

Japan's Spectator Sports

(This is part two of a two-part article.)

By Minoru Kikuchi

Having weathered the two oil crises in the 1970s, the Japanese economy has now slidden into stable growth from the rapid economic expansion of the 1960s. In the process, prices have stabilized, disposable income has risen, and the five-day work week has taken root, permitting a dramatic diversification of Japanese leisure pastimes.

Typical leisure activities used to include travel, spectator sports, betting (horse, bicycle and motorboat races), "pachinko" or pinball, and eating and drinking. But since the mid-1970s, participatory sports have gained in popularity. In the 1980s, this trend has taken on a cultural air with people seeking not only to enjoy sports but to "learn" from them. While spectator sports are of course still popular, they no longer dwarf other leisure pastimes but are simply one among many diverse activities.

Sports to "view" and "play"

The popularity of a sport as spectator and participatory activity can vary greatly. For example, professional baseball is very popular as a spectator sport and amateur baseball is widespread as a participatory sport; thus baseball is popular both ways.

Others are purely spectator sports such as *sumo*, in which only trained professionals can tussle in bouts.

The table shows the extent of Japanese participation in sports. The role of professionals in spectator sports is growing, although there is an increasing number of fans who watch largely amateur sports events like marathons on TV.

Sumo, baseball, tennis, golf and bowling are among the major professional



sports in Japan. The most popular non-professional spectator sports are rugby, football and volleyball, all of which are televised on nationwide networks.

Population Participating in Sports

Ranking among all pastimes	Pastime	Participating population (in 1,000's)
6	Calisthenics (no equipment)	39,300
9	Sea bathing	35,400
11	Picnic, hiking, walking	34,000
14	Bowling	29,700
17	Jogging, marathon	27,900
19	Catch, baseball	25,900

Source: 1984 Leisure White Paper

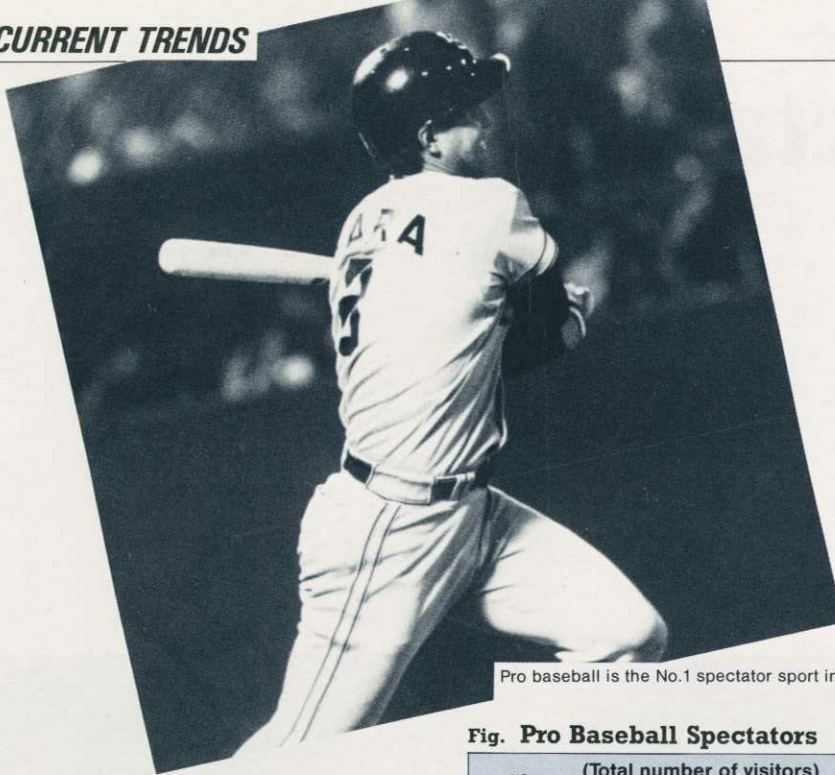
Baseball—hands-down winner

Sumo is considered a major traditional sport in Japan, as are martial arts such as *judo*, *kendo* and *karate*. But base-

ball is by far the most popular sport for both viewing and playing. The pro baseball craze is comparable to the frenzied popularity of football in Europe and South America and that of American football in the United States.

Before World War II, baseball fans focused on university baseball like Tokyo's Big-Six University Baseball League. In postwar years they have turned to pro baseball and the spring and summer senior high school tournaments. Pro players are the idols of Japanese boys, and high school, university and company baseball teams serve as "reserve forces" for the professional teams.

The 12 Japanese pro clubs are split, like the National and American loops in the U.S., into the six-team Central and Pacific leagues. Each team plays a total of 130 games each season, and the pennant winners of the two leagues battle it out for the Japan Pro Baseball Championships.



Pro baseball is the No.1 spectator sport in Japan.

These two leagues together draw 16 million fans to their diamonds every year. This is 86.4% of the total 18,500,000 spectators of all sports, not including TV viewers. No bones about it, pro baseball is king of spectator sports (see Figure).

For instance, a game featuring a popular team like the Yomiuri Giants is a cinch to attract as many as 50,000 spectators. Such a game, when televised nationally, usually comes in among the top 10 TV programs, with ratings ranging from 25% to 30%.

Pro baseball games also make the headlines in newspapers and magazines. Many fans are so crazy about their favorite teams that their morning greetings are likely to be who won or lost the games played the previous night.

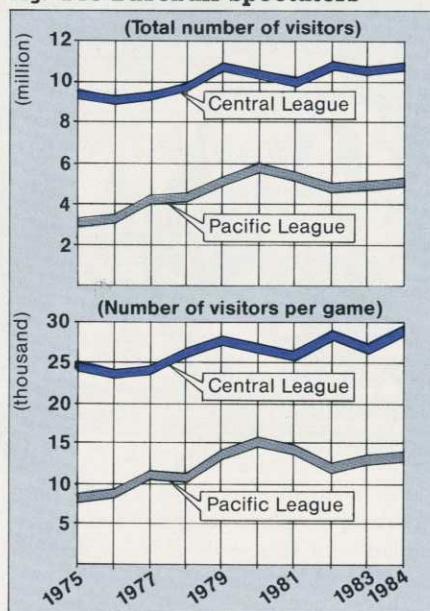
Why is pro baseball so popular?

First, there is the inherent drama of the sport itself. The 50-year history of pro baseball has turned out countless unforgettable games and players. Almost every fan cherishes a memory or two of the performances turned in by star players.

Secondly, baseball players hold in their hands the possibility of making a fortune—something few Japanese can do. Young men, fresh from senior high school or university, are sometimes signed on for nearly ¥100 million (some \$400,000), and can make their way to the lap of luxury. It's a contemporary version of the Cinderella story.

Thirdly, baseball is easily accessible, inexpensive, and wholesome. Horse, bicycle and motorboat races are also pop-

Fig. Pro Baseball Spectators



Source: Central and Pacific Professional Baseball Leagues

ular, but they are gambling strongholds, tainted with vice, and so people hesitate to take their families to the track or stadium.

Not so baseball. Admission to Tokyo's Korakuen Stadium, for example, is ¥2,500 (about \$10) for special seats, ¥800 for infield bleachers, and ¥600 for outfield bleachers; a ¥10,000 note is enough for a four-member family to get in and enjoy the food and drink.

Lastly, most Japanese men have experience playing baseball. Since childhood, they have played catch or softball; they all know the rules and the thrills firsthand.

Just one fumble in a game could result in the front-running team losing the pen-

nant. Such drama carries with it something topical and unexpected that gives salaried men relief and food for thought about the way they live.

Summer days see Japanese, young and old alike, visiting the ball park for the inter-high school games, and summer nights they flock to the professional baseball games. Those who aren't there in body are there in spirit, watching pro baseball games on TV over a glass of beer. Baseball and its culture have become a part of the Japanese life-style.

With more and more foreigners, not only Americans but also Taiwanese and Koreans, playing professional baseball in Japan, pro baseball will continue to dominate spectator sports in Japan.

Sumo lives on

Another sport which is becoming increasingly international is *sumo*, perhaps Japan's second-most-popular sport. Six 15-day professional tourneys are staged each year. *Sumo* parties barnstorm the country. Unlike baseball stadiums, *sumo* arenas are relatively small, with capacity of only 10,000 or so. They are usually packed to overflowing throughout the 15-day tournaments. At home, *sumo* fans have their eyes glued to the TV screen to watch the bouts on a nationwide hookup.

While baseball is a team sport that requires teamwork, a *sumo* match is a man-to-man duel whose outcome hinges on the techniques and power of the two wrestlers in the ring. In *sumo* there is no weight class as in boxing or wrestling; the sight of a little wrestler overpowering his hefty adversary is one of the enduring attractions of this sport.

But *sumo* has one worry: it lacks as large a playing population as pro baseball, which can rely on various sources for the supply of up-and-coming players, such as



Sumo, Japan's second-most-popular spectator sport

little leagues, local amateur, senior high school, university and company teams. As a result, the quality of *sumo* wrestlers has deteriorated. Specialists say this is a serious problem for the sport if it is to thrive in the future.

Cycle of popularity

Baseball and *sumo* have been popular since before World War II. What about other sports, especially spectator sports?

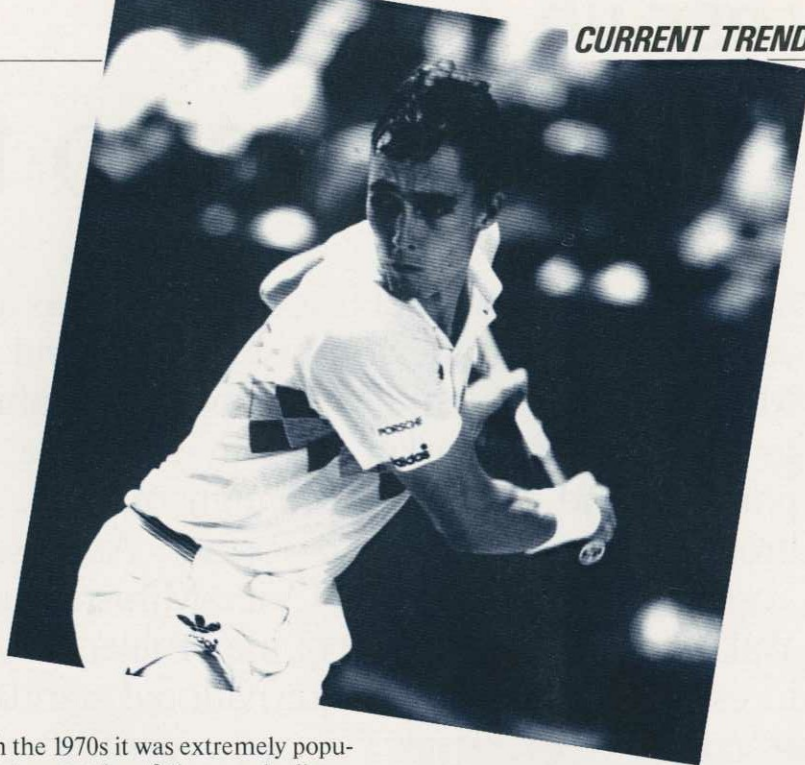
Pro boxing, for instance, leaped into the limelight right after the end of World War II when a Japanese became a world champion. But its popularity has waned in recent years because of the low quality of the fights, due to the large number of poor quality champions. The lack of drive and commitment among pugilists in this age of affluence is also to blame.

Golf is a very popular participatory sport, with a playing population of 12 million and is now catching on as a spectator sport as well. But those who watch golf, both on the screen or at the links, are only those who play golf. This is strikingly different from baseball and *sumo*.

Skiing and tennis are extremely popular activities among young people, but "viewing" has not caught on, largely because Japanese professional skiers and tennis players lag far behind world levels.

Professional wrestling, though having primarily an earthy appeal, still has many avid fans, both young and old. A representative spectator sport, pro wrestling made a tremendous contribution to the diffusion of television in Japan. At one time, not a few people bought TV sets specifically to watch the bouts. In popularity, it is still second only to baseball and *sumo*. Its allure lies in the wrestlers' showmanship, and the thrilling fighting itself.

In the amateur round-up, football has had its ups and downs. From the 1960s



through the 1970s it was extremely popular, but turnout has fallen markedly as the Japanese national team's performance has sagged.

In contrast, rugby has been rapidly gaining in popularity. It is rare for a rugby stadium not to be filled to capacity when inter-university, inter-company or Japan championships are at stake. Rugby games are played up by the mass media because they take place during December and January when baseball and golf are out of season.

Volleyball also holds court as an amateur spectator sport and, dubbed "mama-san volleyball" because its participants are the neighborhood's young housewives and mothers, it enjoys a very high rate of participation. The inter-company volleyball league games steal the show. They are similar to basketball in the U.S.

Corporate control

One characteristic of sports in Japan is that they are often under corporate leadership and control. This is the case with pro baseball, amateur volleyball, rugby, football and even professional tennis. Most of the 12 pro baseball teams are run by newspaper, food or railway companies. Leading companies such as Nippon Steel, Hitachi Ltd., Matsushita Electric Industrial (National), Toshiba, Fuji Film and Daiichi manage volleyball and rugby teams.

This system of corporate management of pro and amateur teams is in sharp contrast to the club system governing sports organizations in Europe and America. For the companies, their teams' performances are powerful publicity and

sales promotion tools, since they are tracked daily by the mass media. They also improve the company's image among consumers.

This commercialization of sports is spreading even to those which have long been considered "sanctuaries" of amateurism. The truly outstanding marathon runners or judoists are almost always so closely tied to corporate interests that nobody really believes they are amateurs.

Some big businesses not only maintain their own teams, but even sponsor marathons, football, golf or tennis tournaments with the company name a part of the tournament name itself for publicity.

The relationship between the Japanese and their sports had long been fixed and predictable: people were either spectators or participators. But the line between these two camps has been dissolved, and people are engaging in more sports as both spectator and player.

Spectator sports are now plagued by a number of unhealthy developments, from excessive commercialism to exaggerated reporting by the mass media and the resultant deterioration in the quality of the games. But the exciting drama of top players in action, be it in baseball, *sumo*, or tennis, will always be a vital source of relief and pleasure to the Japanese as they live in their highly structured communities. It is a place of human contact—physical, emotional, catharsis—that harkens back to village festivals of earlier days. It is the new festival of our 20th century. ●

