

Adversity, acceptance, and accomplishment: female athletes in Japan's modern sportsworld

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In Japan as elsewhere, sport is strongly coded as a masculine field. Nonetheless, women have long played sports at elite and popular levels despite considerable, continuing disadvantages in material resources, media attention and ideological support. I propose four reasons for the surprising profile of Japanese sporting women over the past century. Japan has long placed importance on its success in the Olympic Games; as the Games were opened up to female events, national ambition motivated Japan to improve opportunities for elite female athletes and celebrate their success. A second factor is extensive corporate sponsorship of a range of individual and team sports at elite levels for both male and female employees, which opened up opportunities to women for intensive training and national and even international participation. Moreover, sporting accomplishment more generally in Japan has foregrounded trained effort and focused on commitment rather than 'natural' ability or brute strength. And mainstream notions of Japanese personhood are sociocentric, not individuated. Sociality is as much a norm of masculine conduct as of feminine conduct, and gender dichotomies are more relational than absolute. Together, these factors offer a compelling rationale for female sporting performance in Japan's modern century and some optimism for further gains in the future.

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Introduction

The Japanese national teams in football (or soccer, as it is called in Japan) have had mixed success in international competition, but they are world leaders in strategies of branding and marketing. For over a decade, the men's national team has been named (and branded as) the 'Blue Samurai', and for almost as long, the women's national team has been known as 'Nadeshiko Japan'. Corporate sponsorship, team-marked sporting goods, media representations, game announcing and other aspects of national team promotion have all emphasized these monikers.

Deploying samurai imagery to theme the men's team carries obvious associations of male warrior virtues that are recognizable internationally – using slashing soccer shots as modern versions of slashing samurai swords. Nadeshiko, however, is an image which has deep meanings in Japan but is largely unknown to the rest of the world. It refers specifically to a flower, the frilled pink carnation, and more figuratively (as 'Yamato Nadeshiko') to traditional Japanese ideals of femininity as grace and tender beauty. Both team names attempt to link moral rectitude, spiritual fortitude and physique, but the branding juxtaposes the masculine aggressive competitiveness of the male samurai with the feminine virtues of delicacy, deference and quiet determination. Although it is the women's team that has been the more successful on the world stage, they seem resigned still to walk half a step behind the soccer-warrior males.

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Thus, the binary of masculinity and femininity is as powerful a convention and as potent a lever of advantage in Japan as in the west. Sports always seem to ask of males that they be more-than-male and to ask of females that they be other-than-female. Sports may no longer be a male preserve, but the personal qualities they valorize and the sociabilities they project and demand are highly gendered and androcentric. Nonetheless, what we now know about gender in the west is also true for Japan – that masculinities and femininities are always plural (albeit arrayed in hierarchies), that they are always historically situated, and that they are always relational to one another. Masculinities both unite and divide men, as do conventions of femininity for women.

In Japan as elsewhere, sport is strongly coded as a masculine field because the highest profile professional sports, frequently ‘rugged’ team sports like baseball, soccer and rugby (as well as sumo in Japan), stake out male preserves. Nonetheless, women have long played sports at elite and popular levels despite considerable continuing disadvantages in terms of material resources, media attention and ideological support. This remains true even in the US, with its unique 40-year history of Title IX-mandated sports equality in secondary schools and universities. It is certainly so in Japan, where female athletes have faced a number of barriers.

- Most modern sports developed in Japan largely in the upper secondary and university levels of its national educational system. These levels were almost exclusively male until the mid-twentieth century, denying women significant opportunities.
- The pivotal sport of twentieth-century Japan was baseball, with sumo as a popular counter-point. The two sports dominated spectatorship and media attention, and neither was open to women.
- A hierarchical gender ideology developed in the late nineteenth century that valorized and domesticated women as child-bearers and housewives. Paid labour was acceptable (even encouraged) prior to marriage and as a part-time supplement to family income, but women’s public achievement in business, politics and the professions was minimal.

It is thus all the more impressive that women gained what they did in sports participation and in elite sports accomplishment throughout the twentieth century, and that these successes were increasingly recognized and celebrated by the Japanese public. This is true for team sports, most notably the women’s national volleyball team in the 1960s and 1970s, the women’s national softball team in the 1990s and 2000s and the women’s national soccer team at present. Japanese women have also been internationally successful in many high-profile individual sports, such as swimming, judo, Taekwondo, marathon, badminton, gymnastics, figure skating, tennis and golf (Itani, Tahara, & Raita, 2001).

We now have a number of insightful analyses into the very substantial and longstanding barriers to women’s sports participation in Japan. (in English, see Edwards, 2007; Guttman & Thompson, 2001, pp. 221–225; Kietlinski, 2011; Manzenreiter, 2008; Spielvogel, 2003; Vincenti 1997; in Japanese, see Esashi, 1992; Takahashi et al., 2005; Takai, 2006; Taniguchi, 2007). In this article, however, I want to turn the issue around and to explore instead some of the factors that may account for the achievement and recognition that we have seen for female athletes in (and in spite of) such an androcentric gender order. My question is not why they have been so discouraged and disadvantaged in sports. I take that to be aptly demonstrated by these disadvantages and by other scholars. Rather, I ask, how might we account for their accomplishments to date? Sporting privilege in modern Japan, as elsewhere, has been overwhelmingly masculine, but I propose there

are at least four reasons for the surprising profile of Japanese sporting women over the last century.

One factor is political and bears on the importance that Japan has long placed on visibility and success in the Olympic Games. As the Games were opened up to female events, national ambition motivated Japan to improve opportunities for elite female athletes and celebrate their success. A second factor is the importance of corporate sports. While the national school system has overwhelmingly privileged male sports (especially schoolboy baseball), extensive corporate sponsorship of teams and leagues across a range of individual and team sports at elite levels for both male and female employees has, in compensation, offered opportunities to women for intensive training and national and even international participation.

Moreover, sporting accomplishment more generally in Japan has foregrounded trained effort and focused on commitment rather than 'natural' ability or brute strength. Baseball, the pivotal sport of twentieth-century Japan, is a (largely) non-contact sport, whose demands of power, endurance and speed do not ennoble the hyper-masculinity of the football-code sports. This is part of a broader cultural valorization of effort that has been widely deployed by state institutions and corporate workplaces throughout the modern century. The moral injunction for tenacious effort has been directed towards shaping men and women alike, as students, workers and family members. As a standard of sports accomplishment, it has undermined a sharply gendered dichotomy of performance.

Fourth, sports masculinity in Japan has not had to 'police' the boundaries of sociality and sexuality that are nervous fault lines in many major Euro-American sports. Mainstream notions of Japanese personhood are sociocentric, not individuated. Sociality is as much a norm of masculine conduct as of feminine conduct, and gender dichotomies are more relational than absolute.

The following sections take up each of these factors in turn. They are of disparate status – a national political agenda, a corporate institutional structure, an ethnopsychological emphasis and a cultural idiom of personhood. Together, though, I believe they offer a compelling rationale for female sporting performance in Japan's modern century, and suggest some optimism for further gains in the future.

The Olympics as a driving force in modern Japanese sports

It is a truism that the modern Olympic Games has been a venue for nationalist passions since rowdy, flag-waving American spectators drew criticism in Athens at the first Games in 1896. Despite IOC efforts to promote the Games as a festival of individual effort and talent, its own institutional structure and much of the Games' choreography have developed in such a way as to highlight national teams, national medal totals, and national prestige.

Japan was the non-western pioneer in the Olympic movement. Its entrance dates back to 1909, when Pierre de Coubertin invited Kano Jigorō to join the International Olympic Committee. Japan sent its first athletes to the 1912 Games in Stockholm, and two decades later, Japan was one of the countries that pressed for greater inclusion of female athletes at the 1928 Amsterdam Games, in the face of much resistance from most other nations (Wada, 2007). From those Games forward, Japan saw participation in the Olympics and other international sporting events as a crucial means of gaining recognition and acceptance from western powers and of asserting its own claims to equal standing. This in turn has been important for the legitimacy and recognition of female athletes in Japan.

Although participation in the Olympic movement was a priority from the start for some leading figures in Japanese sports federations, the Games themselves were largely unknown

to the Japanese public until the early 1920s, when newspapers began to feature Olympic coverage and Japanese athletes began to participate in growing numbers. In 1920, Ichiya Kumagai won two silver medals in men's tennis, and at the 1928 Amsterdam Games, male triple-jumper Mikio Oda won Japan's first ever gold medal. Even this, however, was eclipsed by the riveting second-place finish of sprinter Kinue Hitomi in the women's 800-metre race, at the first Games to include women's track and field events (and on the first occasion that she had ever raced at that distance!). Hitomi was the sole female in the 43-person delegation but she was already an experienced and well-known international competitor from the 1922 and 1926 Women's Olympic Games. She returned to Japan a celebrity, and continued to train, compete and tirelessly promote women's sports. Sadly, her fame was not all adulatory, and she faced rumours of 'mannishness' and insulting speculation about her sexual identity. She contracted pneumonia while returning from the Third Women's World Games in 1930 and died the following year, at the age of 24 (Frost, 2011; Kietlinski, 2011, pp. 53–65; Raita, 1999).

Nonetheless, her success and Japan's determination to be taken seriously as an Olympic power opened opportunities for female athletes in the 1930s. Japan's five gold medals in swimming at the 1932 Games were all won by male athletes, but the country was electrified by Hideko Maehata, who became the first female Japanese athlete to win a gold medal with her victory in the 200-metre breaststroke. One might well take 'electrified' in the literal sense, because her event was transmitted live on the Japanese state radio network in a memorable broadcast by Sansei Kasai. Kasai's report made Maehata a national hero and gave a significant boost to sports broadcasting (Kietlinski, 2011, pp. 72–73).

Female sports presence in the first half of the twentieth century was not simply a matter of a few elite performances at the Olympics. Behind it was a nascent institutional framework to support physical education for women in schools and organizations to promote women's sports (Arimoto, 2005; Ikeda, 2010). As feminist scholar Kyoko Raita has detailed, the most effective organization was the Japan Women's Sports Federation (JWSF), established in 1926 to build on the local and regional tournaments for women that had been held since 1910 and the national Japan Women's Olympic Games, first staged in 1922. The JWSF was the essential link to international competitions (including fundraising), but it was also involved in staging events, sponsoring research and holding training seminars. Raita (1999) notes that after the IOC removed the 800-metre run following the 1928 Stockholm Games in the belief that it was too strenuous, the JWSF went out of its way to insert it into subsequent Japan Women's Olympic Games (with little public opposition).

The widening popularity of competitive sports was driven by national pride and Olympic fever, but it was also spurred by the growing place of sports in the vibrant metropolitan leisure world. This was fuelled by the industrial and housing expansion of major urban areas, especially around Tokyo and Osaka. From the 1910s into the 1920s, urban transportation companies, rival newspapers and department stores competed to build recreational facilities (pools, stadiums, tennis courts, ski areas, etc.) and sponsor a wide range of sporting events to entice the burgeoning urban population as leisure participants and sports spectators. Statistics are difficult to come by, but evidence from newspaper accounts, magazine commentaries, local government reports and other materials suggest noticeable female interest and participation.

After the Second World War, the Summer Games that Japan hosted in Tokyo in 1964 marked the first time the Olympics had been held in Asia, and they were hugely important in marking a self-confident return to a normal position in the international sports world. In 1961, the government enacted a law for the promotion of sports in anticipation of the

Tokyo Games, and in the aftermath, the Japan Amateur Sports Association (JASA) expanded tremendously. Japan went on to host two Winter Games – in Sapporo in 1972 and in Nagano in 1998. The successes of Japanese athletes, state investment in Olympic training, and Olympic corporate sponsorship by major Japanese companies have made Japan one of the central nations in the Olympic movement. Its Olympic fervour remains strong; Tokyo, for instance, was named as one of the three finalists to hold the 2016 Games, losing out to Rio de Janeiro, but still determined to try again for the 2020 Games (Kelly, 2010).

As many scholars have analysed, women had to struggle mightily to gain first a place and then parity in the Olympic movement throughout the twentieth century, but the progress gained for women's sports in the Olympic movement has been more significant than in many individual sports. There may still be wide discrepancies in mainstream media attention paid to, say, the men's 100-metre sprint or the men's ice hockey finals compared to the 50-metre women's butterfly or women's rhythmic gymnastics, but a gold medal is the same in all events, and Japan recognized that the medal count was built up through as broad a participation as possible. Women have struggled to achieve event parity over the past century of the modern Olympics, but countries such as Japan, which recognized the prestige value of Olympic excellence early on, are well aware of the value of encouraging female elite athletes in a wide range of Olympic sports. Indeed, with few opportunities for professional sports careers, elite women athletes are often drawn into sports that lead to Olympic recognition. Hitomi was the sole female in Japan's 43-member delegation in 1928; by 1964, the 61 female athletes constituted 21% of Japan's delegation, and by the 2004 Athens Games, female athletes outnumbered their male counterparts 171–141. The list of female medallists, the media attention they received and their subsequent careers are testimony to this.

Playing for the company

The Olympics of course provide opportunities for a small number of elite athletes and the Games are given prominence only once every two years (since the staggering of the Summer and Winter Games). However, a second factor that has been a powerful impetus to female sports participation has been the broad popularity and corporate support for company teams and industrial leagues. This is one of the most important and distinctive features of the Japanese sportscape.

The first corporations, early in the twentieth century, quickly recognized the public relations and entertainment value of such sponsorship. Faced with labour union actions and worker unrest, they saw sports sponsorship as an obvious strategy for deflecting these challenges and building management–labour rapport. The real boom began around 1920, with manufacturing, railroad and newspaper companies taking the lead. Japan National Railway, steel-makers and mining companies sponsored multiple teams at their branch headquarters and major factories. Predictably, baseball was most popular from the start, with industrial leagues in many parts of the country; a national inter-city tournament began in 1927. Cotton-spinning and other light industries with female workforces took quickly to volleyball and track and field. Volleyball was especially popular with the spinning companies, and it was touted as the 'national sport for women' (Sawano, 2005, pp. 34–91).

Japan's post-war economic recovery was led by its major manufacturing corporations, which drew on an increasingly younger employee base whose own educational levels (and, thus, exposure to school physical education) were rising. Major corporations expanded into a wide range of sports as they quickly realized the value of their sports

teams' exposure through the spread of television from the late 1950s, which frequently broadcast national industrial league sports tournaments. Steel, shipbuilding, electrical appliances, textiles, paper and, by the 1960s, automobiles carried the manufacturing sector to world leadership. To support recruitment of young male and female workers in a highly competitive labour market and corporate image in the new age of mass consumption and television advertising, all major corporations sponsored multiple teams in multiple sports – women's teams as enthusiastically as men's teams.

Company sports were also appreciated as a critical platform for national sports development. Winning for company and country was a natural fusion of the economic nationalism that drove state policy. In the 1960s, there was further expansion and differentiation in company sports programmes in the run-up to and aftermath of the 1964 Olympics. A clearer separation emerged between the elite company teams and broader company recreational leagues. Company elite team coaches began to serve as national team coaches and as officials in national sports federations. Among women's sports, volleyball had long been the crown jewel, led by the major textile corporations with largely female workforces. Most of the members of the 1964 gold-medallist women's volleyball team were from the Nichibō Kaizuka company team and coached by the Nichibō coach, Hirofumi Daimatsu. The team began training some five years before the Olympics, and its harsh training regime and international successes were extensively chronicled in the press and through television (Koizumi, 1991; Otomo, 2007).

In the immediate aftermath of the 1964 Games, national leagues for soccer (men's) in 1965 and for volleyball (men's and women's) basketball (men's and women's), and ice hockey (men's) in 1966 were established for the leading company teams. Companies began to recruit and hire foreign athletes as employee/players, so firm limits had to be placed (generally, teams could have two or three such foreign 'corporate amateurs'). Without a national Olympic training centre, the Japan Olympic Committee has always relied heavily on these corporate sports programmes, which often supplied over half the athletes in many sports from the Tokyo Games in 1964 to the Nagano Winter Olympics in 1996.

Unfortunately, the extended economic stagnation that Japan has experienced since its bubble-economy burst in 1991 has eviscerated the entire corporate sports sector. Between 1991 and 2009, some 339 company teams have been shut down across the full spectrum (Sakonjū, 2011; Sugiyama, Okazaki, & Uekaki, 2009, p. 77). If anything, men's teams have been harder hit than women's teams, because the former were dominated by company baseball teams, which have been disproportionately adversely affected. While the long-term consequences are uncertain, even if a corporate recovery is underway, it is not clear that business will again invest in sports through this model.

Supporting the extensive corporate sports programmes through the second half of the twentieth century and offering further grounding for female sports have been two other institutional sectors: schooling and national athletic festivals. A major reform mandated by the Allied Occupation after the Second World War was coeducation throughout all public primary and secondary education. Coeducation, together with the expansion of school infrastructure in the 1950s and 1960s, had a particular impact on female advancement rates. Many aspects of classroom and school practices remained gendered and unequal, but the post-war educational system did improve and normalize school sport opportunities for girls. When I was doing fieldwork in rural Japan in the 1970s, I lived in a farming village whose elementary school featured a kendo team of boys and girls which regularly won regional and prefectural tournaments. The coach considered the girls of the team to be the stronger competitors, and they frequently moved up to successful basketball and

volleyball teams at the regional junior high school. The best of them were then sought by high schools for their teams.

Although organized sports in public secondary education remain gender-segregated and unequal, female participation has risen steadily. As of 2010, the number of girls registered in high school sports teams across the 36 categories of sports recognized by the All Japan High School Athletic Federation was 441,208, compared to boys' membership of 769,279 (All Japan Athletic Federation, 2011).

Another structural opportunity for female athletes has been Japan's annual National Sports Festival. Begun in 1946, based on pre-war antecedents, its venues rotate each year among the country's prefectures. It is now the largest gathering of amateur athletics in Japan, divided today into a winter sports meet of three sports and the main autumn meet of 37 sports. It is a kind of domestic Olympics, conducted under government sanction and support and garnering national media coverage, with athletes competing as individual or team representatives of their home prefectures. Most of the sports are Olympic sports, and female categories and athlete numbers approach those of male athletes. Again, as with the national importance accorded to Olympic success and the value that major companies have placed on their own team sponsorships, and like the importance placed on physical education and interscholastic sports competition at the secondary education level, the National Sports Festival has provided an opening for determined female athletes to find significant pathways to performance and acceptance.

All-out effort ('Gambaru') as a Japanese sports ethic

There is a third dimension to the modern Japanese female sporting experience that shifts our attention from the institutional to the ideological. Giving one's total effort is both a physical demand and an ideological tenet of sports performance everywhere. Guts, grit and grim determination are common idioms used around the world to exhort and assess athletes. Equally pervasive are debates about the relative importance of that 'effort' versus one's 'natural talent' in achieving success. The modern Japanese sports world is no exception, but many have observed across a range of Japanese sports that there is a particular value placed on intensity of effort and a pronounced belief that effort and training can compensate for deficiencies and limitations of the body. This theme in Japanese sports ideology has obvious implications for the prospects of female athletes, which I will develop in this section.

'Gambaru' is a ubiquitous Japanese verb generally glossed as giving one's all, trying one's best, making an all-out effort. It is used whenever someone is trying to accomplish something through skill, strength and spirit – taking a test, setting out on a new endeavour (Befu, 1986; Singleton, 1989). In sports, however, the meaning is intensified; to 'gambaru' is to give not just 100% but 110% – to find and display reserves of resolve that exceed 'regular' full effort. Sporting *gambaru* requires *konjō* or 'fighting spirit', the noun that names the drive behind the effort – having the 'guts' to push beyond one's normal capacities. The lore of Japanese baseball, for instance, is replete with practices that develop and test the player's fighting spirit – the 'bloody urine' training of the most famous early schoolboy team of the 1890s, that of Ichikō, the First Higher School; the '1000-fungo' drill for infielders; the marathon throwing, in drills and in games, of pitchers; and others (Kelly, 1998; Mangan and Ikuo, 2003; Roden, 1980; Whiting, 1977).

The idiom of *gambaru* is as potent in women's sports as in men's. Perhaps the most famous case is that of the national women's volleyball team of the early 1960s. As noted in the previous section, volleyball was a favoured sport of the post-war textile and electronics

corporations, with their mass assembly lines of young females. The national team was reorganized in 1959 and began a five-years continuously publicized build-up to the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, taking several world championships and finding their principal rival in the USSR team. They were driven mercilessly by their male coach, Hirofumi Daimatsu, known to them and a national following as the ‘devil coach’. On the eve of the 1964 Olympics, Japan’s leading monthly, *Bungei Shunjū*, published an interview with Daimatsu (Daimatsu & Ichimura, 1964; see also Koizumi, 1991; Otomo, 2007). The interview, which attracted considerable attention, was entitled ‘Guts, Fighting Spirit, and Leadership’, and it was remarkable in several respects.

Daimatsu began by recounting his own harsh military training and experiences and asserted that the women’s volleyball ‘hard training’ was equally demanding. Nowhere (either there or in his other writings) did he suggest that young female athletes were any less capable of surviving and succeeding under such a regime than young male soldiers (Daimatsu & Ichimura, 1964, p. 102). The explicit analogy between military and sports training is hardly surprising (and is a theme that Mangan has elaborated in many works), and indeed in the post-war period a number of Japan’s most prominent sports team coaches drew explicitly on their wartime experience and credentials in explicating their coaching philosophies. It is revealing, though, that Daimatsu never presumed that his women players could not display the same *gambaru* fighting spirit that drove wartime soldiers or the baseball players, sumo wrestlers and other athletes of the era.

Indeed, Daimatsu avoided any gendered references to his team, always using the Japanese character for ‘person’ rather than ‘woman’ (ibid., pp. 104, 106). The only mention of gender differences in the dialogue was his claim that female athletes are more sensitive than males to differential treatment and that he felt he must be absolutely egalitarian in his demands on everyone, ‘from captain to substitute’ (ibid., p. 104). This intrigued me because in my own fieldwork with a professional baseball club, I actually heard the same tenet expressed by the head coach to explain his policies towards the 70-man (male) roster.

A very different ethnographic corroboration of the genderless premises of *gambaru* is found in Brent McDonald’s (2009) study of rowing clubs at a Japanese university. Although his focus was the men’s rowing club, with whom he carried out intensive participant observation, he also included a comparative analysis of the women’s team and noted some striking differences as well as similarities. The men’s team lived, slept and trained at their boathouse; a group of female student managers attended daily in rotation, doing all of their cooking, cleaning and laundry. The women’s team also trained out of the boathouse but lived individually, in apartments or at home. They had a single changing room at the boathouse. [‘It’s fine with us really. We all live close by, and I think we eat much better than the men because we cook for ourselves’, one of the female rowers told McDonald (ibid, p. 431)!] The teams socialized together occasionally and their training routines were nearly identical. The female rowers came from strong rowing backgrounds and their team was actually enjoying more competitive success than the men’s; McDonald noted that they were ‘much more organized and disciplined on the whole’ (ibid, p. 431). They had fewer meetings and more on-water time than the men. Whereas the men’s team relied on senior members and alumni (OB, or Old Boys) for coaching, the women solicited advice from the professional coaches of a corporate team that trained on the other side of the river (ibid.).

McDonald’s larger interest was in how male sports clubs like those in rowing inculcate a hegemonic masculinity that propels rowers into an adult world of work, and the differential living arrangements, the female managers’ domestic house-keeping for the men’s team, and the intense male camaraderie that was stoked by drinking parties and

other routines illustrate a persistent gendered privilege that they will continue to enjoy when they find jobs and seek spouses (for similar studies, see Blackwood, 2010 and Chapman, 2004). At the same time, it is significant that gender differences are being marked here more by social roles and social status than by male claims of inherent traits of aggressiveness, power and fortitude. That university women's crew may never out-race their male counterparts, and the 1964 gold medal-winning volleyball team might never have won a scrimmage against the Japanese men's team. However, that in itself is not used to demean or dismiss the endurance, determination and strength of will to perform that they demonstrate. Thus, a cultural valorization of sustained sporting effort over physical power, muscle mass or raw speed creates expectations and demands that offer legitimacy according to what an athlete does rather than what an athlete is, innately.

The (quite substantial) barriers to female sporting opportunities in modern Japan have been due more to sports being viewed as socially inappropriate or unappealing for women rather than their being declared beyond the physical and psychological capacities of women. The gendered trajectories of sports were deepened by social tracking rather by biological essentialism. Embedded in this realization is another lesson, not about the character of *gambaru* but about the broader cultural presuppositions of personhood, which takes me to the fourth factor influencing the possibilities for sporting females in Japan.

Sports, social roles and the relational self

The ideology of guts and *gambaru* is a way of placing ethical value on certain character traits, which are then revealed and invested in sporting performance. As we have seen, historians such as Mangan have drawn direct links between modernization in the wider societies and economies of Great Britain and the United States and a reorganization of gender roles and relations, such that sports came to be held and valued as a 'male preserve' for the recognition and display of certain forms of 'masculinity'. Organized sports were institutionalized in the nineteenth century in boys' public schools, men's colleges and working men's associations and social clubs. They were infused with a Victorian sense of masculinity that celebrated competitiveness, toughness and physical dominance. They reflected male anxieties about such factors as changing work patterns, new separations of home and work that ceded the domestic sphere to women and new immigrant populations that challenged Anglo-Saxon men. This sporting ethos of moral muscularity tried to secure advantage from anxiety by basing its core claim on the biological essentialism that was emerging as the normative basis of male–female difference in the wider society (Mangan and Walvin, 1987; Park, 2007).

Although there may be an ethnocentric tendency to assume a universal reach of such a gender ideology, a large body of feminist and anthropological studies has demonstrated the cultural variability of notions of gender difference and the implications of this for the organization of sports. A pioneering study in this respect was Susan Brownell's 1995 book on Chinese sports and body culture, which established two critical points. First, she showed how class in China articulated sport and gender and prestige in very different ways from late nineteenth-century Britain (Brownell, 1995, pp. 222–228). Because sports in modern China were regarded as lower-class activities, they provided an opening for women, because male prestige was not tied to athletic display. And beyond this, Brownell showed how and why it was that gender difference in China was defined by more by a grid of social roles than by a dichotomy of essentializing biology (Ibid., pp. 230–232, 236–237).

In Japan, the adoption of British and American sports and the reorganization of indigenous physical practices such as sumo wrestling into sports in the late nineteenth century

actually followed the Anglo-American model much more closely than in China – locating sports in elite boys' schools and male universities, promoting interscholastic competition and elaborating moralistic codes of performance analogous to those of 'muscular Christianity' and amateur sportsmanship in Britain and the US (Mangan and Abe, 2003)

Nonetheless, Japanese constructs of personhood, as in China, were grounded in the engagement of the self in society, not in the opposition of the self to society. Commitment to filling a social role fully and the capacity to respond openly and wholly to others are both compelling idealizations of satisfying engagement (Kelly, 1991, pp. 399–403; Rosenberger, 1992). And, similarly to China, the emphasis on the sociality that is at the core of Japanese notions of personhood is not gender-marked. It is as true for male as for female. Sport has not become an arena in which Japanese men demonstrate qualities that they claim to be decidedly masculine and on which basis they deny access to females. Rather, this common ground of sociality means that gender difference (and hierarchy) are based in the patterning of social roles that are believed to be appropriate to men and women, not an innate dimorphism.

An emphasis on the social grounds of difference can be no less limiting than one focusing on biological difference – the struggles of Japanese women for access and recognition can never be overstated. However, I would argue that a social matrix of difference has greater potential for challenge and revision than a rigid biologism, and is a much weaker basis for denigration in the arena of modern sports. This is a fourth factor in the distinctive pattern of Japanese sporting gender.

The genders of advantage and disadvantage in sports

Both of Japan's soccer teams – men's and women's – qualified for the 2012 Olympic Games in London. To protect the prestige of the (men's) World Cup, FIFA insists that Olympic men's team squads can only include three players over 23 years old, so the Olympic men's competition is in effect an international under-23 tournament. The women's teams have no such restrictions, and the Olympic teams are generally of the highest World Cup calibre. The Japan women's team was hoping to add an Olympic gold medal to the World Cup crown that it had won in its inspiring victory over the US team in July 2011. Nonetheless, when the two teams flew to Europe on the same flight in mid-July, the Japan Football Association seated the men's team in business class and relegated the women's team to premium economy (Belson, 2012). Under questioning from the Japanese press about this discrepancy, the president of the JFA added insult to injury by announcing that if the women's team took the gold medal, the JFA would upgrade their return to business class ('Nadeshiko, medaru de', 2010). This may have been a minor logistical flap, but it was a telling reminder of the often casual discrimination that elite women athletes continue to face in Japan.

In a domain of modern life that was, from the outset, defined and policed as a 'male preserve', Nadeshiko's economy-class seating is hardly surprising. But the term 'male preserve' falsely singularizes the gendering of modern sports, and Mangan and others have instructed us to attend to the historical forces, institutional settings and cultural matrices in which sporting opportunities are gendered (e.g. Mangan & Walvin, 1987, op. cit.). In short, the forms of disadvantage are as important to assess as the degrees of disadvantage.

History and culture combine to set different institutional and ideological parameters for sports, and it has been my aim here to identify the distinctive features of the forcefield within which female athletes in modern Japan have struggled and succeeded. In the first half of the twentieth century, the geopolitics of Japan as the pioneer non-western power motivated its early role in the IOC, its elite girls' schools were catalysts for physical

education and competitive sports and its burgeoning national media and metropolitan leisure culture promoted recreational participation and sports consumption. Following its defeat in the Second World War, Japan even more vigorously sought the prestige of Olympic event success and host city prestige. The reorganization of the corporate sector and the revision and expansion of the education system opened wider avenues for sports development at both amateur and professional levels. All of these institutional changes offered advantages but not exclusivity to male athletes, and I have emphasized the ways in which they also provided openings for female sporting experience.

In August 2012 in London, Nadeshiko Japan ultimately had to settle for a silver medal, losing a very hard-fought final match to the US women's team. But the Japanese men's soccer team fared even worse, losing their semi-final match and then losing the bronze-medal match to arch-rival South Korea. And women, overall, accounted for a clear majority of Japan's total medal count at the 2012 Olympics. Nonetheless, the return flight arrangements for the two soccer teams were unchanged – the men's team sat in business class, while the women remained at the back!

In a recent essay, Mangan (2010, p. 471) speculated on the possibility of 'gender fusion in and beyond sport in the post-millennium'. Will such androgyny come to sport – a sphere of modern life that largely foregrounds aggressive masculinity and promotes an association of playgrounds as preparation for battlefields? With gender equity in sport still a distant goal, in Japan and everywhere else, it may seem odd to conclude with an apparently even more far-fetched scenario, but its prospects bear upon the central premise of this essay.

Mangan was wisely cautious in avoiding prediction, but he did demonstrate the plausibility of this prospect. I think sports androgyny may well come to pass. Sports, as they arose in the late nineteenth century and developed through the twentieth century, were committed to defining and defending a set of sharp modernist distinctions – between amateur and professional, male and female, natural and artificial, rules and infractions, able-bodied and disabled, real and virtual, citizen and non-citizen, fair play and foul play, and so on. In the twenty-first century, sport is the highly public, global arena in which many of these distinctions are under challenge and are dissolving. The more we come to better appreciate how thoroughly gender constructs are situated and shifting and how politically motivated its deployment in differentiating sporting practices is, the more that gender difference will be contestable. But we can also be sure that sporting androgyny will not come equally, in form and speed, to all sports and in all sporting societies. If that is so, then I would suggest, following from the logic of this essay, that its prospects are better in a society such as that of Japan than in Great Britain or the US.

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