

Sports and Politics

By Hatakeyama Noboru

FROM July 17 to Aug. 7 this year, the Asian Cup soccer tournament was held in China. One of the characteristics of the tournament that stood out from the past 12 Asian Cups was that most of the fans of the host country demonstrated harsh hostility against a guest team not because of the game itself but because of the political context. Chinese fans booed the Japanese national anthem. Some of them threw things at the Japanese fans in the stadium. Others burned at least one Japanese national flag outside the stadium and broke the window of a Japanese embassy car. Why did Chinese fans behave like this? On Aug. 7, a Financial Times correspondent explained as follows. "Ordinary Chinese, who must usually watch what they say on political issues, are granted much more leeway when it comes to Japan. Having for years drummed the horrors of Japan's war into schoolchildren, the government now finds it cannot control the anger of young people towards their neighbor."

In Japan there are many criticisms of Chinese soccer fans for trying to link politics with sports. According to those criticisms, "Sports should be enjoyed purely for their own value." However, the big international sport events have been frequently colored by politics. Western countries and Japan boycotted the Moscow Olympics in 1980 because of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. This was the typical linkage between sports and politics.

It is said that even the modern Olympics were motivated by a kind of political wish of Baron Pierre de Coubertin. He was born in Paris and when he was 7 years of age or so France was defeated by Prussia in the war. In due course he started thinking the defeat of France was caused by the physical weakness of French youth. For the purpose of strengthening the bodies

of French soldiers through international sport competitions, he came up with the idea of restarting the Olympic Games that had been abolished in 393.

Sakai Yoshinori was born on Aug. 6, 1945 near Hiroshima on the very day when the first atomic bomb was dropped on the city. Sakai survived and played the role of the final runner with the Olympic Torch in the Tokyo Olympics in 1964. Needless to say the Japanese intention for choosing him was to convey the tragic catastrophe caused by the A-bomb and the necessity of abandoning nuclear weapons to the Olympic audience.

Ki-Junn Song was also the final runner with the Olympic Torch in the Seoul Olympics in 1988. He was a gold medalist in the Berlin Olympics in 1936 when he represented Japan, which ruled Korea at that time. In 1988 he could represent his own country proudly with the Korean national flag on his chest appealing tacitly the injustice of colonization.

There were other final Olympic Torch carriers such as Mohammad Ali in the 1996 Atlanta Olympics and Cathy Freeman in the 2000 Sidney Olympics. The simple fact that they were chosen as the final runners conveyed political messages.

We cannot decouple sports from politics, especially in the case of international sport events such as Olympics or World Cup soccer. The host countries often make use of those precious occasions to convey messages which are not related to sports as the huge audience for such events is too attractive to be missed. However, in order for these messages to be welcomed by an international audience, each host country has to be careful not to express its political message too loudly or too conspicuously. In the first place international sport events tend to stimulate nationalism. The host country should refrain from

provoking nationalism or patriotism when it tries to convey a political message. It would be necessary for those messages to be sent in the form of something like a metaphor or at least in an indirect manner.

Under such conditions, a host country may convey its message. However, the athletes participating in games and the fans watching them must not try to convey the messages which are not related to the games. If a group of tourists from Taiwan were to shout "independence for Taiwan" in the Olympic stadium in Athens, it would be extremely awkward even if some of the spectators feel sympathy for the argument. Likewise, the hostility demonstrated against Japanese in Chongqing by most of the Chinese fans during the Asian Cup for political reasons was extremely inappropriate. Of course I am not defending here the wrongdoings of the Japanese military against Chinese people in the Sino-Japanese War (1931-1945.) But the argument on that issue should not be conducted in a sport stadium.

The Greek National Olympic Committee (GNOC) did not seem to be interested in sending any political messages through selecting the final runner with the Olympic Torch. The GNOC tried to choose a national hero who had won a gold medal at the Sydney Olympics as the final runner in the opening ceremony. But after he was involved in a doping scandal, the GNOC selected another gold medalist who did not have any political associations. Perhaps the only political message the Greeks wanted to convey might have been that sports should be enjoyed purely for their own value. If China, which is going to host the Beijing Olympics in 2008, fails to improve the attitudes of Chinese fans by that time, China would be better to follow the precedent sent by Athens.