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From Calisthenics to Competition

Early participation in international sport

While the vast majority of Japanese girls and women knew little about competitive women's sport in the early 1920s, let alone competed in it, by the end of the decade there would be a Japanese woman making headlines for her amazing performance at the Olympic Games. Though we have seen that the seeds of women's physical education were planted and cultivated around the turn of the twentieth century, there was little connection between girls' physical education and competitive sport in the early 1920s. *Joshi taiiku* (women's physical education) embodied a specific type of learning that had health at its core and uniquely 'feminine' practices in its curriculum. These practices included modest strength-building activities such as calisthenics and dance, along with learning the skills needed to raise a family such as cooking, nutrition and child rearing. That is to say, the original establishment of physical education for women was symbiotic with the Meiji-era *ryōsai kenbo* ideal of promoting better wives and mothers.

In large part because of the increasing contact with the West and Japan's interest in becoming a more modern nation, competitive sport began to appear in primary schools in the Meiji era, though it was predominantly for boys. By the late nineteenth century, girls were permitted to play tennis, which was competitive but still considered feminine. Lawn tennis had been introduced to Japan in 1875 at the Yokohama Ladies Club and started being played at Dōshisha Women's college in 1879.¹ While girls' tennis was part of the physical education curriculum of some schools, sport was generally not part of girls' education. In the 1910s and 1920s, competitions in sports such as volleyball and girls' baseball started being sponsored by for-profit organizations such as newspaper companies.² Such competitions were still very rare for women, and there was little public interest in watching women compete, as it was considered unladylike and dangerous to women's well-being. Moreover, since competitive sport for women was still largely looked down upon in the West at this time as well, there was little outside pressure for Japan to begin promoting sports for women that were based on strength or speed.³

Things began to change by the mid-1920s, though, fuelled in part by the growing popularity of the Olympic Games – an international event that had been revived by Baron Pierre de Coubertin in 1896 and to which Japan began

sending representatives in 1912.⁴ The precedent for competitive sport was certainly present in Japan at this time, as 'sports days' (*undōkai*) had been part of the Japanese school system since Minister of Education Mori Arinori began promoting them in the late 1880s. However, since less than five per cent of middle school students were girls at this time, very small numbers of females in the Meiji era had direct contact with competitive sport after leaving primary school.⁵ As the numbers of girls continuing their education beyond primary school continued to climb in the early twentieth century, however, so too did their contact with such competitions.

In this chapter, we will be looking at this period of transition in women's sport in the 1920s and 1930s (the early Shōwa era). These two decades saw Japan turn from a nation that reluctantly accepted non-exertive physical education for girls to one that quite fully embraced women participating in competitive sport at the Olympic Games. I will be focusing in particular on shifts in discourse as Japanese women began to participate in sport, first on the local and national level and shortly thereafter on the international level. While many journalists maintained critical or even mocking views towards the earliest female athletes, as these women proved themselves to be increasingly valuable parts of Japan's delegation to the Olympics in the 1930s, these views tended more towards admiration and respect.

In constructing a history of this time period, I have endeavoured to use as many primary sources as possible (especially newspapers, biographies and magazines) in order to gain perspective on how competitions were viewed for and by Japanese women during this period. Further analysis is provided through the use of more recent scholarly materials discussing the earlier part of the twentieth century. In using both primary and secondary sources, we can gain an understanding of the sea change in attitudes towards competitive sport amongst both the general public and the athletes themselves in the early Shōwa era.

Women's sport in early Shōwa Japan

The world of sport was rapidly expanding in Japan in the 1920s. Western sports that had been introduced to Japan following the Meiji Restoration blossomed and took on lives of their own. For example, long-distance running was turned from an individual sport into a team sport, with *ekiden*, or long-distance relay races, taking place in Japan as early as the 1910s and 1920s.⁶ Swim meets and boat races had been taking place in rivers and harbours from the end of the nineteenth century, and winter sports such as ice skating and skiing started being enjoyed around the same time.⁷ The development of much of Western sport in Japan was more or less simultaneous to its development in

the West – tennis, for example, was introduced into Japan only four years after it was patented in England in 1874.⁸

This rapid diffusion of sport was directed but not bound by social and gender divisions within the Meiji and Taishō eras. That is to say, certain groups tended to take part in certain activities, but a wide range of choices was available to males and females of both higher and lower classes. The elite tended to favour those sports that required expensive equipment, a club membership and/or large expanses of space – for example golf and tennis. Citizens from lower classes tended towards sports that required little or no equipment, such as running and swimming, which was generally done in open bodies of water such as rivers and oceans. Student populations across all classes came to be exposed to a variety of sport in primary and middle schools, which is why the focus thus far has been on the development of physical education in schools. Even students in poor, rural areas would have access to otherwise ‘elite’ sports such as tennis, since government efforts to vamp up physical education meant that many schools were devoting more space, time and money to their gym facilities.

Terada Akira’s *Joshi no kyōgi undō* (Women’s competitive games) and Mihashi Yoshio’s *Joshi kyōgi* (Women’s competitions), two books published in the 1920s, discuss at length the state of women’s competitive sport in 1923 and 1924, respectively. The first section of Terada’s book is filled with photographs of Japanese girls and women competing in a variety of sports, including relay races, volleyball, baseball and tennis, along with competitive throwing (basketball throw, baseball throw etc.). The female athletes are shown wearing Western-style athletic clothing, including knee-length skirts for tennis, shorts with short-sleeved jerseys and headbands for runners, and short pants with knee-length socks and caps for baseball players.⁹

A preface in Terada’s 1923 book by Tokyo’s head of social education, Ōsako Motoshige, expresses an interest in sending Japanese women to the Olympic Games. During his travels through Europe, Ōsako had been impressed by the wide range of sports that European women were involved in and says that because Western nations have a deeper and more varied foundation for women’s sport, they are certain to do better at the Olympic Games. Ōsako applauds Terada’s efforts to discuss sports that can be enjoyed by both boys and girls, suggesting that he hopes that Japan, too, can send female athletes to the Olympic Games.¹⁰ Terada’s book is primarily pedagogical, with the first half devoted to explaining broad ideas of women in competitive sport (‘women and sport’, ‘competition and nutrition’, ‘the female body’) and the second half describing specific sports in detail, beginning with track and field, then swimming, racquet sports, baseball, football,¹¹ volleyball and basketball.

Mihashi’s 1924 book on ‘women’s competitions’ is similarly structured, discussing first the general notion of women competing in sport and then the specific sports themselves. In both Terada and Mihashi’s earlier sections, that is, the parts describing ideas of women in competition, the rhetoric is highly

comparative, both authors discussing the current state of women's sport in Europe and the United States during the early twentieth century. For example, Mihashi notes that France was holding an International Women's Olympics¹² and that Vassar and Bryn Mawr Colleges in the United States had already had women's athletic teams for over twenty years.¹³ Following his description of women's competitions in the West, Mihashi describes the current state of Japan's competitive sports for women. The first competition that was opened to women, he writes, was a track meet that took place in Osaka in the fall of 1917. Two years later, a newspaper company (*Hōchi Shimbun*) sponsored a competition for elementary school students in Tokyo in which ten girls competed. Every subsequent year the *Hōchi Shimbun* tournament took place, the number of girls competing increased. Thus the first competitions were relatively small-scale events that were primarily for men or boys, but they were opened to women and girls beginning in 1917. In 1922, the first all-girl's high school sports tournament took place in Tokyo, with eighty-five girls from eight area high schools competing in the fifty-yard dash, the running high jump, basketball throw, three-legged race and various relay races.¹⁴ It is interesting to consider in retrospect how aptly these events captured the transition from 'fun and games' to 'competitive sport' that was happening at that time. While some of the events such as sprints and jumps were the exact same activities that their male counterparts were doing, many of the events such as the basketball throw or the 'potato relay' were not actual sports but rather games that had taken on a new competitive element.

Female-only sporting tournaments within Japan rapidly grew in size and popularity. Newspaper companies soon realized that there was money to be made in advertising and sponsoring such events. In June of 1924, the *Osaka Mainichi Shimbun* sponsored the first annual Japan Ladies' Olympic Games (*Nihon joshi orinpikku taikai*). A large headline in the 11 June 1924 edition of the *Osaka Mainichi Shimbun* reads, 'First Annual Ladies' Olympic Games: 1800 Athletes', and a smaller headline reads, 'Including sports union there will be 3600 people: The first time such a grand spectacle has been seen in Japan.'

The lengthy article that follows the headline discusses in detail the participating schools (which ranged from elementary schools to women's universities) and the events planned for the tournament. This includes not only a description of sporting events (ranging from track and field events to swimming races to baseball and tennis) but also a description of lectures that would be taking place in the days before the tournament. For example, talks were given by journalists and members of 'women's health' associations (*kenbokai*) with such titles as 'Impressions of the Progress in Women's Physical Education', 'Women's Competitive Sport', and 'A Talk About the Olympic Games'.¹⁵

Raita Kyōko, a leading contemporary scholar of sport and gender in modern Japan, has written an article about the significance of the 1924 Ladies' Olympic Games. She focuses on the significance of these lectures that took place before the tournament, saying that they were part of an 'enlightenment movement'

(*keimōteki katsudō*) for the promotion of women's sport in Japan.¹⁶ While the tournament itself could be attributed to a mere money-making tactic of the newspaper company, the fact that it included these lectures to be open to the public suggests that there was an ideological component to the event's organization, that is, the sponsors endeavoured to show that sport for women was more than just a fad or spectacle. This notion is further supported by the fact that the profits raised from the sale of admission tickets to the event went into the Encouragement of Women's Physical Education Fund. This money was then used to help subsidize the costs of sending Japanese female athletes to international competitions.¹⁷

One of the athletes who benefited from this fund was a young woman from Okayama prefecture named Hitomi Kinue. The first female athlete to gain national (and eventually international) attention, Hitomi's rise to fame came at a time when physical education for young women was still geared towards producing healthy mothers. In looking at how she broke the moulds of both 'woman' and 'athlete' in the 1920s, along with subsequent media reactions, we can better understand the transition that occurred in women's 'sport' – from calisthenics to competition. There is a wealth of material from which to draw on the subject, as Hitomi received significant coverage in the media and also worked herself as a journalist and author.¹⁸

Hitomi Kinue

Hitomi was born in January of 1907 in a rural village in Okayama prefecture, western Japan.¹⁹ She led an unexceptional childhood in the wake of the Russo-Japanese War, often playing outside in the fields and river in front of her house. Hitomi later documented her childhood in an autobiography titled *Supaiku no ato* (The impression of spikes),²⁰ often focusing on different events that seem to have affected her gender identity. For example, she writes, 'when I would cheerfully bring a fish that I caught from the river back to our house, my dad would scold me by saying, "What am I going to do about my daughter who likes to mess around in the river? You should go study your arithmetic. Girls need to know arithmetic too, you know".'²¹ In fact, according to Hitomi, her parents were continually pushing her to excel, never telling her that she should work less hard because she was a girl. She worked hard through primary school, and at the age of thirteen was admitted to the top girls' higher school in the prefecture.²² The only girl from her small village to make it into the school, Hitomi would walk with a girl from a neighbouring village six kilometres each way to go to her school every day.²³

At her new school, Hitomi became interested in joining the tennis club after she went to watch a game to cheer on her school and noticed that many of

the girls playing were of larger-than-average size and apparently very strong. Hitomi herself being of larger-than-average size, she was impressed by the way the girls were praised for their strength and size (at least when it helped them win tennis victories). Her father thought that Hitomi should focus on schoolwork and refused to give her money to purchase a racquet. Her mother eventually gave Hitomi the one yen, thirty sen necessary for the racquet but told her daughter to leave it at school so as to not upset her father.²⁴ Hitomi hid the fact that she was participating in tennis from her father for some time, but when her teacher told her that after joining the club her arithmetic scores had in fact *improved*, Hitomi decided to tell her father about her involvement in tennis (and he reluctantly approved). From ages fourteen to fifteen, Hitomi was a passionate tennis player, travelling around western Japan with her team for girls-only tournaments, which had recently begun to gain popularity at this point in the early 1920s.²⁵

In 1923, when Hitomi was in her fourth year of higher school, she went to play tennis in the Second Annual Prefectural Sports Tournament for Middle and Higher Schools. There were no girls from her school competing in track and field events at this tournament, and Hitomi felt that this was a disgrace. She asked her tennis coach if she could try competing in the running long jump and was given permission to take part in this one event. Motivated by the enthusiastic cheers of her fellow tennis teammates, Hitomi ran down the track, jumped with all her might and recorded an incredible jump of 4.67 metres.²⁶ When Hitomi graduated the next spring at age seventeen, her school principal told her about a brand new school of physical education in Tokyo – Nikaidō Taisō Juku. Though her father initially believed that a school for sport must be equivalent to a school for girls who could not excel in more academic fields, he was eventually convinced by Hitomi to change his thinking. Hitomi was extremely interested in moving up to Tokyo and attending Nikaidō's school, and Nikaidō was likewise interested in having the now relatively well-known athlete attend. Hitomi cried tears of gratitude towards her family as she departed on the train from Okayama to Tokyo.²⁷

The education Hitomi received at Nikaidō's school was rigorous, as was her continued athletic training. Only a few months after arriving in Tokyo, Hitomi headed back to her hometown in order to take part in the Third Annual Okayama Prefectural Sports Tournament for Middle and Higher Schools (the same tournament where she had first discovered her love of jumping the year prior). Hitomi had switched over from tennis to track and field by this point, which is clearly outlined in a study by Misawa Mitsuo, one of the leading specialists on Hitomi Kinue's life and achievements. Misawa has catalogued all the tournaments attended and records broken by Hitomi, and in looking at this catalogue it becomes clear that Hitomi was involved only in track and field events after 1923. Misawa's compilation also makes clear that each year Hitomi not only got faster and stronger but also continued adding new

events to her repertoire – starting with the running long jump, then adding the triple jump, standing broad jump and javelin throw, then the 50-metre sprint, 100-metre sprint, discus throw, basketball and baseball throws, 200-metre sprint and 400-metre sprint.²⁸

At the tournament in Okayama, Hitomi did exceptionally well in the triple jump, hop, step and jumping her way to a new world record with her 10.33-metre jump. Hitomi writes that she was especially moved and encouraged at this event because her family attended to cheer her on. ‘The people who had to this point objected most to my playing tennis and competing, my father, older sister and brother-in-law, all came to the tournament to support me.’²⁹ When Hitomi exultantly returned to Tokyo to the Nikaidō Taisō Juku, Nikaidō Tokuyo shared in Hitomi’s joy over her new world record. This moment marked a turning point in Hitomi’s relationship with Nikaidō, as she seemed to acknowledge Hitomi’s great potential and became more outward in expressing her support for the athlete.³⁰

Hitomi had begun to receive a bit of attention in the press at this time, but little more than her winning times or distances were recorded in newspapers. It was not until after her graduation from the Nikaidō Taisō Juku in 1925 that the media began to really take interest in Hitomi Kinue.³¹ Around the same time, Hitomi came to take an interest in the media as well. While she had taken a few odd jobs after graduation to make ends meet,³² these jobs did not seem to satisfy her desire to both be an athlete and to help promote women’s sport. In April 1926, however, she was offered a job at the *Osaka Mainichi Shimbun* – one of the newspaper companies that had sponsored several women’s track and field tournaments and that had taken a special interest in the athletically gifted Hitomi. As it turned out, she was also a talented writer, having excelled in writing and composition while in school, and one of her hobbies was composing thirty-one syllable *tanka* poems.³³ Hitomi joined the sports section as the first female journalist in the company’s fifty-four year history.³⁴

Every afternoon after work, Hitomi would go to the public grounds to practice her track and field events. A few months after entering her new job, Hitomi received the exciting news that she would be travelling to Sweden to take part in the Second Annual International Women’s Olympic Games. Hitomi writes, ‘This was the biggest thing that had ever happened to me, and it hit me like a bolt from out of the blue.’³⁵

The Women’s Olympic Games were started in 1922 by a French proponent of women’s sport named Alice Milliat. Pierre de Coubertin, the founder of the modern Olympic Games and first president of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), had originally conceived of the Olympic Games as a male-only event, but this idea was unable to withstand social changes in gender equity occurring at the turn of the century. Eleven women were invited to take part in a small number of events beginning in 1900 (the second Olympiad), and the number of female athletes grew slowly over the years. Female athletes

were limited to participating in a handful of 'feminine' sports, such as archery, skating, gymnastics and swimming.³⁶ Dismayed by the IOC's refusal to allow women's participation in track and field events (the most anticipated and popular events of the Games at the time), Alice Milliat created the *Fédération Sportive Féminine Internationale* (FSFI), which organized the first Women's Olympic Games in Paris in 1922.³⁷

The Second Women's Olympic Games were held in 1926 in Gothenberg, Sweden, and were a much larger affair than the original one-day, eighteen-athlete event held four years prior in Paris. These second Women's Olympics had athletes from ten different countries, among them Hitomi Kinue as the sole representative of Japan. Sponsored by her workplace, the *Osaka Mainichi Shimbun*, and subsidized in part by the Encouragement of Women's Physical Education Fund raised through ticket sales at women's sporting events, Hitomi was able to take part in her first international track and field competition.³⁸ Though she knew that competing outside of Japan would be necessary in order to bring her the next level, Hitomi was concerned that she would let down her country and herself, based on the fact that she had only been competing in some of her events for a few months (and she knew that it took several years to reach peak conditioning in any given sport).³⁹ As she departed Japan on 8 July 1926, Hitomi was filled with nervous energy as she felt the weight of being 'Japan's Hitomi Kinue' (*Nihon no Hitomi Kinue*).⁴⁰

Hitomi's journey took her around Korea by ferry boat and through China, Siberia and Russia by train. During a several week layover in Russia, Hitomi got to learn a bit about how sport in Soviet Russia differed from sport in Japan.⁴¹ She writes in her autobiography that the Russians were more interested in team sports than individual sports, with such games as basketball, volleyball and football apparently much more popular than in Japan. Practicing with female members of a Russian running club, Hitomi also noticed that her large physique, so noteworthy and out of place back in Japan, seemed to be similar to that of the Russian women with whom she ran.⁴²

In early August, the nineteen-year-old Hitomi arrived in Sweden. Before going to the town of Gothenberg where the Games were to take place, she met with the Japanese ambassador to Sweden in Stockholm and stayed there overnight at the lavish Grand Hotel.⁴³ She writes that she was happy to be able to stretch out her tall (1.68-metre) frame comfortably in the hotel bed and to receive an indulgent Swedish massage on her legs.⁴⁴ After arriving in Gothenburg on August seventh, Hitomi received a telegram of encouragement from Kinoshita Tōsaku, the president of the Japanese Women's Sport Federation (*Nihon joshi supōtsu renmei*).⁴⁵ While she enjoyed her rising fame, a kind of fame theretofore unheard of for any Japanese female athlete, she also felt the mounting pressure to succeed – not only for herself but also for the entire nation of Japan. Representing her country abroad in a field of all-Western opponents brought an entirely new dimension of competition to Hitomi's track and field events.

Hitomi did not buckle under the enormous pressure. While she was the only athlete serving as the sole representative of her country (all other nations had at least two competitors), Hitomi managed to score fifteen points from her exceptional performances in the running long jump (she broke the world record in this event), the standing broad jump, the discus throw and the 100-yard and 60- and 250-metre dashes.⁴⁶ She stunned people the entire world over as she was awarded the prize for outstanding overall athlete of the Women's Olympic Games. Alice Milliat, president of the Fédération Sportive Féminine Internationale and founder of the Women's Olympics, presented the award to Hitomi, who tearfully accepted the prize as she watched the *hi no maru* Japanese flag rise up the flagpole.⁴⁷ The fears that she would not be able to measure up to her international competitors melted away as Hitomi realized her potential for success on a grander scale than she had imagined possible.

The Women's Olympics represented the pinnacle of competition for women's track and field at the time, so it seemed that Hitomi had already reached the top. However, the highly publicized 1926 Games in Gothenberg had caught the attention of the IOC – a committee that had been staunchly against the inclusion of women's competitive sport in the Olympic Games. A series of events including the retirement of IOC founder and president Pierre de Coubertin (one of the most unwavering critics of competitive women's sport) led to the introduction of women's track and field events at the 1928 Olympic Games to be held in Amsterdam. These games were the logical next step for Hitomi Kinue, and after the announcement was made that five women's track and field events would be added to the programme in 1928, she set her sights on becoming the first woman to represent Japan at the Olympic Games.

After her success in Sweden, Hitomi was a veritable celebrity, who appeared regularly in the sports sections of Japan's major national newspapers as well as in other publications such as women's magazines. While a handful of articles had been written about Hitomi's performance on the field prior to the Women's Olympic Games, the articles written after 1926 tended to focus as much on her personal character as they did on her athletic performance. That is to say, with her rising success came a rise in public suspicion over why this woman had come apparently out of the blue to be one of the best athletes in the world. This was, after all, still a time when women's athletics were controversial, as they were thought to lead to sterility and premature aging, on top of the fact that they were considered extremely unfeminine.⁴⁸

Perhaps it comes as no surprise, then, that one of the first things that came under attack as Hitomi's popularity rose was her gender identity. Many began to wonder how she could possibly be a 'real' woman and still such a successful athlete. From the time she began competing, the media had focused on her unusually tall stature, in sometimes subtly derogatory ways. For example, the

following article appeared in the *Asahi Shimbun* on 11 August 1924 when Hitomi was seventeen years old:

Huge Woman Hitomi: She Really is 170 Centimeters Tall

This spring, Miss Hitomi Kinue of Okayama Prefectural Girl's Higher School will be entering Nikaidō Tokuyo's Physical Education school. Miss Hitomi is 170 centimeters tall, and weighs about fifty-six kilograms, which would make her a tall athlete even if she were competing on the men's team. However, her physique seems to be well-suited for being a jumper.

The first word in the headline, *ōonna*, meaning 'huge woman' or 'giantess', sets the tone for the article, namely highlighting the fact that she was a comparatively big, heavy woman in a society that associated femininity with petite women. It even suggests that her size was large among men, which implicitly calls into question her gender identity.

This article from the beginning of her athletic career treats the subject fairly delicately, but subsequent attention paid to the issue of Hitomi's gender identity was far less implicit or tactful. The bulk of the media attention she received came after Hitomi's participation in the 1928 Amsterdam Olympics as Japan's first female representative. Before focusing on the often negative media attention she received, we will first look at the event that marked a major turning point in the history of women's sport in Japan and indeed in the entire world – the 1928 Amsterdam Olympics.

The Amsterdam Olympics

In the lead up to the 1928 Games in Amsterdam, there had been significant disaccord and turmoil among members of the IOC, following which many important decisions were made that would shape the future course of the Olympic Games. In the early 1920s, founder and president of the IOC, Pierre de Coubertin, announced that he would retire as president and that the 1924 Games would be held in his hometown of Paris to honour his nearly three-decade tenure as the committee's president. Around the same time, the decision was made to hold separate Summer and Winter Games.⁴⁹ A French cleric named Père Henri Didon suggested an Olympic motto of *Citius, Altius, Fortius* (Latin for 'faster, higher, stronger'), which was adopted in 1921 and remains to this day.⁵⁰ Debates over amateurism flared, and the official wording over who comprised 'amateur athletes' was clarified.⁵¹ In the 1928 opening ceremony, the first team out in the Parade of Nations was Greece, and the last was the host nation of the Netherlands. The Olympic flame was lit for the first time in Amsterdam. These traditions also continue to this day. In other words, 1928 marked an important turning point in the history of international sport, as the

Olympic Games transitioned from being a relatively small, Euro-centric event, to becoming a much grander, global event resembling the present-day Games.

Significant changes were also made towards the end of including women in the Olympics, as resistance in the upper echelons of event management to this point had been overpowering.⁵² Women did not take part in the first modern Olympic Games (organized by Coubertin) in Athens in 1896. Beginning four years later in 1900, women were allowed to compete on a provisional basis, that is to say the local organizing committee of the host country was given the authority to invite or prevent women from participating in any given event. In 1912, women were granted official status for a handful of sports, namely archery, skating, gymnastics and swimming. The number of female competitors was low in the early years of this official status, however – in Stockholm in 1912, only forty-eight of the 2,407 athletes were women (i.e. less than two per cent). The 1916 Games scheduled to take place in Berlin were cancelled due to the Second World War, but at the next Olympics in Antwerp in 1920 there were sixty-five female athletes (out of a total 2,626 – again about two per cent). This number more than doubled for the 1924 event in Coubertin's hometown of Paris and then doubled again by 1928 so that by the Amsterdam Olympics there were 277 women taking part.⁵³

These rapid changes in women's participation at the Olympic Games were being fuelled largely by changes that were taking place for women in societies around the globe. From the turn of the century, the women's suffrage movement had been gaining momentum in Western nations, and by 1928 about forty nations had given women the right to vote. Moreover, the World's Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WWCTU) had begun to have major impacts on the women's suffrage movement in Asian nations by the 1920s (especially China, Japan, India, Korea and Burma).⁵⁴ As women fought to become more involved citizens of their respective nation states, they also felt a growing need to be represented in the international arena of sport.

In addition to this broad current towards increased and improved rights for women, changes were being made on a more micro-level by individual female athletes and by activists such as Alice Milliat, president of the *Fédération Sportive Féminine Internationale*. Thanks to Milliat's efforts, the Amsterdam Olympics included women's track and field events for the first time, and Hitomi Kinue took part in the first running race ever held for women at the Olympics. In 1928, Hitomi held world records in 200-metre sprint and the long jump, but since neither of these events was held for women in Amsterdam, she entered the 100-metre sprint instead.⁵⁵

'July 30, 1928 (cloudy). The day has finally arrived when I am supposed to show the results of two years of hard work and strenuous efforts. It is the day of the qualifying race for the women's 100-meters!'⁵⁶ Hitomi's journal entry from the day of her first Olympic race captures her sentiments well – the excitement, the anticipation and an awareness of the weight of the historic

event in which she was about to take part. To the surprise of many, Hitomi was unable keep up with the one American and two Canadians who took the medals in the event. She had come in fourth in the semi-finals, meaning a fraction of a second separated her from the winners.

Hitomi could hardly cope with the unfavourable outcome of her race, as she cried herself to sleep that night feeling ashamed to return to Japan empty-handed.⁵⁷ As one of the top all-around athletes in the world of women's sports at the time, Hitomi felt that she had not had a chance to prove her abilities in the (roughly) twelve seconds she had run for the 100-metre race. Thinking about her other options, Hitomi knew that she could not win a medal in the high jump because she had not had much experience in that event. The discus throw had already taken place so she could not take part in that, and of course she could not race the 4 × 100m relay as the sole female athlete from Japan. The only other event left for women was the 800-metre race, but Hitomi had never raced this event since it had not been held at any of the other meets in which she had participated. Even so, Hitomi felt that because this race was relatively new to *all* the women racing it, perhaps she had a chance to win a medal.⁵⁸

The next evening, Hitomi begged her coach to enter her into the 800-metre race, and he hesitantly agreed to let her run it if she followed his advice to not start the race too fast (like a sprinter).⁵⁹ On August first, Hitomi ran a qualifying race and made it into the finals of the 800-metre race, to be held the following day – a remarkable feat in itself considering she had never before raced or trained for that distance.⁶⁰

At the finals on August second, Hitomi failed at first to follow her coach's advice to hold back during the first of the two laps that comprised the 800-metre race. A photo taken at the moment of the start gun shows Hitomi (in the innermost lane) bolting off like a sprinter, while most of the other runners seem to be holding back in preparation for a more endurance-based run. Hitomi should have paid more attention to her coach's advice. While she was ahead of all her competitors for the first 400-metres of the race, as soon as they passed the one-lap mark (i.e. with one lap to go), women began passing Hitomi. She quickly slipped from first place to seventh place, as six runners who had gone out more conservatively passed her by.

As Hitomi began to feel her dreams of becoming Japan's first female Olympic medallist slip away, she remembered something her coach had told her again and again – to use her arms when her legs were tired. In the grainy video footage of the race, one can actually see the moment at which Hitomi remembers this advice, as her arms suddenly gain power and she begins pumping them higher than eye level. Through her mental and physical exhaustion, Hitomi managed to regain the ground she had lost after the first lap, and in the final straightaway (the last 50-metres of the race) she pulled ahead of several runners to finish second overall in a time of 2 minutes, 17 seconds. This time broke the standing world record for that distance by nearly five seconds.⁶¹

After the race, several runners including Hitomi fell to the ground from a combination of physical and emotional fatigue. This incident – common today but yet unseen at the time – was so noteworthy to spectators that it warranted mention in *The New York Times* the following day. Below is this excerpt from the *Times*, previously mentioned with respect to the ways media coverage has changed over the past century:

The final of the women's 800-meter run, in which Frau Lina Radke of Germany set a world's record, plainly demonstrated that even this distance makes too great a call on feminine strength. At the finish six out of the nine runners were completely exhausted and fell headlong on the ground. Several had to be carried off the track. The little American girl, Miss Florence MacDonald, who made a gallant try but was outclassed, was in a half faint for several minutes, while even the sturdy Miss Hitomi of Japan, who finished second, needed attention before she was able to leave the field.⁶²

The tone of the article is indicative of the attitude held in many countries when it came to women's competitive sports – that they were somewhat deviant, borderline dangerous, and all together unladylike.

In Japan, the media first focused on the fact that Hitomi won a silver medal, as national pride tends to overshadow gender, racial or religious differences within each nation in the Olympic Games.⁶³ This was as true back in 1928 as it is today, and the headlines that followed her triumphant 800-metre race show an emphasis on national pride rather than on the fact that Hitomi was a female athlete. The *Osaka Mainichi Shimbun* (the company that sponsored Hitomi and for whom she worked as a journalist) ran the following article on 3 August 1928:

Miss Hitomi Places Second in the Women's 800-meters: Time of 2:17.4 Shatters World Record

In the finals of the women's 800-meter run, though Miss Hitomi Kinue came in second behind Germany's Ms. Radke, her time of two minutes, 17.4 seconds magnificently shattered the standing world record by American runner Thompson, whose record was two minutes, 21.2 seconds.

The Japanese press initially celebrated Hitomi's international success and achievement (while *The New York Times* took a more immediately critical standpoint), but soon the focus turned more to the gender than the nationality of the competitors. This was true both inside and outside Japan. The IOC, which had been opposed to women's track and field from the beginning but allowed it in exchange for Alice Milliat's changing the name of her Women's Olympics, was appalled by the 'unladylike fatigue' exhibited by the runners after the 800-metre race. Their embarrassment over having allowed such a display led the IOC to remove the event from the track and field programme after 1928, and it was not reinstated until 1960.⁶⁴

The notion that two laps around the track was too much for a woman's body to handle is again reflective of the mindset of the early twentieth century. While the Japanese press at the outset focused on the mere fact that Japan had won a medal in the women's 800-metre race,⁶⁵ its focus soon changed to Hitomi's gender identity. National newspapers like the *Mainichi* and *Asahi Shimbun* continued to run relatively objective stories on Hitomi's achievements on the track at various national and international competitions, but other popular channels of media began to take critical views towards her participation and success in competitive sports. For example, a highly circulated women's magazine called *Fujin Sekai* ran a feature story about Hitomi in July 1929, and the (male) journalist's opinion towards the female athlete comes through quite explicitly. Below is an excerpt from the article, titled 'Miss Hitomi Kinue and the Question of "Womanhood"':⁶⁶

Part 1: A Physical Examination of Hitomi Kinue

Fujin Sekai: You have quite a magnificent physique – how tall are you?

Hitomi Kinue: I am five *shaku*, five *sun*, seven *bu* (almost 169 cm).

FS: That is awfully tall, isn't it? Around when did you start growing – was it around the same time you started doing sports?

HK: I can't really say when I started growing, as I've grown a little bit every year.

FS: There is a general sentiment that Japanese women are weak – when you were in Amsterdam for the Olympics, did you feel inferior to the foreign athletes?

HK: No, I don't think so. If you look around in Japan there are a lot of women with sturdy physiques. These days it is not uncommon to see female college students who are five *shaku* plus two or three *sun*. (between 157–160 cm)

FS: Yes, that is true – since women's sports have become popular I have noticed the average height of women has grown somewhat ... And may I ask your weight?

HK: Fourteen *kan*, four or five hundred *monme* (about 53 or 54 kilograms).

FS: Well, that is a bit surprising! So, since that is about the same weight as most men, haven't people said that they are doubtful that you are really a woman?

HK: Well, when I was overseas nobody had such suspicions, but I heard about this rumor upon my return to Japan.

FS: Ha ha ha! Well wouldn't that be funny if you were really a man! It has a smack of mystery – this could be the main plot twist if I were to write a mystery novel. It might really baffle people, ha ha ha! ...

HK: I'm embarrassed.

FS: The appearance of your body is not really that of a woman, not only are you so suntanned but ...

HK: The physique of women in other countries is quite different from that of Japanese women.

FS: This may be a bit rude but the shape of your chest and hips really isn't like normal Japanese women, so it seems like you are more like a Western woman.

HK: Well, if you are too fat then you aren't really fit to do sports.

FS: But is it true that if you are just doing sports day in and day out that eventually you will come to be somewhat masculinized?

HK: No, that is not true. ...

FS: So are you physically becoming more masculine?

HK: Since I exercise a lot, my body perhaps appears more masculine than that of a typical Japanese woman. ...

FS: Please forgive me for being so rude, but there is one problem I have heard again and again about women's sports. Is it true that very intense physical activity can cause gynecological abnormalities for women?

HK: It does not cause abnormalities. My health is just fine. While there have been cases reported of women collapsing while playing sports because they were on their periods, it was really just because some team sports (like basketball) can get a bit rough at times. I am a track athlete, and have never noticed anything abnormal about my health.

FS: When you become a wife and have a family in the future, will you continue to do sports?

HK: Yes, I do not expect anything to change.

This is only a small sampling of a fifteen-page article about Hitomi, but it provides a good example of the tone of the reporter and of the attitude towards female athletes and women's competitive sport. The journalist seems to have little regard for her dignity, as he asks probing and often offensive questions. Hitomi responds to his snidely phrased questions with very straightforward answers, suggesting that she does not find his 'jokes' about her gender to be very funny. There is a cartoon drawing in the article with the title 'The Journalist as a Doctor' (*kisha dokutoru to natte*), depicting the male journalist with a stethoscope around his neck, feeling around Hitomi's chest, which happens to be about at his eye level. Hitomi, with her hands on her hips, is looking down at the 'doctor' with an expression of displeasure.⁶⁷

Hitomi had good reason to seem annoyed (both in the image and in the tone of her responses) at the journalist questioning her femininity. After returning to Japan from the Amsterdam Olympics, Hitomi was increasingly in the public eye, as she travelled around the country giving lectures about her travels abroad to Sweden and the Netherlands and about women's sport in general.⁶⁸ She took some time off from training and competing during this time and grew to be somewhat depressed as it turned to winter and she began gaining weight.⁶⁹ Though not explicitly evident from her memoirs alone, it is clear from other sources that one factor contributing to her depression was the fact that the media had begun to scrutinize Hitomi's gender in a most invasive way.

From the time Hitomi began garnering honours in tennis and then track and field, the media had portrayed her as mannish and abnormal.⁷⁰ The fans soon followed suit, as they began to heckle her in person at track meets as well as in the press. A 1926 publication entitled 'Physical Education and

Competition' referred to Hitomi as one who 'stands like a telephone pole, and runs like a tank', which was a parody of a phrase commonly used to describe beautiful women.⁷¹ In 1928, the *Asahi Graph* reported that when Hitomi raced against Terao Fumi and Kimi, sisters who were competing at the elite level with Hitomi and who happened to be significantly more petite than she, fans would yell, 'Beat Hitomi!' and 'Monster!'⁷² In other forms of popular press Hitomi was rumoured as being a lesbian or biologically male.⁷³ The reasons for this jeering can only be speculated, but it likely came from some combination of apprehension, fear and ignorance among fans. While some taunting likely came from people who were threatened by the fact that a woman could be so fast and strong, it is also possible that some comments were more innocuous, as fans at any sporting event are apt to cheer for their favourites and boo for their least favourite competitors. The general consensus in the reports of these incidents, however, is that Hitomi was viewed as somehow superhuman and incapable of being beat as well as impervious to insulting remarks.

The comments that Hitomi had to deal with in the late 1920s and early 1930s are reflective of the mindset of the time when it came to gender. Like in the West, women were thought of largely in terms of their reproductive abilities and their relative inferiority to men. Hitomi's athletic performance threatened these accepted boundaries of womanhood, as she showed no interest in marriage or children and performed athletically at a level few men would be capable of. The brief surge of positive press that Hitomi received following her silver medal performance in Amsterdam had apparently been due more to her nationality than her gender. The negative commentary that followed (and that outweighed the positive) indicates the resistance to change felt by the Japanese public at the time. Even to this day, the literature that exists on Hitomi is polarized – one set of books and articles praises Hitomi for her role as a pioneer and remarkable athlete, the other set focuses more on her ambiguous gender identity, with articles from as recent as 2005 questioning whether she was biologically female.⁷⁴

Hitomi continued training, working as a sports journalist and promoting women's competitive sport through several years of this mocking and critique in the public media. She published a number of autobiographical memoirs, as well as some critiques of her own, titled *Joshi no rikujō kyōgi* (Women's track and field competitions) in 1930 and *Joshi supōtsu o kataru* (Talking about women's sport) in 1931. In these critiques, Hitomi implies that based on her experiences abroad, Japan was lagging behind Western nations when it came to accepting women as athletes. She writes that in Japan, sport was seen as something geared towards girls and students, while in the West there were married women and even mothers competing at the elite level, making for a talent pool that was far deeper. For example, Lina Radke, the German runner who beat out Hitomi for the gold medal in the Olympic 800-metre race, was at

the time twenty-six years old and the mother of two children. Also, she wrote that there was more of a culture of leisure sport in Europe than in Japan, which meant more women were interested in participating in sport clubs. Moreover, Hitomi believed that there was not enough research to prove that competitive sport was harmful for women's bodies and insisted that physical activity did not cause women to become masculine or infertile.⁷⁵

Her efforts to change the attitudes of the Japanese public towards women's sport were sadly cut short when Hitomi died while at the peak of her career. She contracted pneumonia on a boat trip back to Japan after competing at the Third Annual Women's World Games (formerly the Women's Olympics) in Prague in 1930 and was unable to regain her health for nearly a year thereafter. Hitomi had written in the introduction to one of her memoirs that her story was a 'history of struggle' (*tataikai no rekishi*), as she fought for so many years against society, competitors and her own inclination to give up fighting.⁷⁶ The last struggle she faced was for her life, as she passed away in an Osaka hospital bed on 2 August 1931 at the young age of twenty-four.

The obituary that appeared the next day in the *Asahi Shimbun* embodies the polarized public opinion of Hitomi both during her life and after:

Miss Hitomi Kinue Passes Away Yesterday: Internationally Acclaimed Women's Track Athlete

Miss Hitomi was a like a bright light shining in our nation's women's track and field circuit. Her sudden death came as surprisingly as a huge tree falling without notice. At 168 centimeters and fifty-eight kilograms, this magnificently muscular, swarthy giant was asked by one female reporter at the Women's Olympic Games in Sweden, 'Are you *really* a woman?' ... Though her life was short, it was filled with achievement, as Hitomi was a literary talent and a public speaker. When Hitomi saw a younger teammate fall in love with a man and leave athletics to pursue life as a housewife, Hitomi reportedly said that she was firmly resolved against having any sort of romantic affairs – an interesting episode that shows a rather manly side of Hitomi.⁷⁷

Though the media continued to pry into Hitomi's personal life even after her passing, perhaps it was, ironically, this sensationalized attention that made people within Japan notice women's sport at a level that would have been unheard of a mere decade earlier. While her life was short and filled with strife, the impact that Hitomi Kinue had on women's sport in Japan is immeasurable.

The next medallist: Maehata Hideko

One of the most immediate and obvious impacts that Hitomi had was that she opened the door for Japanese women to compete on the international level. Several Japanese teammates had travelled with Hitomi to the Women's

World Games in Prague in 1930,⁷⁸ and at the next Olympic Games in 1932 in Los Angeles, Japan fielded a team of 131 athletes, including sixteen women. At these Olympics, an eighteen-year-old swimmer named Maehata Hideko won a silver medal in the 200-metre breaststroke event, failing to beat out Australia's Clare Dennis by just a tenth of a second. Her disappointment in not winning gold and her sheer determination to continue swimming in the face of public disapproval led Maehata to continue training upon her return to Japan. What would happen four years later at the Berlin Olympics as a result of this determination would wind up putting Maehata in the spotlight for one of the most memorable moments in the history of Japanese sport.