

**Luke**

This past summer, I had the amazing opportunity to be a camp counselor at SCOA. It was without a doubt one of the most impactful trips and experiences of my life. I constantly think about the unique connections, memories, and moments I had with both my fellow counselors and all the kids

I was able to work with. One of the main highlights of my experience with SCOA was the opportunity to stay with a family for a few days. Learning how to live in a new culture, connect with a family, and share life experiences with them was nothing short of special.

Going to a new country to work with a group of counselors for the first time was scary at first and definitely challenged me to get outside of my comfort zone. However, I was able to grow in so many ways that I cannot recommend SCOA enough and encourage anyone thinking about going to get outside of their comfort zone.

**Johnny**

SCOA was truly an irreplaceable experience for me. To be able to involve and submerge myself in a culture and community that was completely different to my own will be something that I will carry with me forever. I honestly went into camp with 0 expectations of what camp was going to look like, but I quickly realized how life-changing it was for the campers. Although many of the days were long, the countless smiles, memories, and laughs paired with the wonderful connections I made, made it all worth it. It was truly special to be able to see the impact a few counselors could have on the campers through our personalities and sport.

A particularly special part of the camp for me was the homestay. I had the pleasure of staying with the wonderful Fujieda family and it was a completely unforgettable experience. Their kindness, inclusivity, and hospitality showed me that language and cultural barriers didn't have an effect on the universal feeling of fun. I still keep in touch with my homestay family and am so grateful for the experience I never would've gotten anywhere else.

**Ella**

My time at SCOA is something I will never forget. Never in my life did I expect to be waking up each morning in Japan, surrounded by new friends and laughing with such energetic children. A very special part about SCOA was the homestay, where I had the chance to live with a Japanese family and their two adorable daughters for a few days. My favorite part was spending time with them after school and playing Among Us or doing crafts together. They shared their favorite foods and traditions with me. We bonded quickly and it was emotional saying goodbye to them. I will cherish those memories forever.

My time at SCOA was very formative and it was cool to meet so many different campers. Even though we didn't speak the same language, we were able to communicate through sport and play. I felt as though I grew each session and became more connected to Japan each day. It was tiring at times, but it was always worth it to see the kids having so much fun. I never imagined a simple game of duck, duck goose or a Naruto dance could bring so much laughter. Regardless of what we were doing, the incredible team of counselors made every minute exciting. Bonding with the other counselors was one of the most special parts of camp. SCOA was the most culturally immersive experience I've ever had, and I feel very lucky to have met the other counselors and learned so many new things. SCOA will always hold a special place in my heart, and I hope it continues to bring joy to so many children as well as counselors.

**Lauren**

SCOA was one of the best, most unique experiences I've had so far! I was pretty nervous to be so far away from home for that long, but the other counselors and staff welcomed me with open arms and made me comfortable right away. During our training days, I was unsure if I was really going to be able to connect with the kids because of the language barrier, but I quickly learned that my joy and excitement to be in Japan and be a part of this program transferred to the kids and we were able to have so much fun even if I barely knew any Japanese.

The energy the kids brought everyday made me want to be a better counselor for them and do my best to give that energy back. It was hard to keep up with all of the running around and classic kid antics some days, but the other amazing counselors would be right there to support me and take charge if I ever needed a break. It was so fun getting to meet other collegiate athletes from around the country and going through an experience like this definitely made us much closer as a group. Watching each other do silly dances for the kids and playing tag during free time or the younger girls surrounding me to braid my hair all the time are definitely some memories that I will cherish forever.

Another favorite experience was getting to live with a host family for a few days. My family was so sweet and inquisitive! I was scared to be on my own away from the other counselors but my family made me feel so welcome and comfortable. It was so fascinating to get to experience everyday life within another culture. There's so many more amazing things I could mention: the scenery, the food, the shopping, the FOOD, but I am so happy that I was picked to be a part of SCOA and this experience will have a special place in my heart forever.

**Charlotte**

Working with the kids helped me develop patience and learn how to resolve conflicts when disagreements arose. I also learned the importance of gentleness, especially when comforting campers who were homesick. I built lasting friendships with other counselors from across the world. The language barrier was tough at times but, I realized that a smile is universal. So is good music that makes you want to dance. Some of my best memories were dancing and jumping around with the kids, being as silly as I wanted while they laughed and joined in. Living in Japan was equally special. Staying with my host family allowed me to truly experience Japanese culture and daily life. I took the train to school hand in hand with my host kid, admiring the independence and discipline of the Japanese children who rode the train alone.

One of my fondest memories was lying on the tatami mats at night while my six campers whispered and giggled in Japanese. Even though I understand a single word, I could feel the bond we shared and they simply wanted me there. We laughed together until the camp director came in to remind us to quiet down. She was surprised, and maybe a little amused, to see me laughing right alongside the girls.

**Sarah**

Being a part of SCOA Senior Counselors 2025 was a once in a lifetime opportunity and experience that I'm very grateful I was a part of. I loved every part of being a counselor in Japan. I felt so lucky to be able to go back to Japan and teach these kids my sport and bond

with them every session. The counselors were one of the best parts of being in SCOA this summer. The days were very long and I had to work hard but seeing the counselors who had become my friends helped me get through and keep up so much good energy throughout the camps. I loved learning about the culture of Japan and being immersed in it for a month straight. It taught me a lot and I really enjoyed being able to experience it on my own for the first time. I wasn't able to experience the home stay due to unforeseen circumstances but the staff were very quick to help me have a different experience that I still very much enjoyed. The SCOA experience made me learn a lot about myself and tested me to be the best and I feel so lucky to have been a part of it this past summer.

### **Jaya**

I'm so glad I stepped out of my comfort zone and traveled to Japan for SCOA. I'll never forget my time here; it was such a meaningful and rewarding experience. To be honest I was a little nervous coming in, but the other senior counselors were right there beside me, sharing the same experiences and supporting each other through it all.

I loved having a cultural exchange with my campers, learning from one another, and enjoying all the silly, joy filled moments that made every day special. It was also so rewarding to see the kids start to look up to us as role models. I'm beyond thankful for this opportunity and for all the amazing memories and friendships I've made along the way. SCOA will always hold a special place in my heart.

### **Siniru**

Being a SCOA camp counselor this summer was the most rewarding and life-changing experience in my 22 years of life. I stepped out of my comfort zone by going to a country where I only knew the basic language. I couldn't believe it when I got an email for a sports camp counselor position in Japan, thinking it was too good to be true. It was the best decision I ever made to apply. It is a very unique experience that I got to share with other student athletes like me. I learned so much about all the work that goes into leading a sports camp as big as this. There were definitely days when it was tiring and exhausting, with the training and long days, as well as making mistakes, but overcoming those mistakes and reminding myself how privileged I am to be here helped me keep going with confidence. It was the best post-grad summer I could ask for.

The camps were located in the countryside, so it was intriguing to see not just Tokyo and city life, but also the countryside life and how they live. I will never forget seeing Mt. Fuji for the first time. I was also really excited about my homestay, as I was interested in how everyday life was for the Japanese. My host family was very welcoming and made me feel comfortable. I learned about popular Japanese games and tried different Japanese snacks (I love the Umaibo corn flavor). I studied Japanese for 2 years in college, so I was really excited to apply my skills in the real world. I still remember the names of my fingers in Japanese, thanks to my first group of Division 1 campers. The bilingual counselors were also a huge help. I'm so grateful for this experience, as I made new friends for life, from both America and Japan, skills I can transfer into my next endeavors, and if I could do it all over again, I absolutely would. I loved bringing the Penguin Power team together at every campfire. I hope that this camp will open me up to more experiences in Japan in the near future. I will always be grateful to J.R. and Keiko for trusting and inviting me to work for their camp. Thank you SCOA!

**Logan**

When I initially found out that I had been selected to be a Senior Counselor for SCOA, I had no idea what to expect. I was super nervous because this was my first time traveling outside of the US by myself, and I knew that it would be an adjustment. Being a senior counselor for SCOA was such a unique and memorable experience that I am so grateful for. Looking back on my 6 weeks with my fellow SCOA counselors, I learned so much about communication, flexibility, teamwork, and leadership. During my homestay, my host family was so accommodating and kind. In those three days, they made me feel like I was a part of their family and immersed me in Japanese culture. Getting to camp was equally exciting. Working with Japanese children, I was initially concerned about the language barrier, but I can say that was one of the last things I had to think about. I had so much fun teaching sports, playing games, and sharing stories with the kids, making it so easy to connect with them. Not every day was easy, and there were many points where the other counselors and I had to improvise, pivot, and choose resilience. But overall, we were able to come together and create memorable experiences for the campers. My biggest takeaway from this experience are the friendships that I made with the other senior and bilingual counselors. SCOA allowed me to connect with people and learn so much about Japanese culture in a way that wouldn't have been possible otherwise.