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YOUTH SPORT IN JAPAN

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Introduction

In this chapter we describe youth sport in Japan by analysing various statistical data, exploring its socio-cultural background, and examining several contemporary controversial issues found within it. First, we describe several general trends of youth sport in Japan by using nation-wide statistical data, focusing on how frequently sports are played, which sports are played most and least, where play occurs, which clubs are most popular, why youth play sports, who coaches them, and how many injuries occur. Second, we describe the current state of affairs in Japanese school sport, chiefly because it is the most important centre for Japanese youth sport. In particular, we try to understand the role of teachers in school sport and their challenges by using nation-wide survey data. Third, we offer a brief history of Japanese youth sport. Fourth, and finally, we consider the kinds of problems that currently exist in contemporary youth sport, focusing on two serious issues as case studies: judo accidents and corporal punishment (*taibatsu*).

General trends

First, let us examine some general quantitative trends in Japanese youth sport. Let's use statistical data derived from a 2013 nationwide research survey conducted by the private research institution Sasakawa Sports Foundation (SSF), in which the sporting lives of 3,000 randomly selected young people aged 10–19-years old including elementary school students (10–12), junior high school students (12–15), high school students (15–18), university and college students (18–19) and workers (15–19) were examined. This survey (Sasakawa Sports Foundation, 2013) answers the following questions.

How frequently do Japanese young people play sports in a year?

Thirteen per cent of young people never play, 10.3 per cent play less than once a week (1–51 times a year), 6.3 per cent play more than once a week but less than twice a week (52–103 times a year), 5.0 per cent play more than twice a week but less than three times a week (104–155 times a year), 4.9 per cent play more than three times a week but less than four times a week (156–207 times a year), 4.7 per cent play more than four times a week but less than five times a week (208–259 times a year), 6.5 per cent play more than five times a week but less than six

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times a week (260–311 times a year), 10.7 per cent play more than six times a week but less than seven times a week (312–363 times a year), and 38.6 per cent play more than seven times a week (more than 364 times a year). As a whole, 87.0 per cent of young Japanese play sports, and more than half of all young people play sports more than 5 days a week.

When they play, what sports interest them most?

According to the SSF, the top twenty most popular sports are as follows: soccer (31.1 per cent), followed by tag (30.0 per cent), jogging/running (26.4 per cent), basketball (25.9 per cent), swimming (25.3 per cent), dodge ball (24.0 per cent), skipping rope (23.1 per cent), badminton (22.3 per cent), muscle training (20.7 per cent), swing (20.2 per cent), playing catch (18.9 per cent), baseball (18.7 per cent), table tennis (18.5 per cent), riding bicycles (17.2 per cent), “walking” (16.6 per cent), “volleyball” (16.5 per cent), bowling (16.5 per cent), hide-and-peek (15.7 per cent), gymnastics (15.3 per cent), and horizontal bar (15.3 per cent).

Where do Japanese youth play sports?

Most of all they play in schools (73.4 per cent), followed by parks, open spaces and vacant land (42.1 per cent). They also play in gymnasias and on grounds not affiliated with schools (29.5 per cent), in private homes (22.1 per cent), in the road (7.6 per cent), at bowling alleys (6.5 per cent), by the sea, coast, or port (6.3 per cent), in the pool (5.8 per cent), on ski slopes (5.6 per cent), and around the house (4.5 per cent). As you can see, Japanese youth mostly play sports at schools or other public institutions.

Which sports clubs are the most popular among Japanese youth?

According to the SSF, 50.5 per cent of all young Japanese people have participated in a sports club at some time. 21.5 per cent have never participated in club, and 28.1 per cent had participated in club but have quit it for some reason. Among the young Japanese who have participated, more than half have done so as a member of an extracurricular sport club in a junior high or high school (54.7 per cent). Meanwhile, a smaller percentage of Japanese youth have participated in a community-based club outside the school (19.0 per cent), in a private club outside the school (16.6 per cent), in an extracurricular sport club in an elementary school (10.9 per cent), in an intramural (*sākuru*) club during university (3.2 per cent), or in an extracurricular sport club during university (2.0 per cent).

Why do young people play?

The top ten reasons were the following: to enjoy (64.1 per cent), to become physically active (49.9 per cent), to develop physical strength (45.9 per cent), to improve skills (45.3 per cent), to be a member of club (43.0 per cent), to win a match (31.2 per cent), to make new friends (28.6 per cent), to be asked by friends (27.6 per cent), to play with friends (26.8 per cent), and ‘to be healthy’ (25.1 per cent). Japanese youth clearly play sports for various reasons.

Who coaches Japanese youth in sport?

First of all, it should be noted that many Japanese youngsters do not have a coach at all. According to the SSF in 2013, 45.7 per cent of young people did not have a coach, while 54.3 per cent

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did. In some sports, coaches are more common. For example, in soft tennis (85.4 per cent), baseball (80.6 per cent), volleyball (78.0 per cent), table tennis (76.3 per cent), basketball (67.4 per cent), soccer (62.9 per cent), badminton (55.3 per cent), more than half of all Japanese youth have a coach. Yet in cases such as jogging/running (21.1 per cent) or dodge ball (10.9 per cent), a very small percentage of youth enjoy the guidance of a coach. Of course, few youth who play tag ever have a coach.

How many young people suffer injuries?

According to the SSF, the percentage of young people who were injured while playing sport was 15.2 per cent. If we further investigate this rate by age-category, we find that 14.6 per cent occurred among elementary school students, 18.2 per cent occurred among junior high school students, 16.9 per cent occurred among high school students, 8.3 per cent occurred among university and college students, and 1.8 per cent occurred among corporate athletes (many Japanese companies support after work sports clubs for their employees). Some of these injuries include sprains (29.6 per cent), fractures (18.0 per cent), bruises (6.0 per cent), pulled muscles (4.7 per cent), ligament damage (4.3 per cent), and fatigue induced fractures (3.9 per cent).

School sport: a major centre for Japanese youth sport activities

As the aforementioned SSF survey reveals, youth sport, especially during junior high and high school, is largely dependent upon the institution of school sport in Japan. While in many countries youth sports revolve around community clubs outside the school, Japanese youth sports mostly revolve around extracurricular sports activities affiliated with schools. Therefore, Japanese schools not only offer formal classroom curricula in line with the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology's Course of Study, but they also set the informal agenda for extracurricular sports activities. Accordingly, Japanese teachers not only teach students inside the classroom, but also manage extracurricular sports activities outside the classroom. These are two distinct aspects of youth sports in Japan, compared with youth sports in foreign countries.

What is the current state of affairs in school sport in contemporary Japan? In 2001, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology convened the *Undō bukatsudō no jittai ni kansuru chōsa kenkyū kyōryokusha kaigi* [Supporter's conference for an investigation regarding the actual situation of extracurricular sports activities] in order to conduct a nation-wide survey regarding extracurricular sports activities in junior high schools and high schools. Based on the results of this survey, we can summarize the following seven points regarding the current state of school sports in Japan (*Undō bukatsudō no jittai ni kansuru chōsa kenkyū kyōryokusha kaigi*, 2002):

- 1 Overall trends. Almost all Japanese schools offered extracurricular sports activities in line with school educational activities. On average, the number of clubs each school offered was 19.2 clubs for junior high school and 29.0 clubs for high school. The participation rate of students was 73.0 per cent in junior high school and 52.1 per cent in high school. On average, the number of students in each club was 24.5 for junior high school and 18.3 students for high school. On average, the number of teachers who coached students in extracurricular sports activities was 18.1 teachers (66.8 per cent of all teachers) for junior high school and 35.8 teachers (62.6 per cent of all teachers) for high school. Clearly, extracurricular sports activities play a large role in the lives of both Japanese students and teachers.

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- 2 Types of clubs. Regarding participation rate, junior high school students, preferred the following sports in this order: basketball (13.4 per cent), soft tennis (13.4 per cent), rubber baseball (11.7 per cent), volleyball (11.4 per cent), table tennis (10.3 per cent), track and field (8.8 per cent), soccer (8.5 per cent), *kendo* [fencing] (5.6 per cent), badminton (4.5 per cent), and tennis (4.3 per cent).

Meanwhile, in the case of high school students, the top 10 was the following: basketball (12.8 per cent), soccer (11.3 per cent), volleyball (9.4 per cent), baseball (8.2 per cent), track and field (8.2 per cent), tennis (7.5 per cent), soft tennis (5.5 per cent), badminton (4.5 per cent), table tennis (4.4 per cent), and *kyudo* [archery] (4.0 per cent).

- 3 Amount of activity. During the academic term, the most junior high school students participated in sports activities six days a week (34.5 per cent). A slightly fewer number participated seven days a week (29.3 per cent), and even fewer participated five days a week (19.2 per cent). On average, junior high school students participated 5.5 days a week. In terms of how long each student participated in their sport each time, 46.7 per cent participated more than 2 hours but less than 3 hours, 34.5 per cent participated more than an hour but less than 2 hours, and 11.2 per cent participated more than 3 hours but less than 4 hours. At the high school level, more than a third of all students participated in their sport six days (36.6 per cent), followed by seven days (34.5 per cent), and five days (11.3 per cent). On average, high school students participated 5.6 days in a week. As for how long they participated each time, more than half participated for more than 2 hours but less than 3 hours (50.3 per cent), less than a quarter participated for more than an hour but less than 2 hours (23.8 per cent), and less than a fifth participated for more than 3 hours but less than 4 hours (17.3 per cent).
- 4 Student worries. Students who participate in school sport have various worries. For example, junior high school students worry that they enjoy too few holidays (20.9 per cent), experience routine fatigue (19.0 per cent), have no time to play or study (18.2 per cent), don't have a chance to improve skills (18.0 per cent), narrow space (17.4 per cent), friendship among students (14.3 per cent), not enough instruction (13.9 per cent), and 23.7 per cent of all students had no worry. On the other hand, high school students also worry that they enjoy too few holidays (22.6 per cent), experience routine fatigue (22.5 per cent), have no time to play and study (21.5 per cent), don't have a chance to improve skills (20.9 per cent), do not get enough instruction (17.1 per cent), narrow space (16.0 per cent), friendship among students (11.7 per cent), and 19.6 per cent of all students had no worry. As you can see, the trends found in junior high school are similar to those found at the high school level.
- 5 School sport educators. Almost all instructors and coaches of extracurricular sport activities are school teachers, not professional coaches. This research asked teachers why and how they instruct and manage school sport. Most of these educators aim to help students learn co-operation and sociability (51.1 per cent of junior high school teachers, 46.0 per cent of high school teachers), seek to develop mental strength and a sense of responsibility (36.3 per cent of junior high school teachers, 35.3 per cent of high school teachers), strive to foster students' attitude for enjoying sports throughout their lifetimes (31.0 per cent of junior high school teachers, 23.9 per cent of high school teachers), try to improve their competitiveness and achieve better scores (26.5 per cent of junior high school teachers, 40.5 per cent of high school teachers), and to exercise students' body and to help them live active lives in the future (20.1 per cent of junior high school teachers, 14.2 per cent of high school teachers). As you can see, most Japanese school teachers aim to use sports for educational purposes first and foremost, rather than focusing on attaining victory. In

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this survey, Japanese school teachers were also asked how many days in a week they instructed students in extracurricular sport activities. On average, each junior high school teacher instructed their sport 4.7 days a week, and each high school teacher instructed 3.9 days a week. As a result, though teachers willingly and voluntarily coach school sports with a broad sense of education in mind, they must bear a heavy burden to do so.

- 6 Teacher worries. Teachers who coach school sport also have various worries. For example, many teachers worry that they will be unable to instruct satisfactorily because of their other school duties (51.2 per cent of junior high school teachers, 48.9 per cent of high school teachers). Many also worry that they might have a shortage of professional instruction ability (42.9 per cent of junior high school teachers, 39.7 per cent of high school teachers), that they might have to eliminate their free time for research (22.3 per cent of junior high school teachers, 17.4 per cent of high school teachers), that they have a “shortage of institutional facilities or equipment” (19.7 per cent of junior high school teachers; 22.6 per cent of high school teachers), that only a small number of students participate in the club (16.4 per cent of junior high school teachers, 24.8 per cent of high school teachers), that they have “budget shortages” (10.6 per cent of junior high school teachers; 13.3 per cent of high school teachers), and that they cannot maintain a relationship of friendship among students (10.1 per cent of junior high school teachers, 6.8 per cent of high school teachers). Only 2.5 per cent of all junior high school teachers and 3.6 per cent of high school teachers have no worries at all.

Socio-cultural background: a brief history of youth sport in Japan

As mentioned above, youth sport in Japan is largely dependent on school sports. In order to understand why and how school sports have become the centre of youth sport in Japan, we will briefly describe the history of youth sport in Japan, especially focusing on the post World War II history of school sport (for further details, please see Nakazawa, 2014a, 2014b).

In the latter part of nineteenth century, and until 1945, Japan became a modern nation-state, rising from the pre-modern Edo period (1603–1868) to the modern Meiji period (1868–1912). During this modernizing process, Japan learned and absorbed much European and American knowledge, technology and culture, including sport culture. This foreign sport culture was initially introduced through the school system, especially through Japanese universities. Extracurricular sports clubs were later established within higher education in the latter part of the nineteenth century. These sports spread to secondary education, beginning in the early twentieth century (Guttmann and Thompson, 2001). In short, Japanese sports, including youth sports, were from the early years of Japan’s modernization associated with school sport. However, extracurricular sports activities before World War II did not generally depend on the assistance of teachers, schools and educational policies, but rather depended a great deal on students’ voluntary participation. As a result, students’ participation rates were not as high at the time as they became after World War II.

Between 1945 and the 1950s, the structure of Japanese youth sport became largely dependent on school sport. In August 1945, Japan accepted the Potsdam Declaration and removed ‘all obstacles to the survival and strengthening of democratic tendencies among the Japanese people. Freedom of speech, religion, and of thought, as well as respect for fundamental rights shall be established’ (Anderson, 1975, p.61). World War II was over, Japan was a defeated nation, and she had lost her sovereignty to determine her own political system. The General Headquarters (GHQ) of the United Nations began a period known as the Occupation and promoted postwar education reforms. Twenty-seven distinguished educators, known as the United States Education

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Mission to Japan, were invited from the USA investigate Japanese education and produce a report suggesting a vision of postwar educational reform. In line with the report's recommendations, a set of postwar educational reforms were implemented, shifting Japanese school physical education away from the militaristic mindset that had guided them before the war and toward democratic values. Students' participation rates in extracurricular sports activities grew in the early postwar period as a result.

Between the 1960s and early 1970s, school sport in Japan changed, especially around 1964, when the Tokyo Olympics became the first Olympics ever to be held in Asia. In the run-up to these Olympics, Japan's sport policy was characterized by elitism. For example, in 1959 and 1960, the *Hoken taiiku shingikai* [Health and Physical Education Council], which at the time was the most influential council on national policy regarding physical education and sport, emphasized improving sports skills and increasing body strength in order to win at the Olympic games. However, after a decrease in students' participation rates in extracurricular sports activities, policymakers reconsidered these elitist policies. After 1964, the focus of policy shifted to popularization. For example, in 1972 the *Hoken taiiku shingikai* (Health and Physical Education Council) reconsidered their previous emphasis on elitism and began to champion the sports for all cause. Before 1964, Japan's sporting discourse had primarily revolved around the question of how to train elite athletes. At the time, some physical education experts wanted to use physical education to train adolescents who exhibited higher than average potential to contribute to Japan's victories at the Olympic Games. However, this philosophy was criticized by others who spoke from an egalitarian perspective. After 1964, Japan's sporting discourse shifted to the issue of how to engage everyone in sports, not just elites. Japanese physical educators thereafter criticized the prioritization of training of elite athletes, and they argued that extracurricular activities must be inclusive school educational activities offered to all students. After 1964, the focus of sports policy and discourse thus shifted toward popularization and equal opportunity. As a result, students' participation rates began to increase again.

Between the late 1970s and the 1980s, participation in school sports continued to expand. Participation in school itself also expanded during this time; in the late 1970s the percentage of students who chose to attend high school after compulsory junior high school exceeded 90 per cent. Schooling until the age of 18 became the standard for almost all Japanese adolescents during this era. Schools and teachers were forced to handle a broad range of students and to face many problems with students' misbehaviour (e.g. alcohol and tobacco use, violence). As a result, they began using extracurricular sports activities to eliminate these problems. For example, a junior high school teacher said that extracurricular activities were very useful in preventing delinquency because they let students break a sweat, helped them release their frustrations, and deprived them of time necessary to be involved in misconduct (Hayashi, 1980). While there are no statistically significant studies that show whether such extracurricular sports activities actually prevented or rehabilitated delinquent students of the day, nevertheless, there were many people who believed that extracurricular sports activities had such power. Moreover, discipline was increasingly emphasized in the discourse regarding extracurricular sports activities during this period.

Throughout Japan's postwar history, extracurricular sports activities have expanded, and Japanese schools have used sports as tools to promote democracy, equality, and discipline. Japanese schools have therefore regarded sports as an integral part of Japanese education, so Japan's system of extracurricular sport activities has become the main centre of youth sports in Japan.

Recently, however, neo-liberal educational reforms, which aimed at downsizing the school, have been put in place. Hence, at the policy level, there is currently an attempt to shift extracurricular sports clubs from the school to the community. For example, in 1997 the *Hoken*

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taïku shingikai (Health and Physical Education Council) mentioned the possibility of shifting all extracurricular sport activities away from the school and toward community organizations. Still, at the practice level, Japanese teachers continue to use sports for educational purposes, and many of them are unwilling to let them be completely taken over by community sports clubs.

Contemporary issues: towards the safeguarding of youth in Japanese sport

Youth sports are played widely in contemporary Japan and in public institutional spaces, including schools, raising the issue of how Japanese youth are safeguarded in sport. Recently, accidents in judo have become an important national issue as has the issue of *taibatsu* (corporal punishment). Both threaten the bodies, minds and lives of youth playing sport.

Judo accidents

On 17th April 2013, *The New York Times* reported that over the past 30 years, 118 children have died, and nearly 300 have ended up disabled or comatose while practicing judo in Japan. Such shocking news was based on the statistical studies of Uchida Ryo, a sociologist of education, who researches school safety. Although the Japanese government and the national judo association have generally ignored these incidents, Uchida has gathered school accident records from the Japan Sport Council and tracked 118 fatal incidents in judo practice since 1983. Uchida's published studies have had a great impact on youth sport in Japan and have forced authorities, including judo coaches, teachers and officials to reflect on their instructional style and to pay closer attention to children's safety.

Uchida's studies have also included the voices of some parents whose children have been involved in such judo accidents. For example, Murakawa Yoshihiro, whose son suffered a head injury in 2009 and died a month later, and Kobayashi Yasuhiko, whose son had been badly hurt doing judo at school, together created the Japan Judo Accident Victims Association in March 2010, and they started helping other victims who also suffered from judo accidents. Their goal is to prevent such terrible accidents from ever happening again.

Meanwhile, in 2013 Uchida published a new book entitled, *Jūdo jiko* [Judo accidents] aiming at 'reducing serious accidents in judo as significantly as possible so as to save children lives' (Uchida, 2013, p.227). It seems that his work has stimulated some progress. Since 2012, when judo accidents became better known among the Japanese public, there have been no recorded deaths. Can Japan continue this trend in the future? That depends upon Japan's ability to remember these terrible accidents and work toward preventing them from happening again.

Taibatsu

Corporal punishment is the other controversial issue in Japanese youth sports. In December 2012, a second-year high school student of Sakuranomiya High School in Osaka committed suicide after his basketball coach, Komura Hajime, repeatedly beat him. After the incident, Komura admitted to having injured the 17-year-old team captain when the boy 'failed to meet his expectations' (Japan Daily Press, 2013). Komura told authorities that he had used corporal punishment, known as *taibatsu* in Japanese, to 'guide his pupil strictly', in large part because he was the team captain and thought he could handle it (Osaka Board of Education, 2013). This incident, along with Uchida's research of judo accidents, brought the issue of safeguarding the welfare of children in Japanese sport into the public consciousness.

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Tragically, corporal punishment remains a widely used disciplinary practice throughout the world (see Lang, Harthill and Rulofs, this book), most commonly used by parents at home but also by teachers at school, and it represents an important crossroads at which the policies of schools and sports meet (Donnelly and Straus, 2005; Miller, 2013). The issue also raises important issues regarding power, the body, and human rights. The physical discipline of children has been used in Japan for centuries, and many incidents of corporal punishment in Japan today follow a strikingly similar pattern, especially in the case of fatal or severe incidents. The perpetrator of the punishment, whether coach or teacher, commonly argues that the victim is actually not a victim at all but rather a specially chosen pupil who must be strictly trained to maximize their potential. Such educators do not regard corporal punishment as problematic, and they use it to set an example to the team of steadfast perseverance in the face of hardship, absolute obedience to authority and constant loyalty to the team. Japanese coaches like Komura believe this teaches athletes a powerful lesson that the team comes before the individual – a mantra they hope athletes will carry with them into their adult life. For example, Komura told the Osaka Board of Education, ‘I have often hit my students for their own sake . . . I thought I could hit them without incident because we had a good relationship’ (quoted in Osaka Board of Education, 2013). Athletes, meanwhile, are expected to accept corporal punishment without complaint, accepting it for their own growth and for the growth of unity of the group.

Ultimately, Komura was fired for his involvement in the boy’s death, was tried and found guilty by the Osaka District Court and sentenced to three years in prison (Asahi Shimbun, 2013). While Komura was therefore held responsible for playing a direct in the student’s death, he did not serve jail time (Japan Times, 2013). If coaches like Komura are not proportionately punished for their excessive violence, who will be? More importantly, who is responsible for safeguarding the Japanese youth athlete from such abuse? This is a question that the Japanese people have yet to answer.

Conclusion

This chapter has described the current state of youth sport in Japan as well as two controversial issues that exist with it today. First, we examined general quantitative trends in youth sport using nation-wide statistical data, which showed that Japanese youth play a variety of sports actively, especially as members of extracurricular clubs affiliated with their schools. Secondly, we described the current state of affairs of Japanese school sport as a centre of Japanese youth sport, demonstrating that there is a large system of extracurricular sport activities sanctioned by the state. These sports are coached by volunteer teachers, but both these teachers and the students they guide have their own particular worries. Third, we delineated a brief history of youth sport in Japan by focusing on the postwar history of school sport, showing how this large system of extracurricular sport activities became a centre of youth sports in Japan. Finally, we considered two serious issues, judo accidents and corporal punishment, as a way to better understand the current challenges facing youth sport in Japan. We must address such problems so as to save and safeguard youth lives, and to make sure that in the future all Japanese youth can truly enjoy their sporting experiences.

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