

The Spirit and Spectacle of School Baseball : Mass Media, Statemaking, and 'Edu-tainment' in Japan, 1905-1935

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The Spirit and Spectacle of School Baseball —Mass Media, Statemaking, and “Edu-tainment” in Japan, 1905-1935—

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1. INTRODUCTION

Among the central dramas of Japan’s first three twentieth-century decades were the mutual entanglements and antagonisms of an increasingly corporatized economy, a national information-communications network, and an evermore ambitious central state. One of the arenas in which this complex relationship worked itself out was sports, and in particular, baseball. Baseball became the de facto national sport during these decades—at the vortex of popular leisure, corporate profit, and state physical education policy. Baseball was played and watched by ever larger numbers in those decades, but far greater still were those who read about and listened to baseball in mass-circulation newspapers and rapidly spreading radio broadcasts.

This paper considers baseball in Japan roughly from 1905 to 1935, the decades when the sport spread through the school system, when it became a target of sponsorship by competing news, entertainment, and transportation corporations, and when it became a focus of grave concern by Ministry of Education officials and other bureaucrats who sought to regulate and mobilize sports and other physical activities for state objectives. That is, by early Shōwa, baseball had become a national, and nationalized, sport, but its character—as edifying spirit or entertaining spectacle—remained highly contested.

This was a contest played out in the pages of the newspaper dailies and over the radio airwaves as much in the stadiums of Meiji Shrine and Kōshien. That is, there is an essential connection between the emergence of baseball as a national sport and the development in twentieth-century Japan of powerful mass media of information and communication. In a concluding section to this essay, I speculate

on the qualities of sports and sporting events that lent themselves to forms and ambitions of newspapers, magazines, radio, and—in a later era—television.

2. FOR CLASS AND COUNTRY: BASEBALL'S MEIJI ORIGINS

Western “sports” made their way into the curriculum of the new Meiji schools because the authorities believed them more effective in fostering group training than indigenous physical practices. In 1880 (M13), eight years after the Gakusei Happu (School System Law), gymnastics (*taiiku*) was made an official subject (*seika*) in elementary schools. Japanese martial arts were not ignored—*judo* and *kendo* were finally made official subjects in middle schools in late Meiji—but they were generally viewed as too individualized to promote teamwork and disciplined coordination. Instead, efforts were made to inject Western sports with the mental and spiritual aims of such martial arts. Thus, from the start, Western athletics were spiritualized and given pedagogic functions and curricular significance.

A number of commentators and ministry bureaucrats came to see baseball, in particular, as an ideal combination of the display of individual talents and the need to coordinate those talents towards team objectives. Baseball's beginnings in mid-Meiji Japan were closely tied to the emerging character and position of higher education. It is thought to have been first introduced in around 1872 by Horace Wilson, an American instructor at Kaisei Gakkō, which would shortly become one of the constituent schools of the new University of Tokyo.

However, it was at the First Higher School (Ichikō) and other higher schools that the sport became especially popular during the decade of the 1880s. This prominence was reminiscent of the place of cricket and several other sports in the elite schools in Victorian Britain and in late nineteenth-century United States, as Donald Roden observed in his elegant essay on Meiji baseball and its role in defining the ethos of elite education, especially the premier status of the First Higher School [RODEN 1980].

By the turn of the century, however, Ichikō had to share the national limelight with several of the private higher schools soon to gain official designation as universities. In particular, baseball clubs were organized at Keio and Waseda, and in 1904, when both Keio and Waseda defeated the Ichikō baseball club, national attention shifted to this Keio-Waseda rivalry. A year earlier, Keio and Waseda had inaugurated their own semiannual series, the *Sōkeisen*; Meiji University joined them as a three-university league in 1914, and by 1925, this had expanded to what was known as the Tokyo Big Six College Baseball League (also including Hōsei, Rikkyō, and University of Tokyo).

Only two years after it began, the semiannual *Sōkeisen* was suspended; a riot nearly erupted after the autumn 1905 series when the fan clubs of the two schools went on a rampage through the Ginza. This occasioned sharp criticism in the press, and the special series did not resume for twenty years (although regular league play between the clubs did continue).

Without their rivalry, both Waseda and Keio turned to U.S. teams for competition, and international tours and series quickly became an important aspect of collegiate baseball. The Waseda team had already made the first playing tour to the U.S. in 1903, winning six of eighteen games. It proved a most instructive trip, and the club brought back a number of practices it learned from the American collegiate teams, including organized fan club behavior, new uniform styles, the use of gloves for all players, and the safety bunt. It was also notable for the tone with which it was legitimized. The Waseda professor Abe Isoo, who had organized the first Waseda baseball club and led this first U.S. tour, believed firmly that the basis of pacifism lay in non-violence and that military conflicts between nations should be replaced by athletic competition, a view he traced to his readings of Tolstoy while a foreign student in the U.S. in the early 1890s [IKARI 1987: 506–507].

In 1905, a semiprofessional team from Hawaii toured Japan, and Waseda made four more trips to the U.S. over the next twenty years, as well several visits to the Philippines. Keio and Meiji Universities also quickly took to touring. Waseda developed a particular rivalry with the University of Chicagō, an athletic powerhouse during those years; the two schools met on their respective fields ten times between 1906 and 1936. Baseball teams—as well as track and swimming teams—from University of Washington, Stanford, and the University of California also made multiple visits to Japan.

Still, press criticism about the Sōkeisen series troubles continued, and broadened into larger concerns about baseball's popularity. The most famous incident was the so-called "*Yakyū gaidoku ron*" controversy, sparked by a 21-day series in the *Tokyo Asahi* during August, 1911 that presented essays by noted educators and officials about the evils of the sport [ASAHI 1991]. *Tokyo Nichinichi* responded with a two-week series in defense of baseball, and *Yomiuri* opened a *Yakyū mondai kōenkai*. A number of commentators have discussed *Asahi's* campaign against baseball and the ensuing controversy, waged by and in the newspapers. The shrill criticism was emblemized most notably by Nitobe Inazō's opening essay in the *Asahi* series, which dismissed baseball as a "pickpocket's sport," where "players try to swindle their opponents and steal bases." It was well suited to Americans, not Englishmen or Germans, he noted derisively, because "it is impossible for Americans to play a brave game like rugby, the national sport of the British, in which the players hang on to the ball even though their nose is being crushed and their skull dented" ([WHITING 1977: 34–35]; original, [ASAHI 1991: 177]; see also [KIKU 1993]).

3. NATIONAL NEWSPAPERS, MIDDLE SCHOOL BASEBALL, SPIRITUAL IDEOLOGUES

The newspaper debates did little to dampen the growing enthusiasm for baseball, and by the end of Meiji and into the Taishō era, the sport underwent further transformation, both institutionally and ideologically. First, baseball lost

some of its elite associations with the higher schools and universities as it spread downward in the school system and out into youth and working class amateur participation. Baseball was already part of the physical education curriculum at the middle school level, but now the middle schools began to organize ever broader interscholastic competition. Baseball quickly became an emblem of school reputation in a still-unsettled hierarchy of middle schools and of regional loyalty in an era of urban migration.

The sport also attracted participation outside of school. In 1918, Suzuka Sakae invented a soft, hollow rubber baseball (*nan-shiki yakyū* ball), and introduced it at the Kyoto Youth Baseball Tournament. Being cheap and safe, it was an immediate success, accounting for a rapid rise in participation not only among elementary school kids but also among adults. Recreational leagues spread, as did industrial leagues of corporate teams.

However, it was middle school baseball that came to define the sport in Taishō and Shōwa, and here a major impetus was the new national newspapers, which seized on a variety of sports as publicity vehicles of mass appeal. Ever more competitive for subscribers and markets by the 1910s, they vied to sponsor sports tournaments and individual athletes, and to expand their papers' sports coverage to report the very boom they were fanning. This was prompted by an important shift in the papers' self-identity and mission—a fierce competition to survive by becoming national papers and their recasting themselves as “mass media” rather than “political newspapers.”

For example, *Jiji Shinpō* organized the first Mt. Fuji Ascent Race in 1913, the same year that *Osaka Mainichi* sponsored the First Japan Olympics Festival. The latter paper started a 10-Mile Ocean Swim in 1915, and the next year staged a Tri-City Track and Field Meet for teams from Osaka, Kyoto, and Kobe. *Asahi* responded with the First East-West Japan Track Tournament. By 1917, more papers had jumped in. *Yomiuri* sponsored the First Tokyo-Kyoto *Ekiden* (Team Relay) Race, to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the transfer of the capital from Kyoto to Tokyo. *Hōchi Shinbun* organized a 25-mile Tokyo-Yokohama Marathon, and *Osaka Mainichi* countered with an “Olympics Festival.” And so on, with track meets, marathons, swimming contests, ski meets, mountaineering ascents, etc. By the 1920s, sports participation and spectatorship were a central part of the “mass culture” of the decade [IKARI 1987; KIKU 1993]. The few Olympic medal winners became popular celebrities—and, like Hitomi Kinue, the 800-meter silver medallist at the 1928 Amsterdam Olympics, were often hired by the newspapers.

It was in this context that school baseball attracted the attention and sponsorship of the new mass media. In 1915, *Asahi* capitalized on school baseball's broadening popularity by inaugurating a new national middle school championship tournament in Osaka. The initial tournament was held that summer at Toyonaka Field in Osaka, and attracted teams from 72 of the nation's 321 middle schools. The following year, participation more than doubled to 150 teams.

After a decade of growing crowds, *Asahi* organized construction of a huge 50,000-seat Kōshien Stadium in Nishinomiya, which opened in 1924 in time for the tenth Annual Championships. Part of its construction cost was shared by the *Mainichi* newspaper chain, which had decided to sponsor its own spring invitational tournament, and by the Hanshin Railway Company, which built and controlled rail connections to the stadium. In 1927, the thirteenth Championships were the first to be broadcast on radio. Despite some doubts, the broadcasts only served to heighten stadium attendance and the popularity of the industrial league teams that had emerged. By 1928, 410 of the then 544 middle schools were represented [Table 2-3 in KIKU 1993: 60]. Thus, the Kōshien fever that continues to grip Japan was born of the corporatization of the news and transportation industries and was an essential ingredient of the mass-mediated “terminal” culture of Kanto and Kansai.

School baseball not only had commercial sponsors, but it also had new ideologues as well, notably Tobita Suishū, captain and later manager of the Waseda University team during these decades. Revered as the God of Baseball, he preached a spiritualization of baseball as athletic *Bushido* that recast the elite aestheticism of the Ichikō spirit in an idiom more appropriate to an age of mass schooling. He demanded that his players demonstrate moral commitment through absolute loyalty to the manager and total devotion to the sport. His training was known as *shi no renshū*, and his motto was “Perfect Baseball,” which meant total concentration and effort at the present moment: “a pitcher was expected to throw every pitch with all his might.” He was in fact a successful coach, and in 1925 finally revenged Waseda’s early loss to the University of Chicago during a perfect 36-0 season. In 1925, he joined *Asahi* as a commentator, and continued to propound a deeply conservative, “Japanese” vision of the sport (in the face of competing managerial philosophies).

Yet the same print media also publicized numerous controversies about illegal recruiting, affairs with screen stars and cafe waitresses, and other scandals involving star student players that were as captivating to reader-fans as Tobita’s essays. *Yomiuri* of 23 October 1928, for example, described a rampage through the Ginza district by Keio fans (“Ginza wa oretachi no nawabari da”) following the second game of the Keio-Waseda series; for the second year in a row, they had disrupted stores, invaded cafes, and scuffled with police. *Jiji Shinpō* of 17 May 1930 reported that professional ticket scalpers (*brōkā*) had cornered large blocks of Keio-Waseda series tickets, which they scalped at the games, demanding and receiving as much as ¥12 for ¥1 first-class tickets. These and many other accounts suggest the degree to which the hero status of star university players and the wide publicity that their play and exploits garnered in the press appealed to the newspaper magnates who wished to prolong and capitalize more directly on that notoriety.

The making of student baseball players into popular media stars threatened the “spiritualism” that school baseball had cultivated, and invited official attack on the basis that these were Western sports, so that this “degeneration” (*daraku*) and

subversion was inevitable. Tobita's philosophy as an internal critique and its attractions in baseball circles must be seen in this context. To emphasize that sports, too, were a *michi* that could be introduced in middle school sports was to contrast them to leftist tendencies (and put them forward as a counterweight). This was increasingly attractive to government authorities, who were worried about growing student activism. Indeed, throughout the 1920s, the government tried hard to rein in the sport at the same time that commercialization was pushing baseball beyond its school origins and sports of all sorts were key elements of the new urban mass culture.

Sports were becoming a crucial site of government effort to train and manage its citizenry, both spiritually and physically. In 1924, the Ministry of Interior organized a national games (*kyōgi taikai*) at the stadium of Meiji Shrine, and in 1925, on the occasion of the new Tokyo Big Six College Baseball League, the Interior Minister Wakatsuki Reijirō published some strong articles in the newspapers inveighing against rowdy and degenerate trends in school baseball. This followed student protests against the military training that the government had introduced into the schools and other signs of student discontent. Indeed, through a series of directives and strong pressure on organizations like the National Middle School Principals Association, the Ministry of Education sought to harness all sports and physical education to official aims of inculcating bodily discipline and countering the feared "leftist" tendencies in the schools and universities.

Perhaps it is a measure of government success that from the mid-1920s, major business corporations began to target sports club members for recruitment, and sports clubs came to be seen as avenues toward such employment. This was important because by the late 1920s, employment prospects were quite difficult for college graduates. The film, *Daigaku wa deta keredo* (I graduated from college, but...) was released in September 1929, at a time when only 38% of that year's law, economics, and humanities seniors would find jobs; by 1931, that had fallen to 30%. The growing unemployment, student agitations, and union unrest left companies and government both uneasy. Graduates who had been active on sports teams, known for Spartan training and "moderate thinking" (*shisō onken*), came to be seen as prime candidates for the limited openings.

By the 1920s, then, baseball effectively condensed and connected the emerging features of mass education and mass leisure. These, in turn, were largely shaped by the state and by large media, transport, and retail businesses, respectively. The school and the stadium both stood at the intersection of the private and the public, where the individual child was drawn into state pedagogy and the individual adult into corporatized recreation. Schools and stadiums were both significantly inflected by class, place, and gender identities new to post-Meiji, prewar Japan. With the formation in 1936 of a professional league by the ambitious founder of the upstart *Yomiuri* newspaper company, Shōriki Matsutarō, baseball in Japan was again transformed, but in ways that only intensified the sport's embeddedness in a web of school pride, national patriotism, and corporate profit.

4. SPORT AND MASS MEDIA: TELLING THE STORY, SELLING THE SPECTACLE

The above is only a preliminary sketch of some of the ways in which baseball's growing popularity in modern Japan was tied to the emergence of powerful media companies. This requires much further elaboration, and indeed that is one aim of my ongoing research on the institutions and ideologies of the sport in Japan. Here, however, I want to shift my thematic to the more direct concerns of this symposium, and offer some speculations on the crucial links between mass media and modern sports that we have seen for baseball but which are also true for many other sports and many other societies.

Mass spectator sports are a universal feature of modern industrial societies, for reasons that range from the disciplinary to the diversionary. As the Meiji authorities were quick to realize, drilling the body was as important as teaching the mind. Physical education became a counterpart to moral education in the shaping of a new citizenry. At the same time, other analysts emphasize the entertainment value of spectator sports in offering leisure to increasingly mobile and urban populations—a leisure that is respite from the new forms of managed work and that is diversion from other more serious and “political” uses of free time.

Sports in the modern era, in fact, have become “massified” in several respects. There is, first of all, *mass organization*, the structuring and standardizing of sporting activity through rule codifications, national and international governing bodies, leagues, and tournaments. Secondly, stadiums, courses, and other sites which have come to compose “the theater of sport” [RAITZ 1995] have created huge assembly venues for *mass spectating*, for example at Kōshien, where upwards of fifty-thousand fans will gather to watch eighteen players perform. And finally, modern sports are *mass-mediated*, conveyed beyond the immediate spectators to a “virtual spectator” audience of newspaper readers, radio listeners, and television viewers.

These three aspects of massification are, in many cases, mutually implicated and reinforced by these very media organizations. For example, it was in part newspaper reporting and publishing ventures like handbooks and baseball magazines that encouraged the standardization of rules, equipment, and strategies in late Meiji baseball. These same newspapers collaborated with transport companies in some of the principal stadiums in Taishō and early Shōwa (notably of course Kōshien), and then in promoting an expanding audience of fans through radio pages in the newspapers, publicity for teams, players, and announcers, and forums for commentators.

These several ways in which modern spectator sports have been massified have only heightened several fundamental tensions in sport itself. First, sport is preeminently a fragile balance of spontaneity and regulation. When one watches or plays a baseball game, one is both secure in knowing precisely what will happen and anxiously suspenseful in *not* knowing what will happen. On the one hand, a

sport event is highly routinized activity, framed by rules, played and replayed by continuing rosters of players in fairly stable leagues of teams. There is much that one is assured and reassured about the predictability of a sporting event. And yet on the other hand, it is precisely our not knowing and not being able to predict the outcome of a sporting contest that fuels the participant and compels the spectator.

This leads to a second fundamental tension implicit in sport, that between action and talk about the action. One of the compelling fictions of sports is the purity of action—the belief in the centrality of doing, the significance of the game itself, and the marginality of talk. “The game is the thing” insist the fans; “my bat speaks for me” insists the player. Yet that itself is talk, and talk—as commentary, as argument, as record-keeping, as story-telling—is as constitutive of sports as the action itself. What draws us to a game and holds our attention is not only the action itself, but the web of significance and signification in which it is suspended.

Significantly, this sports talk is of two main sorts—stories and statistics. That is, a third tension of baseball, like all modern sports, is that it is constructed and experienced as a matrix of narrative and numeracy [BROWN 1991; SKOLNIK 1994; KELLY 1998].¹⁾ Every game, every series, every season, every player, every team is a record and a story, or rather a congeries of stats and stories. The narratives and numbers are the very connective tissue that runs through the action, not only bringing order and coherence to the spontaneity, but at the same time heightening the suspense of the moment. Will the streak continue? Can they overtake the leaders? Which pitcher will out-duel the other this time?

Sport stories are constructed from a huge gallery of game situations, individual character-types, and team profiles, whose stories-and-statistics people an ever-unfolding drama. There are the promising careers cut short, the bad-boy players who succeed while flaunting the rules, the come-from-behind teams, the once-in-lifetime catches or homers, and a thousand other characters and plots. When a batter steps into the box against a pitcher, we do not know what will happen in the next instant, but the unpredictability is made suspenseful and compelling by what we do know already about their stories and numbers.

In short, I argue that sports have an intrinsic power to draw our fascination, and it is a power that is rooted in the fundamentally divided qualities of sporting experience. I certainly do not insist that this fully explains their significance or character in modern societies, but any explanation that ignores these tensions will fall well short of capturing that experience. I also argue that it is precisely these qualities that have created and sustain the mutual dependency of spectator sports and mass media. But to appreciate this, one must also appreciate the multiple character of the media themselves, especially the print and broadcast media whose

1) Bill Brown [1991: 58] puts it nicely: “While the *story* of a player’s performance tells us about his syntagmatic relation to the game, his ‘*stats*’ provide us with a paradigmatic understanding, some sense of his differential relation to other players who might have performed the same syntagmatic role.”

own popularity and profit have depended so much on sport.

In an insightful analysis of the role of television in transforming sport in Great Britain, Garry Whannel carefully distinguishes three sets of practices within television itself—those of journalism, entertainment, and drama. Both the technologies, aims, and authority-claims of television vary accordingly:

The journalistic practices of news, current affairs and documentary.... assert the conventions of impartiality, neutrality, balance and objectivity as guiding principles.... Entertainment practices, on the other hand, are rooted primarily in.... offering lively, exciting spectacle with personalities and stars.... The values are those of show business.... Dramatic practices are built upon the conventions of the theater and story telling.... (depending) in part on audience involvement in a narrative. [WHANNEL 1992: 60]

Whannel believes that the special allure of sports to television is precisely in its location at the vortex of these three practices. Unlike current affairs programs or variety shows or soap operas, sports are not televised as one of these practices, but rather as a fusion of objective journalism, entertaining spectacle, and dramatic narrative. Television works hard to package and present sports in these three perspectives convergently.

Whannel's model is a persuasive one, which I believe is broadly salient to other mass media, including the press and radio broadcasting. However, if we consider the nature of sport as well as the media and if we consider the case of baseball, the media, and the state in Japan, we need to modify it in at least three respects. First, Whannel's model does not capture the historical evolution of media and media appropriation of sports like baseball. Through baseball's modern history in Japan we can track both the obvious increasing numbers of media presenting baseball and also a less obvious accretion of media emphasis. Tentatively and schematically, I would suggest at least three stages of related developments:

- (1) Late Meiji and Taishō was the era of the newspapers, and as their own identity shifted from political advocacy to news reporting, their focus on baseball shifted from editorializing to event journalism. (See [ORIARD 1993] for parallels with American newspapers and American football.)
- (2) Early and mid-Shōwa was the era of newspapers and radio, and voice transmission over the airwaves conveyed more effectively than the printed page a sense of the immediacy of the event as spectacle [YOSHIMI 1995] — events that were often the creation of the media companies themselves.
- (3) With the beginning of television broadcasting in the early 1950s, late Shōwa became the decades of newspapers, radio, and television, and the technologies of the television (e.g., zoom, cut, close-up, shot/reverse, replay) proved particular effective in creating and conveying the dramatic possibilities, the multiple narratives, inherent in baseball events.

Second, we cannot take for granted that the media presentation of sports will be an easy convergence of news, entertainment, and drama. Whatever balance is struck will always be tentative, always shifting, always contested. The stake that both *Mainichi* and *Asahi* had in sponsoring their rival middle-school tournaments and the intimidating clout that the *Yomiuri* company has wielded over the media representation and transmission of professional baseball make highly problematic any clear lines between baseball as news event, as promoted spectacle, and constructed narrative.

Finally, the fit between sports and media is as much a consequence of the paradoxes of sport as the multiple practices of media. What allows media to exploit the possibilities of sport with their full range of practices (news, narrative, and spectacle) is precisely the doubled qualities of sport as spontaneity and structure, action and commentary, and narrative and numbers.

Sport is high public drama and grinding anonymous routine. It is imbued with deep emotion, constant mental calculation, and enormous physical exertion. Modern sports are watched and played with passion and partisanship and for profit, patriotism, or 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 implicated in structures of power, 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, of a journalist to render a fleeting moment in enduring prose. For an anthropologist of modern life, in Japan and elsewhere, they offer splendid conjunctures of embodied actions and institutional forces.

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