

## **Sport and the Mass Media in Japan**

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The tendency in discussions of media consumption in the past decade has been to move away from political economy or the “production of consumption” perspective; it has been accompanied by a growing interest in the active audience, symbolic culture, and textual analysis. Though sport and the mass media are a popular research topic in English-language publications, the major focus has been on a narrow range of advanced capitalist economies. This article on the relationship between the mass media and sport in Japan takes issue with both these emphases and contributes to on-going debates about sport, the media, and the commodification of popular culture. First, it provides a sketch of episodes in the development of the mass media in Japan—especially the newspaper press, radio, and television—in conjunction with that of sport. The focal point is the involvement of business corporations in the development of relations between professional sport and the mass media and the underlying commercial logic that steers that development. Second, by focusing on Japanese examples, the article provides additional empirical data so that similarities and contrasts can be drawn among existing accounts of the development of mediasport in advanced capitalist countries. In particular, it is argued that much of the writing about sport and the mass media has been derived from examination of “Anglo-American” experiences. Attention to media and sport in Japan, both as an economic commodity and as a vehicle for the creation of meaningful discourse about national identity, raises questions about debates concerning sport, media, and globalization.

The study of the mass media and sport has tended to focus on ideological, political, and economic power (Rowe, 2004a; Rowe, 2004b). Research has considered the issue of ownership and control of the means of symbolic production that confers political and economic power on the owners (Law, Harvey, & Kemp, 2002). It has considered the media’s role in reproducing, sustaining, and creating “imagined communities” (Blain, Boyle, & O’Donnell, 1993). The modes of representing sport—both reactionary and resisting—have been surveyed (Brookes, 2002). Finally the relationships between sport, media, and globalization have been discussed (Wenner, 1998; Whannel, 1992). What is noticeable about these studies and many others is the neglect of Japan and its East Asian neighbors. For both substantive and theoretical reasons, this omission cannot continue any longer.

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Substantively, Japan, China, and South Korea are already (or will become) formidable economic forces and locations in terms of sport and the media. Considering the presence of Japan in the media industry and sport, there is very little discussion of the country in English-language sports studies (Guttmann & Thompson, 2001). Hence, there is a tendency toward an Anglo-American focus and ethnocentric bias in sports studies and especially studies of sport and the mass media.

This article does not focus on textual analysis or audience response in Japan to the various forms of sports media.<sup>1</sup> The focus is broader—the wider economic conditions within which mediasport develops—and deliberately treats mediasport as an economic commodity. Sport is favored as content filler during the development and spread of new media, as well as a means of marketing products and creating consumer markets. This in turn stimulates responses in the form of local resistances and revisioning of the position of and nature of sport and physical culture more generally. In the light of this, the article attempts to re-establish concern for the “production of consumption” emphasis in the study of media consumption. The phrase is taken from the overview of perspectives on consumer culture by Featherstone (1990). It is argued that business corporations and the state have both played a crucial role in the development of modern sport in Japan.

Sport has not just recently become part of the commercial world but has been related to it in various changing ways ever since the emergence of modern sport at the end of the 19th century. The media have always played a pivotal role in the relationship between sport and capital. The creation of markets, the birth of consumer culture, and the development of modern sport all share similar origins at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century. The earliest relationship between sport and the media is best understood as one aspect of the creation of markets in consumer culture in which advertising plays a significant role as a subsidy system. Sport has been provided, represented, and sold in different ways by the media. The media in turn have always been subject to forms of regulation. The relationship between sport and the media has therefore to be understood as conjunctural, reflecting specific social (political, economic, and ideological) circumstances. Hence, the article commences with a preliminary outline of the development of the sport–mass media relationship in Japan, focusing on the use of sport as content and marketing tool by the nascent press, radio, and television industries, in the midst of control of the media by the state and business. The following section considers how understanding of sport and the media in contemporary Japan help shed novel light on debates about sport, media, and globalization. By reflecting on evidence from the Japanese experience, the article seeks to identify key themes for further analysis of the media and sport in Japan and other non-Western societies.

## **Episodes in the Growth of Mediasport in Japan**

Kelly (2000) has provided a sketch of the ways in which baseball’s growing popularity in modern Japan was tied to the emergence of powerful media companies. He draws attention especially to the connection between the newspaper and transport industries in the promotion of baseball in the late Meiji/early Taisho period. Kelly suggests that because sport exists amidst tensions between spontaneity

and regulation, doing and saying, and storytelling and statistical accounting, it lends itself to the forms and ambitions of the newspaper press, magazines, radio, and television. He argues that more research should focus on the work involved in producing sport as news and developing a historical framework within which to understand its development. This article is a contribution to that, although it goes beyond the time frame and the sports that form the focus of Kelly's article. In the next sections of the article we look at key episodes in the chronological development of the mass media and its coverage of sport in Japan to elaborate on these ideas. We begin with the press, then radio, and then television.

## The Press for Sport

"A catalytic force behind the popularisation of sport in Japan has been the media" (May, 1989, p. 184).

Westney (1987) has shown how the newspaper press in Japan emerged in the late Meiji period with the aim of establishing and expanding the market. Four features of its early development have continued to influence the Japanese press. First, unlike in other advanced nations, there have been two main centers of newspaper production — Tokyo and Osaka—in competition since the 1880s. Second, the national dailies have continued to publish two editions, a morning and an evening version, as part of the daily subscription (creating difficulties in making accurate comparisons of circulation with presses in other advanced societies). Third, there was a close linkage among newspapers, universities, and the educational elite. This helped ensure that certain sports and cultural activities would be covered and become established as part of Japanese popular culture. Fourth, but not distinctive to the Japanese newspaper industry, was the fact that mass circulation newspaper consumers bore only a fraction of the actual cost of production and distribution. Advertising revenue has been essential from the beginning of the modern print media to such an extent that it might be considered as a form of hidden subsidy to the capitalist press (Curran, 1980). In Japan in 1998, for example, sales accounted for just 52.1% of newspaper revenue, and advertising accounted for 34.4% (Foreign Press Center, 2000, p. 100). One hundred years ago, Meiji Japan, like Britain and the U.S., required the creation of a market for advertising, as well as newspapers or magazines. Sport played a role in this.

The *Yokohama Mainichi Shimbun*, which began publication in 1870, was the first recognizably modern Japanese language daily newspaper. In the next 15 years the newspaper industry took off in Japan. The *Yomiuri Shimbun*, first published in 1874, was the first paper to combine the features of the serious, "heavy" *oshimbun* with the more popular, "lighter" *koshimbun*. The *Yomiuri* signaled the birth of a "new journalism" in Japan that was less partisan, more information oriented, popular in style, and low priced. By 1879 a rival to *Yomiuri* in Osaka had emerged. The *Asahi Shimbun* managed to outstrip the circulation of all its Osaka newspaper rivals combined within two years (Westney, 1987, p. 165). By 1885 it was Japan's largest daily, with a circulation of 32,000 copies. *Yomiuri*, with a circulation of 15,450, was the biggest of the 16 Tokyo-based daily newspapers.

Westney (1987, pp. 161ff) outlines the ways that the nascent newspaper industry in Japan sought to expand. There were three main objectives: to increase consumer

awareness, to increase the frequency of consumption (and thus the reliance of the readers on the product), and to develop the distribution system (and thus increase the convenience with which people could make their purchase). The years 1886 to 1891 were the heyday of new journalism in Japan (Westney, pp. 177–180). The price, format, content, and language of the press changed. The *oshimbun*–*koshimbun* distinction virtually disappeared. It was an extremely volatile market in Tokyo, and the Osaka-based *Asahi* was able to acquire a Tokyo title to expand further in 1888. Marketing and distribution systems developed. The *Tokyo Asahi* began offering free rides on trams adorned with its banner. Attempts to develop the distribution system, however, could sometimes backfire. The *Tokyo Nichi Nichi Shimbun* established 10 brightly painted newspaper kiosks at key intersections in Tokyo but had to abandon them because too many people thought that they were public toilets (Westney, p. 163). Another of the ways to increase the readers' involvement with the paper was to establish funds for victims of disasters. Alternatively, running competitions with prizes and sponsoring musical or sporting events were seen as useful strategies. The *Osaka Mainichi* sponsored a five-mile swim in 1901 and the first Japanese marathon in 1906. Also in 1906 the *Yomiuri* began a sports column focusing on the rivalries between Tokyo's High School and College baseball teams. Papers began to compete to get the *sumo* results on the street first (Guttman & Thompson, 2001, pp. 73, 76, 88–9, 111, 134, 136; Westney, pp. 189–190).

Attempts to develop *oshimbun* into *koshimbun* involved the generation of, and reporting on, different forms of popular culture. There were debates in different newspapers in the late Meiji period about baseball. The specific vested interest in a sport was reflected in the news value attached to it by a particular newspaper. Coverage could veer between celebration of baseball and warnings against its adverse effects on public morals. These tensions were a matter of concern for national policymakers, as well as commercial newspaper interests. In the first decade of the 20th century, Leheny (2003, pp. 48–49) notes how the Japanese Ministry of Education initially raised concerns about the introduction of baseball into Japan. Amidst growing popularity in junior high and high schools and the rivalry between the Waseda and Keio Universities' teams, the *Tokyo Asahi Shimbun* ran a series of articles on "The Evil Effects of Baseball" (*yakyu sono gaidoku*) in August and September 1911 "based in large part on the results of a survey questionnaire distributed by the Ministry" (Leheny, p. 49). Baseball was considered to waste time, produce fatigue, lead to alcohol abuse, and generate unnatural motions such as pitching and hitting. By the mid-1920s, however, the financial success of baseball tournaments appeared to have created a shift in attitudes toward the game. In addition, two other attributes of the game—that it brought people together in pursuit of a common goal and that it was underpinned by a spirit of self-sacrifice—came to be viewed as positive features.

In efforts to become "national," and not just "political," newspapers "vied to sponsor sports tournaments and individual athletes and to expand their papers' sports coverage to report the very boom they were forming" (Kelly, 2000, p. 108). The *Asahi* and *Osaka Mainichi Shimbun* (founded in 1888) in conjunction with the Hanshin Railway Company helped pay for the construction costs of Koshien Stadium in Nishinomiya in time for the 10th Annual High School Baseball Championships in 1924. Hence, as Kelly (p. 109) notes, Koshien fever "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.” This not only affected baseball but also swimming, footraces, and track and field (Manzenreiter, 1999).

The Great Kanto Earthquake of September 1, 1923, greatly disrupted the Tokyo press, while Osaka-based newspapers, especially the *Asahi Shimbun* and the *Mainichi Shimbun*, prospered. By January 1924 both Osaka-based titles had daily circulations over 1 million. During the 1920s the mass-circulation dailies and the companies producing them strengthened their grip on their market share through consolidation by absorbing smaller publications. The military government assisted this process by promoting the merger of newspapers on economic and control grounds (Hunter, 1984, p. 145). The Tokyo title that maintained its position vis-à-vis its Osaka rivals was the *Yomiuri Shimbun*, edited by Shoriki Matsutaro. Under his editorship it was the *Yomiuri* that established the first professional baseball team in Japan and laid the foundation for the first Japanese Baseball League in the mid-1930s (Manzenreiter, 1999, p. 6).

Newspaper coverage in the late 1920s and in the 1930s suggests that baseball was overwhelmingly the most popular Western-inspired sport in Japan, followed by track and field and swimming (Low, 1999, p. 35). These latter sports were mainly introduced to the reading public through press and magazine coverage of events such as the Far Eastern Games. Held every two years from 1913 to 1927 and every four years from 1930 to the present, countries participating in the games included China, the Philippines, and Japan. According to Low (p. 35), magazines like *Asahi Sports* presented the competitions to Japanese readers as “a concrete example of Asian solidarity.” The proposal to host the Olympics in Tokyo in 1940 is another indication that the Japanese government made extensive use of sports and culture during the 1930s in pursuit of national interests—to become the “sports center of the orient.”

After 1945 there were many technological and distribution changes in the newspaper industry. Circulation of papers specializing in sports and entertainment increased. For example, *Nikkan Supotsu* (Nikkan Sports) began in 1946, and by 1964 it had a circulation of one-and-a-half million daily, as well as six new rivals. In terms of newspaper circulation per capita, today Japan is second in the world only to Norway. In 1998 total newspaper circulation in Japan was recorded as 72.41 million copies compared with 56.73 million in the U.S., 25.04 million in Germany, and 18.45 million in the U.K. (Foreign Press Center, 2000, p. 101). Circulation of sports papers appears to have offset the decline in general newspaper circulation figures. In 1999 there were 108 daily newspapers, 5 national dailies, and 3 regional dailies, each with morning and evening editions (see Table 1), as well as 11 sports newspapers, many with circulations over 1 million a day.

The print media and the press and consumer magazines demonstrate clearly one of the ways in which sport has always been connected to wider commercial relations, and in the last two decades of the 20th century, how it has become a part of a leisure-entertainment consumer culture. Whereas some magazines attempt to cater to general sports fans, the number of different subcultures of sports fans is reflected in the variety of sport titles. Magazines and newspapers have assisted in the production and reproduction of sport and leisure cultures. Magazines can deliver market segments that would otherwise be difficult for advertisers to reach—especially if the desired target audience does not watch much television

**Table 1 Circulation Figures of the Big Five National Daily Newspapers in Japan (2003)**

Newspaper	Circulation (in thousands)	
	Morning edition	Evening edition
Yomiuri Shimbun	10,077	4,004
Asahi Shimbun	8,285	3,950
Mainichi Shimbun	3,957	1,655
Nihon Keizai Shimbun	3,009	1,633
Sankei Shimbun	2,086	637

Note. Source: *Asahi Shimbun* (2003), p. 239.

or read newspapers on a regular basis. As Sparks (1992) has shown, mediasport is particularly useful for “delivering the male”: 18- to 49-year-old men with disposable income. Yet the market for commercial magazines, and alternatives such as manga in Japan, has also been shaped by the distinctive nature of the newspaper and broadcasting industry, which we shall consider next.<sup>2</sup>

### Broadcasting Sport

“In seeking to understand Japanese broadcasting, it is important to remember the dual structure (NHK [*Nippon Hoso Kyokai*] and commercial broadcasters) and the broadcasters’ linkages with the print newspapers.” (Foreign Press Center, 1997, p. 54)

Broadcasting in Japan, like the newspaper industry and sport, has been steered by both the state and business interests. Experimental “wireless telephony” broadcasts were first carried out in 1905, but public broadcasting developed in Japan two decades later. Radio transmissions began in the three main cities of Tokyo, Osaka, and Nagoya in 1925 in March, June, and July, respectively. Before 1945 broadcasting was regulated and controlled by the government. The three private radio companies were combined to form the Nippon Hoso Kyokai (NHK, or Japan Broadcasting Association) in August 1926. Radio broadcasts covered an increasingly wide area “as new regions (e.g., Korea, Taiwan, and much of China) were brought under Japanese control” (Foreign Press Center, 1997, p. 52). The Japanese media system has thus combined aspects of both the U.S. and the U.K. traditions. A distinctive feature of Japanese broadcasting, however, has been the linkage between broadcasters and newspapers. Local stations have been affiliated with local newspapers and national networks with national daily newspapers. Thus TBS is affiliated with *Mainichi*, Fuji TV with *Sankei*, Nippon TV with *Yomiuri*, TV Asahi with *Asahi*, and TV Tokyo with *Nikkei*; all are primarily Tokyo based.

Whereas newspapers organized sports events and tournaments, radio transmissions of live and recorded sports, especially baseball commentaries, helped the sale

of radio sets from 1929 onward. Along with the press coverage, radio broadcasts from the 1932 Los Angeles Summer Olympics, relayed as “live” in “real time,” helped to stimulate national enthusiasm for Japanese achievements at the Games. When Japan took all three medals in the 100 m backstroke, the radio announcer cried, “Japan beats the world. Japan banzai” (Sakaue, 1998, p. 179). For the Berlin Olympics there were actual live radio transmissions. Interest in the Games was heightened by the announcement that Tokyo would host the 1940 Olympiad, and the number of radio licenses doubled between the 1932 Games and 1940 (Sakaue, pp. 212–213). As early as 1928, NHK began to broadcast *rajio taiso* (radio gymnastics) on a daily basis. This was modeled on an American radio show sponsored by an insurance company that broadcast callisthenic exercises set to music (Horne, 2000; Kasza, 1988, pp. 259–260). In 1936 the Japanese central news agency came under the control of the military. The following year all news became subject to military approval. After the Pacific War a blend of the U.S. and European systems of commercial and public-funded broadcasting emerged. The NHK was renamed the Japan Broadcasting Corporation in recognition of its status as a public, rather than fully commercial, corporation. A license fee was levied for listeners (and later viewers) of NHK broadcasts.

Some might argue that radio’s golden age was the years of economic recovery after 1945. Like the commercial press, it played a role in the creation and reporting of popular culture. In 1946, for example, NHK launched *nodojiman shirotu ongakukai* (amateur singing contest), which some consider the forerunner of karaoke. In 1951 sixteen commercial radio stations were issued broadcast licenses. The growth of TV, however, soon led to a decline in the audience for radio, although technological advances such as stereo broadcasts and transistors have brought some of that audience back.

## Fields in Vision: Television and Sport

In the early period of television broadcasts, the audience tended to be attracted by “spectaculars,” and so on-the-spot telecasts of sports, social events and plays were popular. (Shimizu, 1983, p. 124)

Television broadcasts took place in Japan on May 13, 1937. Toshiba and NEC manufactured the first receivers and it was anticipated that the Tokyo Olympics, scheduled for 1940, would also be televised. The Olympic Games were not only a celebration but also a stimulus for further technological development. Other national events and exhibitions were planned to showcase Japanese television technology (Low, 1999, p. 40). Transportation also received a stimulus because the first bullet super-express train was running in Manchukuo by 1939. As Low (p. 41) notes, the “early attempts to develop television (communications) and the very real expansion of railways (mass transportation) were part of attempts to establish in Japan the ‘modern apparatus of circulation.’” With the continuing fighting in China and the imminent outbreak of the Pacific War in the 1940s, however, the Olympic Games were cancelled.

The cost of owning a television was prohibitive for all but a few until the late 1950s. “The rise of television parallels Japan’s recovery from the devastation of war and its strong economic growth” (Foreign Press Center, 1997, p. 54). On February

1 in 1953 NHK resumed broadcasting in Tokyo, and on August 28 of that year Nippon TV (NTV), a subsidiary of *Yomiuri*, went on the air. This started the trend in Japan for commercial TV stations to be funded by newspaper companies. In 1953, however, there were only 866 TV receivers, all in Tokyo. The ownership pattern illustrates a distinctive feature of the early days of TV in Japan (see Table 2).

Many retail establishments such as coffee shops, restaurants, bars, and furniture shops owned TVs and surcharged customers when the television was showing sports or other popular programs. In a more direct sales pitch, NTV had dozens of large television receivers imported from the U.S. and placed outside at strategic street corners, parks, railway terminals, and other places of public gathering. In October 1953 the following scene was described in one newspaper (Kato, 1995, p. 290):

More than 20,000 people gathered in front of a street television to watch a live broadcast of a boxing title fight Sirai vs. Allen. The crowd was such that trams were halted. Automobiles were unable to move. Taxi drivers abandoned their cars to watch the match. Spectators who had climbed trees to get a better view fell and were injured. In a neighborhood residence 20 people fell from a balcony which collapsed under the weight of house guests.

By March 1954 there were 16,000 TV sets in commercial establishments alone. Lee Thompson (1986, p. 69) reports similar scenes of mayhem when, in 1954, Osaka NHK broadcast professional wrestling live for the first time. Thompson (pp. 67–69) notes that the popularity of wrestling was recorded in several surveys of viewers throughout the 1950s and early 1960s. Major studies of TV viewing carried out by Dentsu advertising agency in November 1957 and May 1961 found wrestling to be the most popular television program.

In 1957 Nippon TV (NTV) had started showing *Faitoman Awa* (“Fightman Hour”) at 5 p.m. every Saturday evening sponsored by Mitsubishi (Whiting, 2000,

**Table 2** Distribution of TV Receivers ( $N = 866$ ) in Japan in 1953

Location	<i>n</i>
Electric retail shops	303
Business executives	249
Other retail shops	76
Government agencies and private firms	61
Retired people	33
Hotels and restaurants	28
Students	28
Schools and museums	11
Agriculture	9
Other	15
Not identified	53

*Note.* Source: Kato (1995)0, p. 289.

pp. 48ff). The *Mainichi Shimbun* sponsored professional wrestling, as well as the *Mainichi Cup*. The *Mainichi* gave considerable coverage to it, as did the evening daily *Tokyo Sports*, whereas the *Asahi Shimbun* gave virtually none, often instead drawing attention to the dangers of the sport. Whiting (p. 86) provides a good illustration of the dominance of commercial sports news values in constructing meaningfulness:

Kodama bought and ran the evening daily *Tokyo Sports*, which he turned into a bible of pro wrestling, devoting the bulk of the coverage to Rikidozan and creating an emotion-filled vehicle for unifying emerging Japanese nationalism, which of course was necessary to the effort to fight communism.

The message of professional wrestling was clearly nationalistic as Thompson (1986, pp. 71ff) has observed. Yet it was also the fact that wrestling suited television because it was easy to understand, had “a built in dramatic element and therefore was easily handled by the relatively primitive technology of early television” (Thompson, p. 75). Whiting (2000, p. 55) reports one of his Tokyo-born interviewees describing the impact of “the Riki effect” on her father:

My father was an engineer. He was highly intelligent and liked intellectual TV shows: professorial debates on NHK, lectures on science, and so forth. He liked to discuss German philosophy: Goethe, Hegel, and others. He was very serious minded and looked down on things that weren’t intellectual. But he became another person when professional wrestling came on, especially Japanese versus American. Something came over him. He would shoot his fist in the air, yell, jump up and down, and get all excited. It was really strange. I could never understand why an intelligent person like him could watch Rikidozan so much. To him, I guess Riki was like Robin Hood.

By 1958, alongside NHK, there was an educational channel, NTV, as well as an additional 6 commercial TV stations. There were 1 million TV license holders. In November that year it was announced that a Royal wedding would take place on April 10, 1959. This led to an intensive advertising campaign by TV manufacturers to get people to watch it on TV. The “must have” consumer durables of the late 1950s in Japan were a washing machine, a refrigerator, and a black and white television set. Two million sets were sold during the year. By 1959, revenue from television advertising had overtaken revenue from commercial radio advertising (Shimizu, 1983, p. 128). Shortly after the 1959 “Michi boom,” named after the newly married Princess Michiko, the International Olympic Committee announced from its meeting in Munich that Tokyo would host the 1964 Olympics. As Kato (1995, p. 292) remarks, “If royal wedding fever was type A flu, type B was the Tokyo Olympiad.” The Olympics decision gave TV manufacturers a 5-year lead time to promote TV sales even further. By 1962 the number of license holders had risen to 10 million. By September 1964 color was also available. Hence, in the 1960s a color TV set joined air conditioning and an automobile as the “must have” commodities in Japan.

The Tokyo Olympics (October 10–24, 1964) were the biggest Olympic Games ever to be staged at the time. Ninety-four countries took part represented by 5,586 athletes. The Olympic Games provide spectators with the opportunity to enjoy

athletic performances but also with significant opportunities for representation and display. As Tomlinson (1996, p. 586) remarks, each Games provides a case study of “event management, civic boosterism, national pride, cultural identity and media sport.” By 1964, nine out of ten households had a TV set, and 65 million (or 84.7 per cent of the Japanese population) watched the opening ceremony on TV. The finals of the Women’s Volleyball competition, with Japan against the Soviet Union, attracted a 92.4 per cent rating (Sakonju, 2001, p. 19). The Olympics clearly stimulated demand for TV in Japan. Sport was confirmed as a form of TV content that could attract high ratings. The number of TV licenses expanded to 20 million in 1967 (Shimizu, 1983, p. 128). TV also helped promote sport sponsorship by companies—Hitachi Ltd, Matsushita, and Toshiba all established volleyball teams after 1964. At the same time other media coverage, such as “Tokyo Olympiad,” the film of the event produced by Ichikawa Kon, helped frame the moment and portray Japanese national identity in a new light. As one observer wrote, “The Tokyo Olympics were an opportunity to extend television throughout Japan. When they were over, television and sports events had forged an unbreakable bond” (cited in Guttman and Thompson, 2001, p. 200).

Several distinctive features of the conventions of sports coverage in Japan since the Tokyo Olympics reveal a shift in the broader cultural perception of sport and physical culture more generally. Spielvogel (2003) argues that, since the 1960s, there has been a shift from treating sport as a part of educational training to seeing it as part of personal consumption. During the 1964 Tokyo Marathon, a technological first was achieved when the whole race was televised live (Sone, 2002, pp. 113–114). Unfortunately for the Japanese viewers, the Japanese runner was always behind the leader and, owing to the limited technical equipment, was rarely seen until the end of the race (he achieved a bronze medal). Baseball matches have routinely been televised in a truncated form—beginning at a set time and ending equally abruptly without any regard to the scores or positions of the teams (Uozumi, 2001b). When World Cup football (soccer) was first televised, it was in the format of a weekly 45-min program, “Diamond Soccer.” This program took “the audacious step of showing the first half one weekend and the second half the next” (Sone, 2003, p. 170). This meant that the broadcaster (TV Tokyo) managed to show every match of the 1970 World Cup, even if the viewer had to wait patiently for the result. Finally, Spielvogel (2003) confirms that television has played a central role in the dissemination of ideas about exercise to people of all ages in Japan. Early morning light exercise and stretch programs derived from earlier radio traditions (Horne, 2000) gave way in the 1980s to the more eroticized and sexualized TV program “Aerobicize,” imported from the United States during the aerobics boom.

## **Sport, Television, and New Media in Contemporary Japan**

Since the 1980s, media deregulation and reregulation has occurred in Japan just as it has in the other advanced capitalist countries. Japanese TV companies have attempted to expand their interests and foreign companies, such as Time-Warner, U.S. West, TCI, and News Corporation, have teamed up with them. Sport has played a significant role in developments in the mass media that have occurred since the spread of these neoliberal policies in the 1980s. Developments have included the

limitation of cross-media ownership regulations, the reduction of public-sector broadcasting budgets, the opening up of terrestrial TV to international capital, and criticism of public service broadcasting as elitist and inefficient. Sport has been central to these developments because it provides relatively cheap content for filling hours of TV and is attractive enough to some viewers to entice them to purchase new technologies, such as digital TV (Miller, 1999). Table 3 outlines the most popular sports on TV in Japan in the mid-1990s. It has become a challenge for these domestic events to hold their audience in the past decade given the popularity of international sports transmissions.

As mediated events, baseball, soccer, and other sports have been used as a battering ram by Rupert Murdoch as part of a commercial strategy of consolidation and horizontal integration (see Murdoch's 1996 address to the AGM of News Corporation quoted in Cashmore, 2002, p. 64). Murdoch's News International Corporation arguably devoted more energy to dominating global television sport in the 1990s than any of the other leading media corporations (see Cashmore, 2000, pp. 292–293; Andrews, 2004). In 1997, with the launch of the Japan Sky Broadcasting Company (a joint venture between Murdoch's News Corporation and Softbank Corporation run by Son Masayoshi), exclusive, live, English Football Association Premier League games from BSkyB, Murdoch's British satellite television company, were made available to Japanese subscribers. After 1998 the renamed SkyPerfectTV competed with several other satellite companies operating digital television in Japan. The adoption of digital TV promised an even bigger expanse of sports channels offering live matches and time-delayed recordings (i.e., "as if live") from the major European and South American associations and rugby football leagues.

**Table 3 The 10 Most Popular Sports Events on Japanese Television (1998)**

Sport	TV Viewing Rate (%)*
Professional baseball	14.3
High school baseball	4.1
Marathon/ekiden**	3.8
J.League (pro soccer)	3.7
Horseracing	2.3
Professional golf	2.2
Youth soccer	1.3
Youth baseball	0.9
University rugby	0.8
V.League (volleyball)	0.8

*Note.* Source: Shogo & Murray (2002), pp.122-123.

\*According to Video Research, the company that produces the data, a viewing rate of one percentage point equals 1.2 million viewers; \*\*Ekiden is a long-distance relay form of marathon running.

Consumption is at the heart of economics and culture in late capitalism, and, since the 1980s, sports have become a staple product of the commercialized leisure economy in Japan. Consequently, although the launch of the professional soccer J.League in Japan in 1993 was viewed as a risk, in its first year more than US\$300 million worth of items were sold for Sony Creative Products, 1 million new subscribers joined one of the J.League sponsors, Fuji Bank, and snack food manufacturers sold millions of items related to the J.League (Stoddart, 1997, p. 95). An important test for the J.League up to, and perhaps especially since, the 2002 World Cup, has been to match the quality of imported, televised, soccer action from the major leagues in Europe and South America. Involvement of the Japanese national soccer team in the Football World Cup Finals in 1998 also generated considerable consumer demand for the new digital television receivers and video recorders with satellite tuners. NHK estimated that new subscribers to its satellite broadcasting service grew by 60% in June 1998.

Through the J.League, the increasing success of the Japanese national soccer team, and Japan's co-hosting of the 2002 World Cup Finals with Korea, soccer as a television spectacle has become part of Japanese popular culture. The Soccer World Cup qualifying match between Japan and Iran in November 1997, for example, attracted a 50% television viewer rating. Japan's qualification for the World Cup Finals held in France in 1998 brought an increase in media attention and, not surprisingly, television audiences for the actual Finals were high. Japan's matches against Argentina and Croatia had audience ratings over 60%—the highest for any sporting event in the 1990s and the sixth highest recorded since television program ratings began in Japan in 1962. This was capped during the 2002 finals when a 66.1% rating (including a peak of 81.9%) was recorded during the qualifying-round match between Japan and Russia; the audience for this event was second only to the TV audience for the women's volleyball triumph at the 1964 Olympic Games.

Interest in sport outside of Japan—especially Major League Baseball (MLB)—has also risen impressively in the 1990s as a result of the increasing numbers of Japanese players playing in the majors. Sports tourism, or more precisely, baseball tourism, has grown since Suzuki Ichiro joined the Seattle Mariners. Once again television companies have been seizing the opportunities. NHK began to broadcast the Mariners' games by satellite, and subscriptions to the NHK broadcasting service grew by nearly 50,000 in April 2001 alone. As NHK's associate director, Nagato Koichiro, stated, "We're expecting MLB programming to be the killer content that leads to the diffusion of satellite services" (quoted in *Uozumi*, 2001a, p. 8). Sport in Japan, as elsewhere, has increasingly been used by television companies as relatively cheap content with which to attract, maintain, or readjust audience consumption patterns.

Brian Stoddart (1997) argued in the 1990s that the mass media's role in the globalization of sport could not only affect how people consume sport "but also the forms of revenue raising in which sports themselves are involved, ranging across merchandising, sponsorship, viewing, fan idolatry and news dissemination" (Stoddart, p. 94). He argued that because of media convergence—the merger of TV, computer, and telephone services to provide a wider range of delivery and merchandising services—consumers might also challenge the alliance of sport and TV. From the point of view of the producer/provider this is a more targeted form of communication, but from that of the consumer it offers the possibility of greater

control over selection. Stoddart argued that on-line sports-data services create the possibility for a subculture of sports fans to engage in “a postmodern version of spectatorship and fan affiliation . . . which offers a curious form of resistance to the mediated forms of information and attitudes fed to fans by mainline information sources” (Stoddart, p. 96).

Stoddart posed a number of questions pertinent to this discussion of sport and the media in Japan. Are sport consumers in Japan caught between twin processes of “Murdochization” and “Microsoft-ization,” or has the Net provided “a redress in balance in favour of the fan?” (Stoddart, 1997, p. 101). In either case, can indigenous sports in Japan “survive the onslaught of globalized sports?” (Stoddart, p. 101). Stoddart proposed two scenarios. In the first, the sports consumer/viewer faced a tightly controlled product market, and, in the example provided, IMG recoups money at all stages of the sporting event. In the second scenario, the internet offers much greater potential for an alternative sports communication system to develop (see Table 4).

How applicable are these scenarios to Japan? There are 42 million TV households in contemporary Japan. A substantial and growing number of them access TV through satellite or cable (*Asahi Shimbun*, 2003, p. 241–2). The number of Japanese internet users has been relatively small compared with other advanced capitalist countries. Although only 18.3 million Japanese people, or 14% of the population, were online in 2000—about half the proportion of users in the U.S. (Watts, 2000)—the rate of growth is steadier and faster than in the U.S. (on Japanese cybercultures see Gottlieb & McLelland, 2003). In this context, however, Bell and McNeill (1999) argue that the Japanese government-sponsored policy of “informationalization” and private sector efforts at “multimediatization” have been driven more by the needs of Japanese capital to increase profit accumulation during the “Heisei recession” rather than novel forms of collective reflexivity (Lash & Urry, 1994).

Therefore, although Stoddart’s “BI” (before internet) scenario might be considered more applicable to Japan, it is increasingly likely that the internet will

**Table 4 Two Convergence Scenarios for Media Development in Japan**

Scenarios	Characteristics
BI (before internet)	Sports consumers trapped by producers (unknowingly for the most part) and by sports and mediators (e.g., Mark McCormack and IMG involvement in golf and tennis: own players, organizes tournaments, holds TV rights).
AI (after internet)	Sports consumers have the potential to go to other sources of information; some major old-media players attempt to connect to online development, but so, too do the new media, especially telephone companies.

Note. Source: Stoddart (1997), pp. 99–100.

have an impact on the establishment of official and unofficial groups and “cyber-subcultures.” In the 1990s the publicity value of team sponsorship has also fallen in Japan. The internationalization of sport has spread to Japan, as we have seen, and the domestic media cover international sports—U.S. MLB, NBA Basketball, NFL Football, and European Champions’ League soccer—as much as, and often in preference to, domestic sports competitions. Despite cohosting the 2002 Soccer World Cup, media attention since then has increasingly focused more on the exploits of home grown and foreign international stars of the sport (Nakata, Inamoto, Beckham) than the domestic professional soccer J.League. The same has occurred in baseball in which organized visits to the U.S. to see Japanese players in the MLB are complemented by magazine and newspaper coverage and television broadcasts of Japanese players in the majors. This can be seen as part of what Whitson (1998, p. 66) describes as the “delocalization” of sport in which there is a gradual “detachment of professional sports from loyalties and meanings based in place, and a normalization of the discourses of personal and consumer choice.”

These processes do not go unchallenged. For example, some commentators compared Murdoch’s acquisition of a 21.4% stake in TV Asahi in December 1996 to Commander Perry’s “Black ships” of the pre-Meiji era.<sup>3</sup> Although Murdoch became the first foreign investor to overcome the prohibitions on foreign ownership of Japanese broadcasting companies, he subsequently had to sell it back when it became clear that he could not place any News Corporation executives on the Asahi board (Bell & McNeill, 1999, p. 776). In 8 years of operating in Japan, SkyPerfectTV has not (yet) made a profit—and the costs of securing exclusive coverage of the 64 matches in the 2002 soccer World Cup Finals ensured that it would not do so for several years. Murdoch eventually sold News Corporation’s stake in it in August 2003 (Lawson, 2003).

## Conclusions

From a production-of-consumption perspective, what has caused the increased media interest in sports programming cannot simply be greater free time or the sudden growth of a widespread interest in sport. Increasing commercial pressure on television companies, the cost benefits of sport vis-à-vis other TV shows (drama, documentaries, etc.), and the development of new, and competing, media including video, cable, satellite, digital, internet, and mobile phones have all been responsible for the search for a relatively low cost means of attracting, adjusting, or maintaining audiences (Miller, 1999). The mediation of sport, however, also needs to be understood in specific political, economic, and ideological contexts, such as the specific trajectories of and developments in the relationship between the media and sport in nonwestern societies (Curran & Park, 2000).

In the case of television in contemporary Asian societies in general, the recent experience has been one of economic growth and neoliberal-influenced economic strategies in the midst of attempts to retain national distinctiveness through state regulation (French & Richards, 2000). The mass media, as technologies and cultural forms, have become central to the production and circulation of the sociocultural meanings of sport and leisure cultures in contemporary Asian societies. In the case of Japan, in the late Meiji/early Taisho period (approximately between 1890 and 1921), baseball offered a message about the successful merger of Japanese spirit

and western technique. The adoption of association football in Japan and the successes of Japanese baseball players in the MLB in the Heisei period of the late 20th and early 21st century (1989 onwards) might represent the internationalization of Japan. Yet exactly what *internationalization* means in the Japanese context is still open to debate (Robertson, 1997). It is not sufficient merely to focus on identities, images, or the reception of textual meanings alone. It is also necessary to consider the way in which the political economy of mass media leads to the valorization of particular cultural goods at particular moments. The production of meaning is also the exercise of socioeconomic power.

This article has provided a sketch of the development of sport and the mass media in Japan, a country whose practices continue to be little understood and even now are subject to stereotyping in the English-language press and media generally (Hammond, 1997). It has focused on the way that sport has been used as an economic commodity within the political economy of the media. It has provided data that can be contrasted with histories of the development of mediasport in other advanced capitalist economies. It has drawn attention to the need for specific attention to be paid to the development of the regulatory frameworks within which the mass media develop in different economies. It is hoped that, like other recent studies, this article will stimulate research projects that relate the specifics of local development to the global shifts in the significance of sport (see Palmer, 2001). In addition, a number of key themes for future research can be identified. First, more research into the ideological power of sport in generating “imagined communities” in Asian audio-visual space is required. Second, the dialectic between agents and structures in Japan needs to be considered. Third, the form and content of mediasport in Japan in the age of new media needs close attention. In Japan this is marked by a battle for control of television by increasingly transnational commercial enterprises. Finally, Japan’s position in Asia as a hegemonic sports and cultural power needs to be explored (Iwabuchi, 2002a, 2002b). This position is volatile and subject to change, which reflects the capitalist dynamics that increasingly shape the relationship between sport and the mass media in Asia as in most other parts of the world.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Of course “the media” are neither limited to the coverage of professional sport nor to print and broadcasting, and the values of society embodied in sport are often played out in a number of

different sites of expression and consumption—including comics, sports movies, and TV dramas. One well-known example from Japan is *manga* (comics). Schodt (1983, pp. 69ff) has shown how stories from the early 1950s focusing on kendo, judo, baseball, boxing, and wrestling were the means by which “samurai stories,” which were found in prewar comics and expressed the “bushido” (warrior) ethic, were revived in manga. In a different era, women’s manga expanded in the late 1960s to include not just melodramatic plots but also stories about volleyball, tennis, and other sports. As Schodt (1983, p. 98) notes, for example, the story “Attack No.1,” first published in 1968 in Shueisha’s comic *Margaret*, “reflected the tremendous boom in women’s athletics that occurred in real life after Japan won the gold medal in volleyball in the 1964 Olympics.” Full discussion of these media is beyond the scope of this article.

<sup>2</sup>It is not possible to consider sports magazines in this article, but for information on the men’s and women’s magazines market in general in Japan see Tanaka, 1998 & 2003.

<sup>3</sup>For approximately 250 years prior to 1853, the Japanese shogunate had operated a policy of exclusion of foreign influence, especially Christianity. “Black Ships” was the name given to the United States naval fleet commanded by Commodore Matthew Perry that arrived in Japanese waters in July 1853 and demanded that Japan open its borders for trade and to assist foreign sailors in need. Guttmann and Thompson (2001) offer a glimpse of preindustrial sports and physical activities in Japan.