The Sportscape of Contemporary Japan

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The organized sports of contemporary life are high public drama and grinding anonymous routine. They are imbued with deep emotion, constant mental calculation, and enormous physical exertion. Sports are watched and played throughout the world with passion and partisanship. They are pursued for profit, patriotism, and personal compulsiveness. They are spontaneous moments of pure action and visceral performance, but they are always embedded in long chains of stories and statistics. And sports are everywhere implicated in structures of power, both personal and collective—the variable powers of an athlete to compel her body with her spirit, of an owner to command a team with his financial clout, of fans to will a victory with their cheers. For any student of modern life, they offer splendid conjunctures of embodied actions and institutional forces.

This is as true in Japan as in the West. Despite the prevalent image that Japan worked its way resolutely and single-mindedly to prosperity through the twentieth century, it has also been a nation at play. And within the worlds of leisure, recreation, and entertainment, sports have loomed large. Indeed, the general patterns of sports in Japan are not unlike those of other industrial societies, although particular sporting forms are distinctive and intriguing, as we will see in this chapter. In Japan as elsewhere, those competitive physical contests that we call sports are closely related to other physical activities including physical education in schools and the recreational and fitness activities of the population for leisure and health. Sports are both games that are played and games that are watched. For over a century, sports, physical education, and physical recreation have been central to Japanese community life, school curriculums, corporate values, mass media, gender relations, and patriotic sentiments.

National sportscapes can be roughly divided into those few countries in which a number of spectator sports vie more or less equally for attention and prestige and those more numerous countries where a single dominant spectator sport overshadows others of more limited attraction. The United States is an example of the former type, as baseball, basketball, and football rival one another as "center sports" for time and resources. Japan is one of the many more numerous nations that have a single dominant sport and a penumbra of secondary sports. For
much of the world, this center sport is soccer; occasionally it is cricket (as in South Asia and some Caribbean nations), even more rarely, ice hockey (for Canada).

For Japan, like Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and other non-cricket Caribbean nations, the center sport has been baseball. For many decades, it has been played in youth Little Leagues and in secondary school teams, in universities and in semi-pro industrial leagues, in the Japanese professional leagues, and as adult recreation across the country. In participation, spectatorship, and media attention, baseball has dominated the sportscape as soccer dominates England and Brazil and as cricket dominates India.

At the same time, this center sport is surrounded by a wide periphery of spectator and participant sports—perhaps most notably, sumo, whose year is organized around six two-week tournaments, and more recently soccer, especially the professional J.League. Beyond this, the longstanding popularity of swimming, track and field, and other Olympic-inspired sports, together with tennis, golf, Formula-1 motor racing, and motocross remind us that despite national stereotypes of group-consciousness, Japanese have long been attracted to individual sports as enthusiastically as team sports!

Even this does not exhaust an enumeration of sports that have been popular in education and entertainment for over a century, including team sports of limited followership at the college and company level (rugby, American football, volleyball, ice hockey); outdoor adventure and endurance sports like mountain climbing, Arctic exploration, and sailing; martial art sports like judo and karate; and professional wrestling, both men’s and women’s. Finally—and perhaps the most popular and lucrative of all—lies the shadow sector of the Japanese sportscape, the unholy trinity of gambling sports: horse racing, velodrome cycling, and motorboat racing.

This broad contemporary sporting landscape includes indigenous sports that have been significantly reshaped from premodern practices of village and temple rituals (like sumo wrestling and field day events), from aristocratic pursuits (such as archery), and from martial training (like kendō). Equally prominent in contemporary Japan are sports that have been introduced from the West, sometimes retaining their original form (like soccer and volleyball and swimming) and sometimes being strikingly domesticated and reformed (like baseball, bicycle racing, and mountaineering). This has led Allen Guttman and Lee Thompson, authors of a valuable history of Japanese sport (2004), to propose the two master themes of Japan’s modern
sports history to be the domestication of certain foreign sports and the reformation of certain indigenous practices into more physical competitions ("sportification" is a term used for this process).

This is a valuable framework for understanding sports in Japan, although we must realize that these processes are hardly unique to Japan. In the late nineteenth century, for instance, Yale and other Eastern colleges took in the newly distinguished soccer and rugby from England via Canada and created a very different "gridiron" game that Yale's greatest sports coach-philosopher, Walter Camp, touted as a superior and uniquely American achievement!

At the same time, Japan has been drawn into several ongoing transnational flows in global sports. Several of the so-called martial arts, which underwent formalization and sportification around the turn of the 20th century, have followed complicated routes that took them through East Asia, South America, North America, and Europe. And soccer, which developed out of local ballgames at schools and challenge in England in mid-19th century, spread to Europe and South America and through the British Empire, becoming the world's game by the early 20th century. By the end of the 20th century it had established itself in Japan as well as a popular and professionalized sport, drawing Japan into this global network.

To briefly survey this rich sportscape, I will focus in this chapter on two sports that exemplify the several ways that outside sports have been incorporated into Japan (baseball and soccer) and two sports that emerged from earlier Japanese practices (sumo and judō), with some final comments on the sports media and on future prospects for Japan's sports.

**Baseball, the domesticated national pastime**

To understand baseball in Japan, it is important to note three key elements in its history. First, unlike the sport’s origins among the urban working classes in the United States, baseball became popular in Japan through the elite boys’ schools and new universities of the late 19th and early 20th century. More like American football, it was an amateur school sport with a strong emphasis on character building and team loyalty long before the first permanent professional league was started in the 1930s. In order to gain acceptance, these early professional teams had to borrow some of the rhetoric of character and spirit from school baseball, and this continues to color some team practices and some of the media coverage.
Moreover, the spirit that was invested in this game by these elite school clubs in the 1890s and 1900s developed nationalistic overtones. Just at the moment when Japan was trying to renegotiate the unequal treaties with Western powers and beginning to flex its own political muscle in the East Asian mainland, the baseball club from the First Higher School in Tokyo, the most elite of the elite schools, scored a surprising series of victories over a team of American residents and sailors in Yokohama. The victories electrified the population and enhanced the prestige of baseball as a Western sport that was now imbued with a Japanese spirit. Just as Americans have been apt to idealize the “national pastime” in a world that is largely obsessed with soccer, the Japanese ever since have made much (some would say exaggerated) the national distinctiveness of their version of the sport.

However, it is also important to keep in mind that despite this philosophical emphasis on the schoolboy spirit, purity of effort, and nationalism, a third feature of baseball in Japan has been how quickly it became “edu-tainment.” That is, almost from the beginning, moral uplift met mass appeal, and school baseball became a national pastime and a commercial target. The initial means of this popularization were city street cars and national newspapers, and these interests remain powerful in baseball even today.

Particularly in Osaka and Tokyo but also in other growing Japanese cities, the decades of the 1890s to the 1920s were an era of fierce competition between private electric train companies to build terminals and commuter rail lines through the metropolitan regions, vying for riders, for customers at the department stores and other retail businesses built around their terminals and stations, and for residential land they bought and resold along their rail lines to insure a steady ridership. Building tennis courts, swimming pools, amusement parks, and athletic stadiums were further projects to induce riders, and this fueled a boom in recreational and spectator sports in the 1910s and 1920s. In the Osaka-Kobe-Kyoto metropolis, for example, five major rail companies crisscrossed the region with rival lines, and four of them came to build sports stadiums that featured baseball. Amateur baseball at this time moved from being a purely school sport to becoming an urban entertainment.

The preeminent symbol of the new popularity of sports was Kōshien Stadium, which was built on the west side of Osaka in 1925 as the largest stadium in Asia to house what had already become the biggest attractions of the sports year, two annual middle school baseball
tournaments. An August baseball tournament had been started in 1915 by the Asahi newspaper company, and a year later, its rival Mainichi organized a spring invitational tournament. Both were immediate successes and quickly outgrew the small stadiums in which they were held. Ten years later, it was this national enthusiasm for schoolboy baseball that prompted one of the five competing inter-city railroad companies around Osaka, Hanshin, to build the mammoth 50,000 seat Kōshien. The stadium still retains much of its original character. It is still the site of these two national tournaments (although they now feature the best high school teams), and it also hosts one of Japan’s most popular professional teams, the Hanshin Tigers. A game at Kōshien Stadium remains a vivid window into modern Japanese baseball history.

What is distinctive about baseball in Japan is the equal attention that has been given to this amateur school game and to the professional league that emerged in the 1930s. The main force behind this was yet a third newspaper, the Tokyo-based Yomiuri Newspaper Company, and its powerful owner, Shōriki Matsutarō. Shōriki sponsored several visits by U.S. all-stars (including Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig in 1934), and he was stunned by the huge welcome and attention given the series. He then sent a group of Japanese players on an extended exhibition tour of the US in 1935. The core of that team returned to become the Tokyo Yomiuri Giants. Several other newspaper and railroad companies joined in sponsoring teams that began a professional league in 1936. The eight teams played into the wartime years before ceasing in the end of the 1943 season.

Baseball’s revival was encouraged in 1947 by General Douglas MacArthur as a means of fostering an American spirit in Occupied Japan. School baseball tournaments were restarted, and a new two-league professional structure was inaugurated in 1950 in part because MacArthur believed it was a more democratic format than the original single league. The two leagues (the Central League and the Pacific League) quickly settled to six teams each, with the league winners meeting at the end of the season fin the Japan Series. These numbers have remained stable for six decades; they never expanded as MLB did through the second half of the twentieth century.

The Giants have always been Japan's most popular and prestigious team, by success and by clout. Yomiuri had the first private television network in the 1950s and used to broadcast its team to the far corners of the country and then used that popularity and revenue to assemble an overwhelming team that ran through nine straight Japan championships from 1965-1973,
consolidating Yomiuri control of the baseball world and hold on the national spectatorship.

This corporate history of baseball remains relevant (although the Giants have lost their grip on league standings). Professional baseball is big business in Japan as well as in the US, but MLB teams have generally been owned and operated by wealthy business individuals or partners. Only recently have corporations begun to own and operate clubs. In Japan, though, the teams have always been owned by major companies and run as subsidiaries. It is widely believed that most JPB clubs have always run deficits. They serve instead as publicity vehicles for the owning company and usually bear the names of their corporate owners—thus, the Hanshin Tigers and not the Osaka Tigers, the Chūnichi Dragons, not the Nagoya Dragons, etc.

Also, distinctively, the baseball clubs themselves are very large organizations. JPB has never developed a tiered minor league system as in the US, and the twelve clubs maintain large rosters. Presently each can have 70 players under contract. The seventy players are divided into two squads, a first team, the actual major league team roster of 28, and a “farm” team which plays a shorter season of games against other farm teams.

Such team sizes have several consequences, one of which is a need for an extensive coaching staff. And because the seventy players range from the most talented stars to raw rookies, this staff must devote a lot more time to teaching fundamentals than on an MLB club (which depends on its largely-independent farm system to prepare and winnow young players). This is not just drill time but also coordination—there are constant structured practices and it takes detailed scheduling to coordinate the drills of a hundred players and staff. In this regard, JPB less resembles MLB than the National Football League, with its large staffs, highly-orchestrated practices, and often-dominant head coaches.

The rhythms of the professional baseball season in Japan would be familiar to any fan of US baseball albeit with several distinctive features. Month-long spring training camps open on February 1. Pre-season exhibition games are played from late February through March. The 142-game regular season begins around April 1 and continues into mid-October. Play-offs and the best-of-seven championship Japan Series usually overlap with the U.S. World Series. The shorter distances, the country’s single time zone, and the high-speed train network in Japan make travel less of a determinant than in the MLB. For several decades, almost all regular season games have been evening games (starting at 6:00 p.m. or 6:30 p.m.), and there are no
double headers. Teams play three-game series twice a week (Tu-W-Th and Fr-Sa-Su), with Monday as a travel day. Given the six-team leagues, each team faces its five opponents twenty six times; this intensity and frequency of rivalry has been much diluted in MLB.

It is frequently said that Japanese players put in many more hours of practice than MLB players throughout the season and off-season. This is generally so, although it less a matter of some national character trait and more a result of Japanese baseball’s need to be constantly in the media spotlight. In America, there is little media interest in off-season training because the MLB is replaced by the seasons of two other powerful professional leagues, the NBA and the NFL. Japanese professional baseball keeps itself in front of the public eye as much as possible—and must do this to retain its media preeminence. The clubs’ owners want maximum exposure for their corporate name, the media which have invested resources in baseball reporting need to generate non-stop news, and the players themselves, even those at the lowest rungs of the second squad, are playing for the club. The pressures—and the profits—for keeping the operations of baseball before the public even in the off-season (and even during breaks in the regular season) are enormous and go along way to explaining the distinctiveness of the pro ball work year.

**Sumo, Japan’s other national pastime**

Massive and nearly naked bodies colliding in a barely marked ring on an elevated hard sand platform paced by a silk-robed official carrying a fan and surrounded by avid spectators packed on to mats surrounding the platform is certainly a distinctive—and distinctly Japanese—sports scene. Sumo is certainly a sport, but it is also still termed “kokugi,” or the national skill or art, and its headquarters in the eastern Tokyo district of Ryōgoku is called the Kokugi Kan, or Hall of the National Skill. It is most determinedly “Japanese” in its look, its organization, and its training style—and yet it is dependent on the same competitive structures, media reporting, and commercial pressures and often beset with the same problems as other sports.

Sumo’s history lies deep in Japan’s past, and grappling and throwing wrestlers were mentioned in some of Japan’s earliest myths. They were considered ritual entertainment for the gods when they put on displays at shrine festivals from medieval times forward. In the eighteenth and nineteen centuries, some domain lords supported troops of wrestlers, and they were popular
plebian entertainment in the urban districts of Edo and Osaka. An exhibition of sumo wrestlers was arranged by the Japanese for Commodore Perry on the occasion of his first visit to Japan in 1854, no doubt to impress upon the unwelcome visitors the brute strength and technical skills of the Japanese body.

The sumo that is seen today really took form in the late nineteenth century, when a national organization and a system of competitions and titles were established. At a time of growing national assertiveness (and anxiety about the physical health of the population), sumo was taken up as a prestige display of traditional body culture. The design of the ring, the samurai-style hair topknots, the ceremonial costumes, and the elaborate ring rituals were all deliberately fashioned to heighten the indigenous effect. At the same time, this rationalization and standardization of what had been rather disparate practices and local customs also promoted the sporting competitive potential. For over a century, then, modern sumo has had this double identity as a wrestling sport and as an invocation of tradition.

Sumo is a tournament sport. There are six annual 15-day Grand Sumo tournaments held in odd-numbered months. Three take place in Tokyo at the main sumo stadium, and the others are held in Nagoya, Osaka, and Fukuoka. All of the top wrestlers have one match per day, and they rise and fall in rank according to their record, tournament to tournament. Winning a majority of bouts generally raises one’s rank, while a losing record often brings a demotion.

There are about the same number of wrestlers as there are professional baseball players in Japan; 735 wrestlers were registered with the governing body, Japan Sumo Association in mid-2007. For competition, they are divided into 6 divisions, although casual spectators are only often aware the top “Makuuchi” division of 42 wrestlers because only these appear on television. Match days begin with the lowest novice wrestlers and eventually reach the upper ranks about 4 p.m., when the national television network broadcasts the final two hours.

Within the top Makuuchi division are five named ranks. The pinnacle is yokozuna, or Grand Champion, selection to which is determined by the Japan Sumo Association and requires a strong career record, at least two consecutive tournament victories, and demonstration of “worthy” character. It is lofty pinnacle to which few wrestlers ever attain; the latest champion, Mongolian Hakuhō is only the 70th Grand Champion in sumo history.
All 735 registered wrestlers are attached to one of 54 “stables,” the residential and training units of the sumo world. A stable is owned and operated by a former wrestler who has been able to obtain an ownership share in the Japan Sumo Association (much like “seats” on a stock exchange). Stables vary widely in size from a couple of wrestlers to 20 or so, depending on the prestige and backing of the stable master. The master and his wife run the stable as a year-round training camp and dormitory, assisted by a chief coach (shisho), who oversees the rigorous daily practices in and around the stable ring.

The stables are the places where the wrestlers must observe a strict hierarchy of seniority. The younger wrestlers get up earlier, practice earlier, assist the senior stable wrestlers, and do many of the daily chores of the stable including laundry, shopping, and cooking. The daily routines of stable life are arduous. Early morning practices are followed by prodigious eating and drinking—the stew pots of meat, vegetables, and tofu consumed with rice and washed down with bottles of beer. Hazing is common, and the death of a 17-year-old wrestler in 2007, who had been beaten by the stable coach and older wrestler brought unwelcome attention to the abuses endemic to this very closed world.

Like baseball, sumo before after World War II recruited wrestlers from Japan’s colonies without regard to ethnicity, and it was with the wave of cultural nationalism in the 1960s that the distinctive Japaneseness of the sport was reasserted. Soon after, though, the domestic pipelines of teenagers willing to endure the sumo life began to dry up, and the Association opened up to foreign recruits. Hawaiian Jesse Kuhaulua joined one of the most prominent stables in 1964. Wrestling as Takamiyama, he rose through the ranks to sumo’s third-highest rank. He was popular with the fans; he married a Japanese woman, gained Japanese citizenship and was even able to buy an Association share so that he could open his own stable.

Since then, there has been a steady stream of foreign wrestlers, initially from Hawaii and Tonga and more recently from other parts of Asia and eastern Europe. There have been periodic anxieties and backlashes by the JSA against foreign presence, and from 2002, stables have been prohibited from registering more than one non-Japanese citizen. Existing wrestlers were grandfathered in and some foreign wrestlers have become Japanese citizens, so there remain about 60 foreign wrestlers. Of these, 34 are Mongolian, followed by 6 each from Russia and China.
And foreign wrestlers have proven to be very successful. Following Takamiyama was a succession of Hawaiian-born champions, and more recently the Mongolian Asashōryū has dominated the sport as Grand Champion (yokozuna). In winning his 13th Emperor's Cup in July of 2007, he became the first wrestler in almost 20 years to win five titles in a row. In fact, sumo hasn't had a Japanese grand champion since Takanohana retired in January of 2003. Asashoryu has been joined by fellow Mongolian yokozuna Hakuhō, with several Eastern Europeans right behind.

Despite the occasional outbursts of JSA prejudice, there is an irony in the situations of foreign athletes in baseball and sumo. In the former “American” sport, most foreign players are treated specially and separately (given better pay, special living quarters and travel hotels, personal interpreters, etc.), while in sumo—the indigenous Japanese pastime—foreign wrestlers are treated exactly as Japanese wrestlers, enduring the same training conditions in the stables, expected to conform to the common wrestlers’ code.

Sumo has always generated gossip and scandal (about match-fixing and wrestler behavior), but recently this has threatened to eclipse the luster of the sport. In 2007, for instance, the sumo world was rocked with a series of widely-publicized charges. One of the tabloid weeklies published several articles detailing match-fixing among stables involving top wrestlers, and other media broadcast a tape of the stable master of Mongolian Hakuhō, who was being promoted to Grand Champion, bragging about match-fixing. This was the same year that the young Tokitaizan died after repeated beatings from his stable coach; only after the story leaked did the police step in and the JSA take action. And the current yokozuna, Asashōryū, is proving to be a public relations disaster for the JSA, avoiding the promotional demands, flouting JSA rules, and facing suspensions from the Association, although his fellow Mongolian yokozuna, Hakuhō, is gaining respect and fans for his skillful technique and stolid demeanor.

Soccer: Japan joins the global game

Soccer is yet another way in which Japan is inserted into a global sporting scene. Soccer actually appeared in Japan in the same era as baseball, but it languished for much of the twentieth century as a minor school and company sport. The formation of a full professional league in 1991 (actual play began in 1993) with much commercial fanfare has raised its profile; the recruitment of several Japanese stars by European clubs and Japan's co-hosting of the
2002 World Cup with Korea have placed the sport on an even firmer footing, and recent frictions in matches with China were symptomatic of the fervent interest in the run up to the 2008 Beijing Olympics and the 2010 FIFA World Cup.

The Japan Professional Football League (known more commonly as J. League) was organized from nine corporate and amateur teams (and one newly-formed team) in order to upgrade the quality of elite soccer in Japan and offer challenge to professional baseball. It was immediately successful, using a community-based ethos and a free-spirited approach to appeal to a young and exuberant fan base. By the late 1990s, over-expansion of team numbers and Japan’s continuing weak economy deflated this boom, caused a number of corporations to pull their support, and forced the J. League leadership to reorganize and rethink. The result was a three-tiered league system: the J. League itself divided into Division 1 (known as J1) with 16 clubs and Division 2 (J2) with ten clubs and a lower semi-pro Japan Football League of variable numbers.

The new structure quite successfully revived professional soccer. The tiers of leagues brought professional soccer into alignment with the game elsewhere. In most professional team sports like baseball, membership in a league is fixed, but in the soccer world, teams move up (promotion) and down (relegation) between a hierarchy of leagues according to final season records. J1 teams have strict requirements of team funding, stadium facilities, youth programs, and community support, so the new structure allows teams to be organized at lower levels and develop these resources as they move up the league ladder.

Of all the major professional sports in Japan, J-League seems to accommodate foreign players and coaches with greatest ease. Indeed, bringing in foreign stars was part of the original strategy to attract fans, raise the level of play, and gain the attention of foreigners and FIFA. Dozens of well-known players from Europe and South America have played for J. League teams, and in the last two decades, the Japan national team has had a succession of coaches from Germany, France, Brazil, and Bosnia as well as a Japanese ex-player. Many of the foreign stars have higher salaries and special subsidized benefits like their baseball counterparts, but the media shots and the real engagement of many of these players with teammates and fans convey a cosmopolitan atmosphere that contrasts sharply with baseball’s image.

J. League has also been much more successful and creative in pursuing a coordinated strategy
of licensing of broadcasting rights and J.League brand goods. Soccer magazines, soccer comics, and licensed team goods are becoming major revenue streams for the league and companies that now devote resources to the sport.

Certainly the drawing power of J.League has been vastly enhanced by its fans, well-known for their exuberant passion and flamboyant expressions. One of the flashier J. League teams has been the Urawa Red Diamonds. Urawa is on the northern edge of metropolitan Tokyo, and its nickname is a reference to the logo of Mitsubishi Heavy Industries, from whose company team the present club has descended (the corporation remains its chief financial backer). From the start of J.League, Urawa modeled itself as the Manchester United of Japan, adopting the red color of “Man U” with its supporters calling themselves The Reds. The core supporter group came to be known as the Urawa Boys, and they occupied the seating behind the goal, always unfurling a huge banner with the number ‘12’ as the team first takes the field (the fans as the 12th man on the pitch), and filling the stadium with banners, chants, and songs. Samba rhythms, references to Japanese anime characters, and European pop lyrics were all drawn into a multi-lingual mélange. While soccer cheering is only slightly less orchestrated and coordinated than baseball cheering groups, the public and the media have made much of a contrast between the unrestrained and creolized exuberance of soccer cheering and the more mechanistic and repetitive styles of baseball. Certainly soccer has successfully cultivated an image of grass-roots concerns, youthful independence, and cosmopolitanism.

Media coverage of J. League still lags behind that for professional baseball because of the longstanding symbiosis between baseball and television broadcasters and the sports newspaper dailies. However, there are signs that soccer is breaking the media stranglehold, and it has certainly become the sport of choice, for playing and watching, for many youth, while baseball audiences grow older each year. Like baseball, though, soccer faces the double-edged sword of the foreign game. What brought baseball to the younger generation was the start of satellite broadcasts of American Major League games in the late 1980s, but these same broadcasts have so familiarized players as well as the general population that it has encouraged the steady flow of star players and raw young talent across the Pacific. Likewise, broadcasts of the best leagues in Europe both instructed and enthused soccer fans in the 1990s, but also encouraged some of the best young players to test themselves in top leagues of Italy, Netherlands, Belgium, and elsewhere. Given the numbers involved, the difference in seasons in Europe and Japan, and the structure of club and national teams, the threat to soccer is probably
much less than that to baseball. Indeed, it may reflect just how much better Japan can integrate and synchronize its soccer with the global game.

**Judō: Creating a transnational sport**

The fascination of the so-called "martial arts" is suggested by the oxymoronic term; even in their original forms as military training practices many of them had aesthetic and spiritual overtones, and as modern body disciplines, they now conflate self-defense, sporting competition, and spiritual training. Such practices have been found in societies around the world throughout history, but certainly East Asia has contributed more to the current inventory of martial arts than other world regions.

If sumo’s origins were plebian, the martial arts originated among the hundreds of schools and styles of martial practices that flourished with the premodern warrior classes. From the medieval centuries when Buddhist religion and warriors gained the political center stage in Japan, a wide range of martial practices were given practical utility, prestige, and also spiritual foundations. Archery, swordsmanship, hand-to-hand combat, and other military skills were codified into multiple schools of instruction and credentialing. The extended peace of the Tokugawa centuries encouraged their further elaboration as artful and demanding exercises rather than actual fighting. After the Meiji Restoration, however, the warrior class privileges were abolished, the older martial arts were disparaged, and most of the schools declined and disappeared.

The most important single individual in the modern history of Japanese martial arts was Kanō Jigorō, who learned several styles of jujitsu in the 1870s, when he was a student at the elite school later to become the University of Tokyo. He integrated these styles, regularized them into standard patterns, created levels of accomplishment (“belts” and “degrees”), and actively propagated his new pedagogy at the Police Academy, to the army, and in schools (he was principal of Japan’s most elite boy’s school for 20 years). Judō as fashioned by Kanō was a holistic practice, not a sport: it combined physical education, mental preparation, moral training, and martial art. Thus it was a “way” (dō) and not just a technique (jutsu). However, in addition to the fundamental “kata” or fixed sequences of moves, his most important innovation was to introduce a freer style of competition that he called “randori.” By this he was seeking to make the discipline more accessible and more attractive to students, but the randori proved so popular that it has become the basis of the competitive sport that judō has become for many, if
not most, of its practitioners.

Judō’s relationship to Japan’s official nationalism of the era is complicated. Kanō offered judō as a modern adaptation of earlier martial arts directed at strengthening the body and the mind; the appeal to the modern Japan state was obvious, and efforts by supporters and state bureaucrats to make judō and other martial arts part of the mandatory curriculum were finally realized in the early 20th century. But Kanō himself was an early internationalist, and in 1908 became Japan’s first member of the still-young International Olympic Committee. He became a tireless overseas promoter, sending students and traveling himself through the Americas and Europe to encourage judō as a path of personal development that was open to all.

Rather, it was a second organization, the Dai Nippon Butoku-kai (Greater Japan Martial Virtue Society), that the 1900s exploited judō for nationalist purposes and built training halls around the country from its headquarters hall in Tokyo and enjoyed the support of the police and the Home Ministry. Ironically, when the Butokukai was banned by the American Occupation authorities after World War II, many of its leading members left Japan for Europe and elsewhere to teach. The result was at least two rival international associations of judō fighting for power in the 1950s and 1960s, just as Japan was trying to get judō accepted as a sport for the 1964 Olympics in Tokyo. Eventually Kanō’s organization prevailed and judō entered the Olympics as the first Asian sport. However, the further irony is that by then it had become a truly transnational sport. Europeans introduced colored uniforms, weight classes, and championships, and even the organization was headquartered outside of Japan!

Judō of course is not the only modern form of Japanese martial arts. Early styles of archery continue as kyūdō, the “way of the bow”, and premodern fencing survives as kendō, the way of the sword, which uses a short wood staff instead of a real sword. In both cases, influenced by Kanō’s success in combining and codifying disparate practices, the kyūdō and kendō that we see now is a similar simplification, with competitive sporting elements added to these physical arts.

And among weaponless arts, judō has shared popularity with other styles. While judō focuses on grappling—grasping an opponent by the collar and sleeve and attempting to throw him, martial arts like karate emphasize striking and kicking an opponent. Karate’s complex history offers another fascinating illustration of the evolution of contemporary martial arts. Around the
same time as Kanō was fashioning judō in Tokyo, in Okinawa Itosu Ankoh was bringing together various local fighting and play practices of the Ryūkyū Islands. He too used the framework of fixed “patterns” (also calling them kata) to create a program that he introduced into Okinawa public schools in 1901. This new karate was brought to the Japanese mainland by Okinawan students who organized university clubs and private dojo practice halls. In a further development, karate was learned by Korean students in Japanese universities during in the 1920s and brought back to their country, then under Japanese rule, and karate soon proliferated into tens of competing masters. The struggles among these Korean schools became so rancorous that in 1955 then–President Syngman Rhee mandated a truce and a consolidation of rival schools. He also decreed a new Korean name for the martial art, Taekwondo, which tried to tie it to indigenous roots in Korean foot-fighting. Thus, Taekwondo, which entered the Olympics as a Korean sport, demonstrates what is generally true of the martial arts—their multiple origins (in this case, Okinawan, Japanese, and Korean), their modern establishment as organized systems of physical training, and their multiple ambitions to be educative, entertaining, and competitive. They are poised between physical arts, mental training, and competitive sports.

Kanō’s proselytizing in Europe and the Americas in the 1930s, the rival Budōkan teachers’ exodus from Japan after World War II, and the migration of Japanese and Korean to the Americas and Europe all served to spread judō, karate, and Taekwondo around the world (former-President Putin of Russia is an avid Black belt in judō), Brazil, with its own African-derived martial arts like capoeira and a large Japanese immigrant population) was fertile ground, and yet another amalgam has developed there over the mid-20th century. This Brazilian style made its way to southern California by the 1980s and television promoters began a no-holds-barred open fighting competition in the early 1990s—which came to be known as “Ultimate Fighting”—the wrestling world was stunned by the early success of these Brazilian judō/karate masters over much heavier boxers and wrestlers. These East Asian martial arts were soon incorporated into what is now a polyglot “mixed martial arts”—which has returned to Japan as the wildly popular, though quite brutal, spectator sport of K-1 fighting.

From Kanō to K-1 was a long and tortuous route, but it is a fascinating case of how Japan has not only been a recipient and a creative adaptor of Western sports but has also contributed its own schools and styles to what is increasingly a transnational flow of sporting practices.

**Japan as a sporting nation: Grim samurai or playful people?**
As noted at the outset, these four sports are but an illustrative sample of a wide range of sports that have found their way into Japanese life and are important for personal recreation, in schools, and as spectator sports. In sports as in many other areas of society, there has long been a strong tendency of foreigners and Japanese as well to emphasize a small set of stereotypes as a Japanese “national character”—that they work hard with grim determination, that they easily sacrifice individual goals for group demands, that they are insular and provincial, and so forth. But any survey of sports, like careful attention to other aspects of Japanese life, quickly questions such superficialities. To be sure, every society engages in sports with commitment, hard work, and team play, and national styles emerge in some sports. But the broad spread of sports and physical recreation in modern Japan, the balance of individual sports like sumo and martial arts and team sports like baseball and soccer, and the important contributions of Japan to the global sportscape belie convenient simplifications.

It is hard to square images of insularity with the actual conditions of Japanese sports. Baseball in Japan has certain special features, but in important ways, Japan is deeply involved in the sport’s international nexus. Japan even more wholeheartedly has joined soccer, the truly global game, and it has given the world of martial art sports its major inspirations and innovations. Even sumo, an indigenous closed world with little international appeal, has been among the most aggressive in absorbing foreign wrestlers who are accorded equal treatment within the stables.

Japan’s Olympic history is further evidence. It has been sending athletes to the Olympic Games since 1912, and won the rights to host the 1940 Games in Tokyo until its military aggression forced its withdrawal from sponsorship. The Games that Japan hosted in Tokyo in 1964 were the first time the Olympics were held in Asia, and they were hugely important in marking a self-confident return to a normal position in the international sports world. Japan went on to host two Winter Games, in Sapporo in 1972 and in Nagano in 1998. The successes of Japan athletes and the investment in Olympic training have made Japan one of the central nations in the Olympic movement, and it is now bidding to hold the 2016 in Tokyo again, which would make it the first non-Western nation to host the Games twice.

As the above cases demonstrated, sports at home have been vital to the development of all media within Japan as well. The early newspapers grew by promoting (and then reporting!)
sporting contests, and both radio and television have always depended heavily on sports revenue and reporting. The internet and its digital democracy are reshaping these established media as forcefully as they are elsewhere.

There are two distinctive features of sports media in Japan are the daily sports newspapers and sports comics. Like many European and South American countries but unlike the US, the main print media for sports news are not the national newspapers but daily sports papers, targeted at commuters, sold mostly in kiosks and stores, not by subscription, and featuring in-depth game coverage and often tabloid-like journalism, packaged with colorfully illustrated photographs and illustrations. Japanese readers support five separate, competing sports dailies, whose 12-15 page morning and evening editions are enticing and convenient reading for the subway ride to work, the morning office coffee break, or a quick glance at home in the evening before the televised baseball game.

Japan sports have also inspired manga comic artists, and comic serials, rather than sports films and novels, as in the US, have been the most popular sports fiction. Of several hundred baseball themed comics, the long-running Kyojin no hoshi (Star of the Giants) captured several generations of fans from the 1960s. Captain Tsubasa, about a boys’ football team and its captain, began back in the 1980s and continues today after several iterations that have kept up with the changing world of Japanese soccer (as with other sports manga, anime, video games, and brand merchandise have also been developed). Minami-chan, the teen-aged heroine of Touch, has inspired a huge number of girls to tryout for positions as “manager” (all-around helper) of their high school baseball teams. And Slam Dunk, about a high school basketball team, is currently the biggest selling comic, with series sales exceeding 100,000,000.

So even with the younger generations, sports continue to attract their participation and consumption. Nonetheless, there are serious challenges that face Japanese sports in the foreseeable future. Both baseball and sumo are declining in spectator interest. Baseball is threatened by US Major League ball, both because MLB is drawing off some the top Japanese players (Ichirō Suzuki, Hideki Matsui, Daisuke Matsuzaka, and others) and because MLB game broadcasts to Japan are proving to be more popular with Japanese viewers than many of the local league games. Sumo faces a number of internal troubles that have sapped fan interest, including allegations of bout-fixing, incidents of brutal hazing, and controversies with several top foreign wrestlers.
Soccer, on the other hand, has overcome several dips in attendance and disappointing performances in recent World Cups, and it is now the team sport of choice for youngsters. This bodes well, although the national team’s continued lack of achievement in world and regional tournaments and the wildly popularity for satellite broadcasting of premier European soccer leagues in Japan could create a backlash against J.League. Martial art sports retain loyal and organized practitioners around the globe, but their appeal will always be circumscribed, and any spectator value is eclipsed by vulgarizations such the current commercial boom in mixed martial arts.

What the future holds, then, is uncertain, but Japan has always been as passionate in play as it has been determined in work, and it will no doubt remain embedded in the global flows of sports even as it puts a distinctive stamp on its own ways of playing and watching.
Recommended readings on sports in Japan


Given baseball's place as center sport, Western fascination with sumo, and the international spread of Japanese martial arts, these three have long drawn most scholarly and journalistic attention. For baseball, the prolific writings of Robert Whiting for thirty years, in English and in Japanese, have had enormous influence in interpreting the sport (especially 1977, 1989, and 2004). Donald Roden's study of Ichikō, the First Higher School (1980), contains fascinating material on the emergence of sports clubs at the school in the 1880s and 1890s, and a companion article details the exploits of its famous baseball club, whose victories over American teams in the late 1890s essentially made baseball Japan's national pastime and defined the first era of the sport in Japan. My own writings (e.g., 1996, 2002, 2006) deal with baseball generally and with the professional level in particular. Among studies of high school baseball are the 1984 article by Brian Moeran that analyzes idioms of spirit and effort in the national high school baseball tournament, several stimulating essays by another anthropologist, Charles Springwood (1992, 2000) and by Daniel Gordon (2006).

For sumo, Kenji Tierney (2004) offers a contemporary portrait, while popular books by Patricia Cuyler (1987) and Mark Schilling (1994) older but still helpful. For the martial arts, several of Inoue Shun's writings on the creation of martial arts as organized regime of physical discipline in the late 19th century have appeared in English (see especially 1998). Anthropologist John Donohue's ethnographic study (1991) of dojo training in several different martial arts schools is
especially insightful. Sabine Frühstück and Wolfram Manzenreiter (2001) describe how Japanese martial arts have proliferated as hybrid and local forms around the globe.

Soccer in Japan is beginning to attract the attention of European scholars and journalists. British sociologist John Horne and German anthropologist Wolfram Manzenreiter have produced two collections (Horne and Manzenreiter 2002 and Manzenreiter and Horne 2004) that are valuable for presenting both European and Japanese scholars in English. British journalists Jonathan Birchall (2001) and Simon Moffet (2002) provide details of J.League developments and in-depth reports about several clubs.

There is surprisingly little foreign scholarship thus far on Japan's participation in the Olympics and in the Asian Games, although there is some useful discussion in the Guttmann and Thompson history and in articles by James McClain (1990) and Morris Low (1999). Sandra Collins has recently written a book about the “missing” Tokyo Games of 1940, which were cancelled at the outbreak of the World War.

**References cited**


