

The Power of Japanese Sports

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Aaron L. Miller

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I first started thinking deeply about the power of sports when I lived in a small town in rural Japan called Mima, in the early 2000s. At the time, I had little Japanese language ability, few friends, and an unremarkable social life. I was a 22-year-old English teacher fresh out of college, and this town of just a few thousand was so far-flung that most of its people close to my age fled for the cities as soon as they could.

I had no choice in going to Mima—the Japanese government hired me to teach English and sent me there—but I was stubborn enough to stick out my one-year contract, which then somehow became two. At times life in Mima could be hard, and often not very exciting. Sports became something of a refuge—a way to blow off steam and lose myself. I have little doubt I would have gone home much earlier had there been no sports in Mima.

But sports were also a cultural bridge of friendship to the Japanese people, which got me thinking about the power of sports. My experiences in Mima corroborated the power of sports I had learned growing up in US suburbs, too—they could build, maintain, and in some cases even improve relationships. The Japanese sportsmen and women of Mima noticed quickly that sports were a favorite pastime of mine. I lit up when the local high school baseball team's games appeared on the television in the teacher's lounge. I jumped up from my desk when the sumo tournaments did, too. So a friend at the board of education signed me up for the softball team. And a senior teacher signed me up for the basketball team.

Over time I would learn that in Japan, relationships in sports (and out) are taken very seriously, especially the relationship between teachers and pupils, or in the case of sports, coaches and athletes. Like a samurai and his lord, these are “ecological” relationships driven by respect, honor, and service. I would eventually learn that what **I have elsewhere called a “samurai approach” to sports** was no accident. Japanese sportsmen drew strength from seeing themselves as samurai in battle, and they tried to pass on “samurai values” of toughness, loyalty, and honor to the next generation.

At the time I was fascinated by the relationship between coaches and athletes because I was a teacher, but also because I had once coached basketball myself. Yet without Japanese language ability, I usually had little choice but to observe coaches and learn from them. That was alright, though; there was great dependence on language in the classroom, but more physical cues and gestures on the court or diamond, and that aided my learning. I felt like I absorbed more information about Japan—and learned more of the language—by watching sports, and perhaps that is why coaching ultimately became a central part of my research.



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I watched coaches lead their basketball and baseball teams and I studied their techniques. I focused on their gestures. And I listened to the words they used: **“Ganbarou!”** (“Come on!”/“Fight!”/“Persevere”), and the ones that the players repeated in return –**“Osssssu!”** (loosely, “Yo!”/“Hey”), **“Weeeiii!”** (loosely, “Let’s go!”). **I even watched as coaches physically punished their players.** I was surprised to learn that many Japanese sports coaches in Mima had never played the sports they coached. They were educators who saw sports as education, so they took the task of coaching as a serious part of their duties, even when they were not paid much for it. In exchange, they typically received the respect of parents and the local community, most of whom deferred to them and rarely complained.

I’d later learn that coaches across Japan are often revered, even at the amateur level. Their work is not simply the transmission of skill. Like coaches elsewhere, Japanese coaches guide their players toward improved technical performance. But they also guide them morally, which fascinated me the most of all. Japanese coaches seemed to relish the chance to teach something they knew better than technique.

Ultimately, it was that moral and educational power of sports that honed the focus in my research. From other studies I'd come to learn about the power of Japanese sports to **foster nationalism** and **maintain gender hierarchy** and **make money**.

But in the beginning, sports in Mima simply brought me deeper into Japanese culture and helped me build friendships.

I am not surprised that they held then, and continue to hold now, great power over me.

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In this monthly column, "The Power of Sports," Miller considers the social and political nature of sports in American society, with an eye toward opening the minds of readers to the seriousness of these so-called escapes.

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