started out as an Osaka textile factory team, in their punishingly arduous training regimes supervised by enigmatic, martinet coach Hirofumi Daimatsu. Members of this team would go on to form the Japanese national side, victorious in the Tokyo Olympics of 1964 and dubbed "the Oriental Witches".

These training routines are dramatised and stylised in passages from Eiji Okabe's youth-oriented anime *Attack No.1*, a film and TV series from 1969/70 inspired by the Olympics triumph and play out at considerable length, often moodily augmented by new electronica-heavy music by K-Raw and Jason Lytle, or existing tracks by the likes of Portishead.

The film is at its most strikingly effective when the editors alternate quickly between one archival source and another, emulating the lightning-paced brilliance displayed on court. It's hard to inject much in the way of drama when one is dealing with an uninterrupted winning streak of 258 games, of course, but the last sections of the 1964 Tokyo final against the USSR do attain a surprising level of intensity.

Calmer interludes are provided by glimpses of the genial surviving members of the team, who gather for one of their regular reunions and reminisce about their global fame. And it's all very pleasant. No particularly valuable or surprising insights emerge from *Witches of the Orient*, which prefers to foreground retro aesthetics rather than the minutiae of volleyball lore or tactics. As such, the film perfectly palatable for those without even a passing interest in the sport — or, indeed, in sport at all — though aficionados may become quickly bemused by Faraut's creatively whimsical flights of fancy. ♦