

License to Play: The Ludic in Japanese Culture. By Michal Daliot-Bul. University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu, 2014. xii, 186 pages. \$45.00, cloth.

Marathon Japan: Distance Racing and Civic Culture. By Thomas R. H. Havens. University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu, 2015. xii, 227 pages. \$47.00, cloth.

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These two recent volumes are parallel investigations into ludic realms of Japanese life. Michal Daliot-Bul presents a theoretically ambitious cultural history of play (*asobi*) in Japan and Thomas Havens has written a social history of sport, in particular, the two major forms of distance running in modern Japan, the marathon and the *ekiden*. What both demonstrate with fascinating scholarship is the significant imbrication of play and the more sober realities of politics and economy and the everyday routines of social life.

Play is a human universal, a space of imaginative release and a symbolic reframing of ordinary reality. "Autotelic" is a term that several play theorists use, meaning that play is just play, with no greater purpose than itself. To many, play is hardwired into humans; Daliot-Bul accepts this, but she is wisely more focused on its variable cultural forms and manifold significance across societies and times. What are the ways, she asks, in which both institutions and ideologies have fashioned forms of play in Japan, and, conversely, how have these variable forms of play alternately supported and subverted societal conventions?

Thus, hers is a study of "asobi," a Japanese rubric of play that has been in the language for over a millennium but which has been a linguistic shape-shifter, capacious in its meanings, responsive to changing times, and itself consequential in its impact on the sober realities of historical eras.

In tracing the cultural history of *asobi*, Daliot-Bul gives particular emphasis to three of these epochs. It was the imperial court aristocrats of the Heian period, Japan's first leisured class, who both secularized and aestheticized certain refined pursuits in more playful yet still elegant manners. She then considers the vibrant play cultures of the urban commoners of the Tokugawa centuries, when literati salons, theaters, teahouses, temple marketplaces, and other entertainment and artistic spaces attracted a wide range of commoner townspeople. Finally, she considers the even broader nationalization of entertainment and leisure practices across twentieth-century Japan.

In each epoch, she argues, play created spaces of release and relief for the less well positioned—the aristocratic ladies of the male-dominated

Heian court, the wealthy but low-status merchants of Edo and Osaka, and the disaffiliated youth in the 1970s. At the same time, though, play did not erase social distinctions but rather transposed them to a ludic register, allowing the “players” opportunities to excel and exclude.

Dalio-Bul points persuasively to important continuities across these epochs, but the book’s real focus is on the recent decades, and the resonances between the serious world of work and school and the ludic realm of play and leisure in late modern Japan. Two features of mainstream society are particularly crucial to her analysis: the disciplines of the highly corporatized workplaces and the information-rich consumer culture. Both have profoundly shaped the ways of play in those decades—for example, the structuring of play as school clubs, the proliferating publications on how and where to play, and the commodification of even the most everyday of leisure pursuits. They also influenced standards of the “best players,” whom Dalio-Bul finds to be not those who are the innovators or creators but rather “those who best embody the prescribed play aesthetics and its rules” (p. 98).

What distinguishes play in the contemporary moment (which she characterizes as “post-modern”) is that it now exceeds its previous boundaries as the space beyond the everyday; it increasingly inserts itself into the structures of our regular lives. She writes of a “gamification of nonplay technologies” (p. 138) because playfulness is the most appropriate modality “for dealing with the prime issues of our time: the obsession with change; the constantly shifting natures of identity, social relations, and space; and the expansion of reality into multiple physical and virtual realities” (p. 139).

Sports do not figure in Dalio-Bul’s account of play, which is a common lacuna in cultural studies, but watching and doing sports is one of the broadest areas of play in any contemporary society, certainly in Japan. Every year on January 2 and 3, huge television audiences tune in and upward of a million spectators line the route to follow the 134-mile relay race (*ekiden*) for university men’s teams with five stages from Tokyo to Hakone on the first day and five return stages from Hakone to Tokyo on day two. Then six weeks later, Tokyo hosts one of the world’s premier marathons. In 2015, over 300,000 people applied for the lottery that selects the 35,000 chosen to run (over 96 per cent of whom actually completed the 26.2-mile course). The Hakone Ekiden and the Tokyo Marathon are peak events in an annual calendar of running that is the topic of *Marathon Japan*, another highly original contribution by Thomas Havens, one of our leading historians of Japan’s modern century. Spectatorship and participation for other sports may be down from 1990s highs, but running remains a premier arena for exercise and entertainment.

Despite the book’s title and its cover photograph of Noguchi Mizuki, one of Japan’s greatest marathoners, it is the genius of Havens’s approach to juxtapose the marathon with the *ekiden* and to connect elite distance

running with the boom in popular recreational running. In doing so, he demonstrates the multiple ways of being citizen-runners in Japan.

Both the *ekiden* and the marathon have roots in the early twentieth century and both have claimed national political importance and commercial spectator interest. Competing in the marathon became central to Japan's early investment in the Olympics; coverage of the 1908 Games by Japanese sports reporters created awareness of the geopolitical role of sports, and reference to the marathon apparently stimulated support for that event among others. Kanaguri Shizō, Japan's first Olympic marathoner at the 1912 Games, promoted running in the school system (including as physical exercise for girls), and by the 1920s, Japanese marathoners were among the world's elite.

The most controversial deployment of the marathon for nationalist purposes was the gold medal victory of the Korean Sohn Gi Jeong in the 1936 Berlin Olympics; his countryman Nam Sungyong took the silver medal, but both had to participate in the Japanese delegation and were forced to run under their Japanese names.

The Tokyo Olympics of 1964 further boosted Japan's investment in elite marathoning, and the Fukuoka Marathon became part of the global triple crown of marathons in the 1970s. Japan also pioneered women's marathoning before it was belatedly recognized by the International Olympic Committee. There are now over 100 sanctioned marathons (of the 26.2-mile distance) held annually in Japan, and many more races over shorter and longer distances that bear the name "marathon" (as in English we have "half" marathons, "ultra" marathons, etc.).

The other pole of Japanese running, the *ekiden*, was something of an Olympic spin-off, as newspapers in the 1910s realized the profitability of sponsoring recreational facilities and sports competitions for growing urban populations. The Yomiuri newspaper came up with the first *ekiden* in 1917; the three-day relay between teams from eastern and western Japan was run over the 304 miles between Kyoto and Tokyo to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the transfer of power from the ancient capital to the modern capital. Runner exchanges took place at 23 of the former post stations (*eki*), hence the event's name.

Ekiden popularity really took off in the postwar years, and the university clubs and the professionalized teams sponsored by major corporations competed in circuits of *ekiden*. Both universities and companies recognized the enormous public relations value of emblazoning their logos on the athletes running through the streets over long distances, especially as television networks began broadcasting the major *ekiden* for their own commercial benefit.

Havens is particularly insightful in showing the consequential trade-offs of a national running scene based on these two rather different forms, which is an unusual combination among leading running countries. By analyz-

ing their embraided histories, he doesn't fall for national character clichés, especially the frequent talk about some uniquely Japanese cult of sacrifice and endurance that surrounds the *ekiden* and has tripped up others, such as Adharanand Finn, a runner and freelance writer who came to Japan for six months in 2014 and wrote an otherwise enjoyable account of his efforts to train with *ekiden* teams (*The Way of the Runner: A Journey into the Fabled World of Japanese Running* [Faber & Faber, 2015]).

University and corporate *ekiden* did provide a strong foundation for the world-class performances of Japanese male and female marathoners in the last two decades of the twentieth century. However, *ekiden* requires different training and tactics, and the performance requirements of the university and corporate teams now conflict with the professional demands of the new global marathon circuit. As East African marathoners have come to dominate the elite scene in the twenty-first century, Japanese runners have struggled in the major marathons, which, Havens suggests, only elevates the profile of the domestic *ekiden*, but this then has prompted the top runners on the corporate teams to break off as independent professionals.

At the same time, though, the longstanding national popularity of *ekiden* and marathons—and their celebrity stars—has promoted a sustained running boom as well as spectatorship, and this is equally important in Havens's notion of a nation on the run. Running is an unusual sporting activity, requiring little equipment, no special location, done over any distance at any speed and with any effort, individually or with friends. The thousands of distance events around Japan are open to all ages, male and female, inspired by male and female stars. Motivations are personal and social but certainly align with national ambitions of a healthy population: "Like their counterparts in other countries, ordinary non-elite runners in Japan regularly cite fitness, body image, stress reduction, and self-esteem as prime reasons for participating in marathons" (Havens, p. 173).

Havens notes the special significance of the Tokyo Marathon, forced upon the city in 2007 by then metropolitan governor Ishihara Shintarō but now embraced as one of the proudest civic spectacles. For logistical reasons, the route was planned along the Tokyo subway system, which has become a chief sponsor, so this mass running festival now tracks and celebrates metropolitan civic space in the way a shrine festival marks the reach of its tutelary deity.

In their own ways, then, these volumes together challenge an easy binary of the serious and playful that even theorists have fallen back on. Cosplay, running, pachinko, tennis, and manifold other recreational pursuits constitute a world of leisure, often a break from the conventions of our mundane routines. But the lines between edification and entertainment are seldom clear, and hard work and serious play are dispositions that we bring to both our pursuit of pleasure and our drive for profit.