

Implications of the 2020 Tokyo Olympics for Sports in Japan

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What Evolved from the Tokyo Olympics of 1964?

The 2020 Olympic Games will be held in Tokyo, the second time the Japanese capital has hosted the event. What did the first Tokyo Olympics in 1964 achieve for Japan? A brief retrospect may be useful in considering the possible impact of the forthcoming Games.

First of all, preparations for the 1964 Olympics resulted in the construction of important social infrastructure for transportation, including the Tokyo-Nagoya expressway, the Tokyo Metropolitan Circular Highway and the Tokaido Shinkansen high-speed railway. The implicit primary goal, however, was to promote Japan to the rest of the world as a nation that had dramatically recovered from its defeat and destruction in World War II, and this goal was ingeniously realized. Before the opening of the Olympics in 1964, even basic infrastructure such as a sewage system was not well developed in Tokyo. Most of the toilets in those days were simple pit toilets. At that time the Japanese thought they should not reveal any aspect of an underdeveloped country to visitors coming to the Olympics from all over the world. Most Japanese are easily motivated by such reasoning to support reforms, because they worry about what the rest of the world will think of them and want to be considered the best, so will always strive to achieve such results.

So the whole nation concentrated on avoiding the potential shame of being revealed in any way as an underdeveloped nation, with the result that Tokyo was drastically changed by the rapid construction of numerous new buildings and social infrastructures. These efforts paid off. With the success of the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, Western nations started to see Japan differently, and this change of attitude was reflected in the sales of Japanese industrial goods. “Good quality” began to be the principal image of a product made in Japan, replacing the earlier image of “cheap and bad quality”.

The creation of such key infrastructures became the basis for turning the nation toward urbanization and industrialization in earnest, quite apart from its transformation in appearance. Tokyo had become the center of the national economy and began attracting workers from all regions. Some other big cities became somewhat similar to Tokyo in this respect and thus local cultures began to diminish. The whole nation started to become unified in reconstructing itself as an economic superpower. Such an energetic national movement continued until the bubble economy began to burst in the late 1980s. It is therefore possible to regard the Tokyo Olympics of 1964 as the original source of the bubble economy in Japan. It was the first time a nation had used a big international sports event to kickstart the creation of social infrastructures and economic prosperity. In this sense, the 1964 Olympics turned a global sports event into an

economic event for the host nation, rather like the Nazis turned the 1936 Berlin Olympics into a political event in Germany.

But economic development and prosperity, the key outcomes of the 1964 Olympics, could lead to the environmental destruction of a nation if pursued as its only goal. Today, it is a key question how we should cope with the issue of the global environment in hosting the Olympics. This issue will be at the center of Tokyo’s preparations to host the 2020 Games and how to deal with it will be one of the keys to the success of the growth strategy of “Abenomics”.

Another important consequence of the 1964 Olympics was the emergence of new broadcasting technologies such as simultaneous satellite broadcasting and slow-motion replays. These significantly promoted “industrialization based upon technology” and also had an enormous influence on sports and sports-related business. One of the attractive things about sports is that each event is unique and cannot be replicated by any other. The athletes play by established rules but no single moment of action is exactly the same. Capturing the simultaneity of each moment ensures its value, and simultaneous satellite broadcasting made this possible on a global scale. In the previous year, experimental satellite broadcasting captured the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, enabling Japanese people as well as Americans to witness that tragedy simultaneously.

Although such simultaneity is key to enjoying watching sports, the speed of the best professional athletes nonetheless requires a high degree of alertness from viewers to apprehend the quality of their performance. At the Sydney Olympic in 2000, Japanese judoka Shinichi Shinohara was controversially defeated by Frenchman David Douillet in the 100+ kilogram men’s final. That result was a misjudgment that shows even a well-experienced judge can be wrong. Slow-motion replays came into existence in order to minimize such misjudgments and to enhance viewers’ enjoyment of sports. Enabling people worldwide to observe an athlete’s physical performance in detail through slow-motion replays was made possible by television broadcasting on a global scale. Having replaced radio by such means as the dominant form of broadcasting, TV began to play a key role in promoting sports and since the 1970s it has also played a pivotal role among the media in promoting conspicuous mass consumption. Thus, the 1964 Olympics initiated a mutually beneficial relationship between sports and TV in Japan.

As many countries achieved independence in the postwar period, the number of members of the United Nations and International Olympic Committee (IOC) rapidly increased. The growing number of participating nations in the Olympics brought about a significant increase in the cost of its organization. At the 1976 Montreal Olympics, this increase in costs provoked the financial collapse of the

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IOC itself, and this financial instability was not resolved until the 1984 Los Angeles Olympic. To achieve this, then IOC Chairman Peter Ueberroth adopted a management strategy of commercializing the Olympics that took full advantage of the power of TV to stimulate consumption. His strategy later led to the creation of a new business field called “sports marketing”.

What Can Japanese Expect from the Tokyo Olympics of 2020?

I believe that the Tokyo Olympics offer Japan a good opportunity to create a new perception of sports in the country. In Japan, we traditionally never had a concept of sports that was based on a Western context. For example, we have a national “Day of Physical Education” on Oct. 1, a holiday commemorating the date of the opening ceremony of the 1964 Tokyo Olympics. But the Olympics are a festival of sports, not a festival of physical education. The Sports Promotion Act was suddenly created in 1961 as a temporary measure when it was decided that Tokyo would host the 1964 Olympics, but no single law for sports had ever existed until then. This temporary law was proposed because the lack of laws relating to sports could have been viewed by other countries a sign of Japan’s backwardness, and it clearly stated that a basic law on sports, defining the essence of sports to be promoted permanently, would be adopted at a later date.

Yet it was only in 2011 that this prescription was realized. For half a century Japan had only a provisional law relating to sports. This reveals Japan’s weakness in accommodation of “software”, while it has a significant strength in its capacity to create “hardware” such as highways or super-expressways that are visible and tangible infrastructures. The Japanese National Stadium, which opened in 1958, served as the main stadium for the Tokyo Olympics in 1964 and will be redeveloped for the 2020 Olympics. But this stadium is still designated as “a temporary structure” as an exception to the Natural Parks Law. This problem will be resolved soon in preparation for 2020, but Japan needs to have a clearer concept of “sports” in order to promote the forthcoming Olympics.

At the 2014 World Cup in Brazil in June, the Japanese football team was soon eliminated. In reality, the World Cup is a kind of battleground of nationalism. People are passionate about their countries, since almost all of humankind belong to one of the many nation states that comprise the world. Compared to the supporters of some other countries, though, the Japanese did not appear to be overtly nationalistic and seemed to accept their team’s defeat without much fuss, even cleaning up the litter in the stadiums while concealing their disappointment — respectable behavior that drew

some media attention around the world. But there is a difference between supporters and the team. Modesty and politeness may be well respected, but if these characteristics result in a “lack of aggressiveness” in matches, it would merely invite defeat. So how can this be avoided? If Japanese teams and supporters become more aggressive, their modesty and politeness may be to some extent reduced.

Perhaps Japan will become one of the few countries that can change the way nationalism is expressed in sports and thereby create a new sports philosophy for the 21st century. The 2020 Olympics could be an ideal opportunity for the Japanese to present to the world a less aggressive kind of nationalism. This is no easy task and cannot be achieved spontaneously. It would need great determination and the optimum strategies. One of them should be education about sports.

In talking about education, it will be important to reflect upon the lessons of the Tohoku disaster in 2011. It is generally agreed that the myth of Japan being a safe country was exposed by this disaster. For some while afterwards, the disaster was often referred to as “man-made”. But even though the real causes have still not been resolved, we do not hear these days about the risk of “man-made” disasters. Three years on, we hardly talk about this “man-made” disaster and people seem to have become less conscious of such risks. This is the essence of the very problem that caused the disaster.

In considering such risks, the government of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has been pursuing a policy of achieving “national resilience” to make Japan better prepared for disasters, along with the structural reform policies aimed at strengthening Japan’s competitiveness. This is to enhance our capacity for risk management, namely “detecting the probability of a risk”, “lowering the risk” and “being well prepared for a disaster”. Given that Japan is a country of natural disasters, this policy of being well prepared has a high priority.

The government is maintaining a 10 trillion yen budget for the next five years (2 trillion yen for each year) to achieve such resilience. This is an extraordinary sum, most of which will be assigned to expanding facilities to protect the nation against tsunami and other threats. But the government is also aware of the importance of software. Accommodating institutions through laws and regulations or human resources development for risk management will also be crucial to achieving resilience.

A capacity for resilience should be considered vital to the development of risk management, and I believe it should have two aspects. One is the knowledge and established methodology necessary to cope with risks as they actually happen. But the other is the more important core issue, in talking about man-made disasters, of the determination or courage to use that knowledge.

What is “courage”? It is easy to define: “a readiness to do what has to be done”. There is an ancient saying in Japan — “If you do not do what has to be done in terms of morality, you are not courageous.” This simply says that courage should be demonstrated not only in thought or belief but also in action (Aristotle maintained that all actions should have an ethical aspect). Needless to say, we will need training in order to turn thoughts into actions.

Sports could be one area for such training in the integration of knowledge with action. In Japan, we have a traditional view that “mind, technique and physical strength” should be simultaneously engaged in order to make a good athlete. But leaders of sports in

Japan do not know how to teach this to athletes, since the concept of sports has remained rather vague. It is no exaggeration to say that this problem is not exclusive to the domain of sports in Japan, but even created a lack of risk management skills that resulted in a man-made disaster. In modern nation states, it is taken for granted that a “good citizen” with a well-developed “mind, technique and physical strength” will receive an education in sports. We may even say that sports are the best area in which to achieve such training in the integration of knowledge with action. Sports education in this sense can lead not only to raising each athlete’s physical competence but also to improving the level of “national resilience”, a key to risk management skills.

Reforming Sports Business Management in Japan

The issue of management is a structural problem for the sports business in Japan, which can be seen by analyzing the performance of the two largest professional sports businesses in Japan, namely “Professional Baseball” and the football “J-League”. The Japanese sports business model adopted by them shows some striking differences from US and European professional sports businesses in the sense that the majority of the participating teams’ corporations have officials from their parent companies among their board members. Looking back at the history of Japanese sports, amateurism was originally the dominant feature and this was strengthened and became almost a doctrine in the 1970s.

At the Munich Olympics in 1972, however, when Poland won the football tournament and Japan won the men’s volleyball tournament, the athletes of the former had their salaries paid by the national government whereas those of the latter were paid by companies. The former was called state amateurism and the latter was called corporate amateurism, but both were paid for playing the game. Essentially, they were professionals even though they were considered to be amateurs then. Because of this difficulty in distinguishing real professionals from amateurs, the IOC Convention in 1973 eliminated being an amateur from the list of qualifications for participating in the Olympics, even though no professional athletes ever participated in the Olympics until Los Angeles in 1984.

In spite of this global trend, Japanese sports continued to be strongly controlled by amateurism and the reluctance to make sports a business prevailed until the end of the 1980s. This is why knowledge about the business of the sports industry is still insufficient. It had been taken for granted that parent companies would compensate for any deficit incurred by their affiliated subsidiaries in the sports business. This reluctance was eliminated by the creation of the J-League in 1993. The emergence of the J-League brought about a revolution in the sports business in Japan. Its fundamental contribution was to accommodate governance that clearly defined who would be responsible for what. This was a drastic change from traditional Japanese organizational management that preferred a decision-making process based upon consensus, which tended to make each manager’s responsibilities rather vague. Western management models have never been well accepted by Japanese corporate culture in general and this is still an impediment for a large part of the Japanese business economy overall. However, in comparing the J-League and professional baseball in Japan, one can

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Tokyo Skytree, with lighting designed by a fifth-grade girl in hope of a successful bid to host the 2020 Olympics & Paralympics, and a bridge named Sakurabashi

conclude that the Japanese business model allegedly most successful up until the 1980s — often referred to as the “Quality Control” model — failed to produce management experts, as it promoted to executives only those managers who had achieved good numbers in sales.

Conclusion

The people engaged in sports and the sports business today in Japan seem to be very keen to resolve all the structural problems in the Japanese sports community that I have mentioned by taking advantage of the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. These issues include the international promotion of the city of Tokyo, full integration of new social infrastructure into national life in the 21st century, institutional reforms and education for human resources development. A determination to promote such fundamental reforms prevails today in Japan against the backdrop of a business recovery initiated by Abenomics. This is certainly good news and a positive trend for the nation following the two “lost decades” in which Japan suffered from stagnation caused by the lingering effects of the burst bubble economy.

Japan’s success story in the postwar era was essentially made possible by being rooted in the Cold War scenario that dominated international affairs. This scenario was destroyed by the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. A distinguished economist, Dr. Masahiko Aoki, has said that it takes around 30 years for a country or system to be drastically changed, and 2020 will correspond to approximately 30 years since the collapse of the Cold War regime. In such a significant year, the Japanese could introduce a new socioeconomic model to the world that would have a major impact on its future on the occasion of the second Tokyo Olympics, following the example of 1964. This should consist of a new growth model for Tokyo not based upon industrial urban development but on environmental awareness, one that pursues an energy system not based on oil or gasoline and demonstrates a new and hospitable Japan that has overcome aggressive nationalism but has the courage to commit itself to action in accordance with ethics. Such a reform on the occasion of the Tokyo Olympics could offer a powerful example for world peace and prosperity. I believe that Japan certainly has the potential to turn this dream into reality in 2020.

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