

Japan new PM uses sports talk to calm party feuds

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TOKYO, Aug 31 – Japan's new prime minister, Yoshihiko Noda, a judo black belt with a fondness for metaphors, is now turning to sports analogies as he preaches unity to his fractious ruling party.

The Democratic Party, a hodge-podge of politicians with varied backgrounds and policy preferences, has been plagued by internal feuds since sweeping to power two years ago.

In the latest twist Noda (picture) was elected DPJ leader, and hence premier, on Monday in a bruising run-off after none of five candidates won a majority in a first-round vote.

"Why don't we call it 'no side', already," Noda said after beating rival Banri Kaieda in the run-off, which boiled down to a fight between critics and allies of a party powerbroker.

"No side", a phrase Japanese politicians often use to suggest bitter rivals can be friends once a battle is over, is an out-dated rugby term still used to end matches in Japan.

Speaking to Democratic lawmakers about his picks for a new party executive line-up, Noda said today: "In soccer terms, I want them to be mid-fielders.

"There are many, including me, who want to be a centre-forward but what this party needs is a group of mid-fielders with broad views who can deliver strategic passes."

Not to be outdone, Noda's new party policy chief Seiji Maehara – a pitcher in his youth – used a baseball analogy to urge his fellow MPs to pull together.

"In the spirit of everyone playing on the baseball team, I want all of you to participate in the political process," said Maehara, who lost to Noda in the first party vote but backed him in the run-off.

The rotund Noda, a fan of pro wrestling as well as a judo practitioner, often quips that he lacks a talent for "newaza" moves involving grappling on the mat. "I was never good at 'newaza' in either judo or politics, and am still bad at it now," is how he puts it.

The unassuming Noda's sense of humour evoked laughter and grabbed headlines this week when he compared his jowly features to those of a "dojo" loach – a bottom-feeding fish.

"I do look like this and if I become prime minister, the support rate would not rise, so I would not call a snap election," he told DPJ lawmakers before they voted on Monday. – Reuters

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