

# Japan Fact Sheet

## SPORTS

Promoting health for people and the economy

### Introduction

Japanese of all ages enjoy sports activities, both as participants and as spectators. In Japan, sports are regarded as a healthy pastime that develops good discipline, builds character, encourages fair play, and instills sportsmanship. Win, lose, or draw, Japanese will enthusiastically cheer the athlete who makes a determined and sincere effort. At sporting events, competitors are invariably urged on by shouts of *gambatte!* (do your best).

Before the introduction of Western sports, Japan had made progress in traditional sports called *budo*, which were born in the twelfth century and flourished mainly among the warrior class. They include *kendo* (Japanese stick fencing), *jujutsu* (known today as *judo*), *kyudo* (archery), and others. In the Edo period (1600–1868), these sports, which put stress on their mental aspects, were established as martial arts. The *do* in *budo* means “way,” and it was required that practitioners master the profound way of the sport. The traditional *budo* have been handed down from generation to generation and are still flourishing. *Judo* and *karate* have come to be international sports.

*Sumo* is said to be Japan’s national sport and is very popular. It has a nearly 2,000 year history and could boast of professionals as far back as several hundred years ago. In each match, two wrestlers, who wear only colorful *mawashi* (belly bands), fight on a *dohyo* (an elevated straw ring), pushing, throwing, and so on. The ceremonies performed on the *dohyo* are also colorful.

After the Meiji Restoration (1868), various



#### Long-distance running

Races of varying lengths are held nationwide. Thousands of runners are shown here at the start of the 2002 Ome Marathon in the city of Ome in Tokyo Prefecture.

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kinds of Western sports were introduced into Japan. Baseball arrived in 1872, thanks to an American. During the 1870s, track and field events, rugby, soccer, and ice skating were introduced. In 1911, an Austrian gave skiing instruction to the Japanese army. In those days Western sports were played by few people, but through the educational system they spread throughout the country. Western sports were also stressed as a form of mental discipline at first, but now Japanese have come to enjoy them as recreational activities.

Each year, Japan observes October 10 as a national holiday designated Sports Day.

## Sports Today

Modern sports began in the early 1870s, when the school system was established. As education was systematized, schools added physical education to their curricula. The first sports to be introduced into universities and junior high schools were track and field events, rowing, baseball, and tennis.

Children are encouraged to take part in school club activities, which may include baseball, *judo*, archery, soccer, swimming, gymnastics, and field athletics, as well as others. Many pursue an interest in sports well into adulthood.

With a few exceptions, almost all of the sports presently played in Japan were already known to the public before the end of the nineteenth century. The Japan Amateur Sports Association (JASA) was organized in 1911, in preparation for the Fifth Olympic Games held the following year. Local chapters of JASA were subsequently set up, along with national governing bodies for each sport.

According to a survey taken by the Leisure Development Center, the top 10 sports activities, in terms of participation, are jogging and long-distance running (particularly in marathons), calisthenics, training, aerobics (including jazz dancing), table tennis, badminton, baseball, softball, cycling, and ice skating. Others of note include bowling, soccer, volleyball, basketball, swimming, traditional martial arts such as *judo* and *kendo*, gateball (a game based on croquet and practiced almost entirely by senior citizens), golf, and tennis. Twelve of these sports are regularly practiced by 10 million people or more. They are long-distance running (jogging and marathon running), table tennis, badminton, baseball, softball, cycling, bowling, volleyball, swimming, golf, tennis, and skiing. Most of the participants in these sports consider them as a kind of leisure activity, in which they can partake easily, with friends or colleagues.

The appeal has been growing for activities that family members can do together, such as those combined with domestic and foreign travel. Likewise, interests are continuing to diversify: people who engaged in horseback



### Rugby

Many university teams engage in intercollegiate rugby competition. Shown here is a 2003 game between Waseda University and Meiji University.  
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riding, although still comparatively few, more than doubled from 400,000 to 900,000 between 1988 and 1996. Gains in scuba diving and hang gliding show that costly activities, especially those that require people to travel far from their homes, are no longer a barrier.

## An Indispensable Part of Daily Life

A key requirement for all types of recreation and leisure, including sports, is having the time to pursue them. From an annual 2,137 work hours in 1978, the average time put in on the job in Japan had declined to 1,966 hours by 1994, placing it below the 2,005 hours in the United States. This was largely due to expansion of the five-day work week (now in force at over 90% of all enterprises), reduced overtime work, and more holidays on the calendar.

Surveys conducted annually by the Prime Minister's Office have noted that a majority of Japan's adults are basically satisfied with their current level of free time. In 1988, 47.2% of those polled said they were content with their current amount of leisure time, as opposed to 48.7% who said they desired more. By 1994, 58.3% voiced satisfaction with their leisure time, and 37.2% said they wished to have more.

A survey by the Ministry of International Trade and Industry in 1992 showed that Japan had over 1.6 million registered members of full-service fitness clubs, 451,093 members of smaller (semi-comprehensive) fitness clubs, 191,404 members of gymnasiums and studios, and 1,244,537 members of swimming clubs. Females accounted for a slight majority in all of these. Out of the total 3.57 million, 52.8% were elementary or junior high school children, with adults accounting for



the remainder. The number of fitness clubs operating as businesses grew from 473 in 1989 to 848 in 1992.

## Spectator Sports

Almost every city in Japan has at least one stadium. A 1994 poll by the Sasakawa Sports Foundation queried interviewees on the sports events most regularly attended in the course of a year. (The frequency of attendance is shown in parentheses.) Among professional sports, these were baseball (3.5), soccer (3.3), tennis (3.2), auto racing (3.0), golf (1.6) and *sumo* (1.4). Among amateur sports, the leaders were softball (7.1), baseball (6.0), rugby (5.3), basketball (5.0), soccer (5.0), volleyball (4.3), and ice hockey (4.0).

Baseball is one of the most popular spectator sports in Japan. During the season, night games of professional baseball are broadcast almost daily and gain high audience ratings. Since Nomo Hideo became a player for the Los Angeles Dodgers in the United States, many people have become interested in the Major Leagues. The All-Japan High School Baseball Championship Tournament is held each summer, and these games are watched by millions.

With the establishment of the J. League in 1991, soccer became more popular. Soccer has now become the second most widely practiced sport among boys in elementary school, after baseball. J. League games are well attended. Japan's national soccer team will participate in the upcoming 1998 World Cup in France.

In professional sports, many foreign sportsmen are currently active in Japan. One of the most popular *sumo* wrestlers is Akebono, from Hawaii, who holds the highest rank of grand champion. Many famous foreign soccer players take part in J. League soccer. "Zico," a star player from Brazil, made a great contribution to the development of professional soccer as a player for Kashima Antlers.

## Amateur Competition

To revive sports and raise the morale of



### Amateur athletics

The opening ceremony of the 2003 autumn Kokumin Taiiku Taikai (National Sports Festival), a national amateur athletic competition for both children and adults.  
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dispirited people in the aftermath of World War II, the Japan Amateur Sports Association organized the first Kokumin Taiiku Taikai (National Sports Festival) in 1946. These summer and autumn meets became annual events. In 1947, The first Winter National Sports Festival was held, and this too became an annual event.

The Kokutai, as the events are known, are held in a different prefecture each year. Three sessions are held: winter, summer, and autumn. Winter events feature skiing and ice skating. Summer events include swimming, boating, and sailing. And in autumn, the events cover track and field, gymnastics, and various ball games. The Emperor's Trophy is awarded to the prefecture with the highest total points. An Empress's Trophy is awarded to the prefecture whose female athletes achieve the highest overall score.

Participation in the Kokutai is limited to Japanese citizens with amateur standing. Many outstanding performers go on to appear in the Olympics and other international competitions.

## International Events

Japan took part in the First Far Eastern Championship Games, held in Manila, in 1913. The Japanese government first subsidized the funding of an international sports event at the Fifth Far Eastern Championship Games, held in Shanghai, in 1921. Following World War II, these regional events became known as the

Asian Games. In 1951, Japan participated in the First Asian Games, held in New Delhi. The strong showing by the 80 members of the national team quickly fed enthusiasm for international competition.

Tokyo hosted the Third Asian Games in 1958, and in 1994 the city of Hiroshima hosted the Twelfth Asian Games. The First Winter Asian Games were held in Sapporo in 1986 and the second in 1990.

Increasing numbers of Japanese choose to combine their interest in sports with foreign travel. They ski in the European Alps or Canadian Rockies, or play golf at famous golf courses in Hawaii or California. They take part in water sports such as water skiing and surfing. It has also become increasingly common for Japanese from all walks of life to participate in foreign marathons.

## Economic Contribution

Physical and mental well-being are not the only benefits that participation in sports provides. As with other forms of leisure and recreation, sports activities in Japan make a major contribution to the domestic economy, attracting capital investment and creating employment opportunities in local areas. In certain sports, such as skiing, golf, bowling, tennis, baseball, and others, imported



### Sports day

In autumn most schools in Japan hold a sports day, in which all the school's students participate in athletic activities.

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equipment is popular, thus contributing to foreign trade as well.

Growth in expenditures has been ongoing, although total outlays for sports during 1996 declined 0.2% from the previous year. The 1997 *White Paper on Leisure* estimates that total expenditures by individuals and businesses for sports equipment, training and instruction, stadiums, arenas and other facilities, admission to events, and so on, came to 5,738 billion yen (US \$52.74 billion) during 1996. Among these outlays, golf equipment accounted for 559 billion yen (US \$5.139 billion); and skiing, skating, and snowboard equipment, 395 billion yen (US \$3.631 billion). Tennis, baseball, mountaineering, and cycling sports also exceeded 100 billion yen (US \$919.2 million).