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Female Athletes in Contemporary Japan

In December 1979, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. Within a week, US President Jimmy Carter suggested the possibility of a boycott of the 1980 Olympics, which were slated to take place in Moscow, if the Soviet Union did not withdraw its troops from Afghanistan, and eventually an official boycott was declared.¹ British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher followed suit shortly thereafter, speaking with the British Olympic Association (BOA) officials and urging them to ‘approach the IOC urgently and propose that the Summer Games be moved from the Soviet Union’.² While the British government supported the US-led boycott of the Games, the BOA ultimately voted to defy the boycott, as did eighty-four other nations.³

While the Games did go on, over sixty nations boycotted the 1980 Olympics, with Japan considered one of the five most significant because of both the number of athletes they sent and the number of medals they usually won at the Summer Games (the other four ‘significant’ boycotting nations were the United States, West Germany, Norway and Kenya).⁴ In October of 1980 (three months after the close of the Moscow Olympics), Kiyokawa Masaji, who served as vice-president of the IOC from 1979 to 1983 (the first Japanese citizen to do so), wrote an article in the academic journal *Taiiku no kagaku (Science of Physical Education)* titled ‘Retrospective on the Moscow Olympic Games’.⁵ In it, Kiyokawa emphasizes the importance of Japan’s solidarity with other nations throughout the world (which he believes to be more important than solidarity with other Asian nations). He acknowledges the disappointment felt by the athletes who could not participate but urges citizens to consider the larger picture and the stain that would have remained on Japan’s otherwise splendid history of sport if the nation had decided to go against the boycott.⁶ In retrospect, we now know that the boycott did not necessarily achieve its goals of solidarity and resistance. In fact, according to James Riordan, Russian Studies scholar and expert on the 1980 Games, ‘the Moscow boycott was an abject failure. The Games went on, scarcely diminished, and Olympism gained in moral stature, while the boycott’s protagonists soon disappeared from the historical stage’.⁷

Of course, as Kiyokawa’s words anticipated, athletes from the boycotting nations were generally not in favour of their governments’ decisions to withdraw from the Games. An article from an April 1980 edition of *Running Times* magazine contained the voices of several elite distance runners from the United States, most of whom opposed the decision to boycott the Games.

Craig Virgin, the American record holder for the 10,000-metre run said, 'I think an Olympic boycott would only be effective if fifty percent or more of the countries participated in it', while marathon runner Ron Tabb stated, 'I think it should be left completely up to the athletes. The athletes are the ones who've worked their asses off and I think it should be left up to them whether they should go or shouldn't go'.⁸ The sentiments felt in Japan were no doubt similar, as athletes generally tended to feel that politics and sport should not mix and that it was unfair to shatter the dreams of those who had worked so hard towards this goal in order to make a political statement.

One such Japanese athlete was gymnast Kanō Yayoi (now Sasada Yayoi), whose article 'The Moscow Olympics, Where My Dreams Were Extinguished' poignantly illustrates her disappointment over the boycott.⁹ Her article begins, "'To Participate in the Olympics". This was the title of the essay I wrote for my elementary school's graduation collection of compositions, "Dreams for the Future"'.¹⁰ Kanō was the top-ranked gymnast in Japan from 1979 to 1982 and had been training for the 1980 Olympics since 1976, when she was selected for the national team.¹¹ After the boycott was announced in 1980, she felt that she had been robbed of her childhood dream but decided to try again for the 1984 Olympics. At the Olympic trials, she was one of the oldest competitors there and finished in ninth place, which was not good enough to secure her a spot at the Olympics. While Kanō initially felt that the years of sacrifice and hard work invested in her Olympic dream had gone to waste, she eventually came to appreciate the time she spent working towards her goal. She writes that the experience gave her a sense of self-awareness and self-reliance that she otherwise may have never fully realized and that she can look back happily on all the experiences she had and friends she made as she was aiming for the top.¹²

While Kanō's and many other athletes' Olympic dreams would never come to be realized because of the 1980 boycott, it is important to keep in mind the many changes that were taking place for women's sport in Japan in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The trends towards increased participation and more funding being channelled towards women's sport that had been set in motion in the early 1970s were now being felt around the world, and Japanese women were at the forefront of these changes. For example, the Boston Marathon, arguably the world's most celebrated running event, was officially opened to women in 1972 (when eight women competed in the race). While Japanese men had been competing in (and occasionally winning) the event since the 1950s, Japanese women began taking part almost immediately after the field was opened up to them. A Japanese woman residing in California named Michiko Gorman was the winner of the Boston Marathon in 1974 and 1976.¹³ By 1981, there was a movie about her life story released in Japan called *Ritoru Champion* (English title: *My Champion*). In 1979, the first annual Tokyo International Women's Marathon (*Tokyo kokusai joshi marason*) was held, and while foreign runners took first place the first few years, by 1983 a Japanese woman named

Sasaki Nanae came through the finish line first, with four more Japanese women behind her in the top ten places.¹⁴ Sasaki would go on to compete in the 1984 Olympic Games (which was the first time women took part in the marathon at the Olympics) and marked the start of a trend of highly successful female Japanese marathon runners that has continued to this day.

Women's marathon running was not the only sport that would take off in Japan during this time period. In 1979, Watanabe Emi became the first Japanese figure skater to win a medal at the World Figure Skating Championships, coming away from that year's event in Vienna with a bronze medal.¹⁵ Later that year, the Women's Football League (*Nihon joshi sakkā renmei*) was established. Also in 1979, Japan held its first national women's jūdō tournament, which was won by fourteen-year-old Yamaguchi Kaori. The next year saw the first World Championships of women's jūdō, from which Yamaguchi came away with a bronze medal.¹⁶ From 1978 to 1981, speed skater Katō Miyoshi won medals at the World Short-Track Championships, taking home the gold medal in both 1980 and 1981. In 1982, a West German scout recruited a female handball player from Japan to play on his club team in Germany.¹⁷ Japanese women continued to perform well at the World Championships of synchronized swimming, which began in 1973, and in which Japanese women would win medals at every single competition.¹⁸ In 1983, Japanese women took the bronze medal in the World Table Tennis Championships.¹⁹

Throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s, Japanese women also began to excel in tennis and golf. National Tennis Championships were held in Japan, and player Okagawa Emiko gained press and popularity in 1982, when she won the All-Japan Tennis Tournament as a seventeen-year-old high school student.²⁰ Golfer Okamoto Ayako won numerous high-profile professional golfing events from 1982 to 1984, including the 1984 Ladies British Open.²¹ The list could continue, as the number of events and the level of competition were mushrooming at an alarming pace by the early 1980s. These few examples provide evidence of the advancements being made by Japanese female athletes, even at a time when the Olympic Games were unavailable venues at which they could compete. Moreover, in 1981, the first women were elected to be members of the IOC, which would help to globally spur greater change for female athletes in the 1980s.²² In 1982, former Olympic gymnast Ono Kiyoko became the first female member of the JOC, showing again that Japan was keeping pace with the changes that were taking place for women in the global arena of sports.²³

Performance, publicity, and profit: Athletes of the 1980s

While the Summer Games of 1980 were not an option for Japanese athletes, they did take part in the Winter Games of both 1980 in Lake Placid and 1984

in Sarajevo. The number of women who travelled to these Games remained very small as it had in previous Winter Games (with the exception of Sapporo 1972), but some significant figures arose nonetheless.²⁴ One notable athlete who first competed at the Sarajevo Games in 1984 was speed skater Hashimoto Seiko, who would go on to become one of the most well-known competitors in contemporary Japan.

Hashimoto Seiko was born on 5 October 1964, just as the Tokyo Olympics were getting underway.²⁵ In a 1996 essay, she wrote, 'My name was given to me by my father, who was so moved by the beauty of the *seika*, the Olympic flame, that he gave me the name "Seiko" (using the same Chinese character for "sei"). Being given this name, it was always my dream to become an Olympic athlete.'²⁶ Growing up on the northern island of Hokkaido, Hashimoto participated in various winter sports and came to be a competitive athlete in speed skating. She made it onto Japan's national delegation to compete in the Sarajevo Olympics in 1984 and felt completely overwhelmed the first time she saw the Olympic flame from which her name originated. She writes that the moment she saw this flame was perhaps the moment when she decided that sport would be the central focus of her life.²⁷ Although her eleventh-place finish in the women's 500-metre speed skating event would be the best performance of all the Japanese women who competed in Sarajevo, she felt very disappointed by her results.²⁸ She writes, 'As I stared at the Olympic flame blazing in the sky, I swore to myself, "I must not be an athlete who disgraces the Olympic flame – I have to return to the Games again".'²⁹

Hashimoto did indeed return to the Olympics – not once but six more times. After Sarajevo, she took part as a speed skater in the Winter Games in Calgary in 1988, Albertville in 1992 and Lillehammer in 1994. During the off-season, Hashimoto stayed in shape through biking and came to ride at the professional level through this training. In 1988, only seven months after competing in five events at the Calgary Winter Olympics, Hashimoto competed in the bicycle sprint-racing event at the Summer Games in Seoul. She competed as a biker at the Summer Games in Barcelona in 1992 and in Atlanta in 1996 as well.³⁰ In her 1994 autobiography titled *Seika ni koishite (Longing for the Olympic flame)*, Hashimoto writes that she caused quite a furore when it was announced that she would be competing for Summer Games, as people viewed it as somehow unfair that one athlete should be given so many opportunities to compete. 'Hashimoto Seiko is just entering the Olympic Games whenever she wants. She should think about all the other athletes who are trying their very best but can not go to the Olympics even once.'³¹ Undeterred, Hashimoto continued to train and beat out many other talented bikers for the one seat open to women bikers from Japan at the Summer Olympics.³² In her seven appearances at the Olympic Games (to date, the most by any athlete from any nation), she came away with one medal – a bronze in the 1,500-metre speed skating event in Albertville in 1992.

While Hashimoto's accomplishments of being one of the first Japanese women to win an Olympic medal at the Winter Games (figure skater Itō Midori won a silver medal at the same Olympics in Albertville) and the most seasoned Olympic athlete in the world were certainly impressive, she came to have several other significant achievements to her name. In 1995 she was elected to the House of Councillors, the Upper House of Japan's national parliament (the Diet), as a member of the Liberal Democratic Party. Recalling that her Olympic career spanned from 1984 to 1996, this means that she trained for and competed at the Summer Games in Atlanta at the same time she was serving as a member of the Diet. She has served on numerous committees within the House of Councillors, including committees that deal with the environment, with issues of disputed land on the northern and southern ends of the Japanese archipelago, and educational policy. She also serves as a member, advisor or chairwoman of numerous other national organizations, such as the JOC, the Japan Skating Federation and the Association of Physical Education Instructors.³³

Hashimoto continues to serve in the Upper House, now in her sixteenth year of service, and because of both her athletic and political achievements, she has gained significant name recognition within Japan. She has used this recognition to lobby for change in Japanese society. For example, in the year 2000, she wrote an article in a popular women's magazine, *Fujin Kōron*, titled 'Appealing the Need for Childcare Support from the Daycare-Less Nagatachō District'.³⁴ In it, she discusses that in spite of recent efforts to expand day care options for the children of working women, the Nagatachō district, where the nation's main bureaucratic and political offices are located, has been extremely slow to follow the lead of the rest of the country. While Hashimoto's achievements in the Olympic Games and as a member of parliament are exceptional by any account, her story exemplifies the growing possibilities that were opened for and by sportswomen in Japan in the 1980s. While previous decades had witnessed a fair number of female athletes or teams cause waves throughout society that often resulted in eventual shifts in perception or treatment of women, by the 1980s these changes were being felt in a far more direct and measurable way.

One of the major factors affecting the ways that female athletes affected Japanese society in the 1980s had to do with the increasingly close relationship between sport, media and capitalism. From advertising endorsements to growing numbers of women's professional teams, sport in the 1980s was no longer just about being a good athlete. Rather, sport began to see such issues as marketability and audience approval as serious considerations when airing events on the television, which by the 1980s was more or less ubiquitous in people's homes.

One of the clearest examples of how commercialism and sport had become entwined by the early 1980s was seen in the 1984 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles. In discussing the event, sport sociologist Richard Gruneau has

suggested that those Games are 'best understood as a more fully developed expression of the incorporation of sporting practice into the ever-expanding marketplace of international capitalism'.³⁵ Indeed, the 1984 Summer Games are usually remembered for two reasons: the Soviet-led boycott that occurred and the Games' huge financial success due to the heavy commercialization of the event. Shortly before the Los Angeles Olympics were to begin, the Soviet Union's national Olympic committee issued a statement declaring, 'Chauvinistic sentiments and an anti-Soviet hysteria are being whipped up in the United States ... In these conditions, the National Olympic Committee of the USSR is compelled to declare that the participation of Soviet sportsmen in the Games is impossible.'³⁶ Though not explicitly a retaliatory move, the president of the Soviet National Olympic Committee (NOC), Marat Gramov, had previously served as propaganda chief in the Communist Party, and his appointment to NOC president was clearly a political move. While the large and historically very successful Soviet team, along with fourteen other national teams, was absent from the Games, a record of 140 nations participated in the event.³⁷ Japan sent its largest delegation (231 athletes) since the Tokyo Games in 1964.³⁸

Financially speaking, 'The LA 1984 Olympics was a symbolic moment in the history of the modern Olympic Games, embodying its transformation in terms of media profile, marketing opportunity and potential source of profit and personal aggrandizement for those purporting to live by the ideals of the Olympic movement.'³⁹ The 1976 Olympics in Montréal had been a financial disaster for that city, leaving a debt of over Can\$1 billion that had to be paid off over nearly three decades by that city's taxpayers.⁴⁰ In the wake of this disaster, when the 1984 host city was being chosen at the IOC session in 1978, Los Angeles ran unopposed, as no other city wanted to risk bearing the financial weight that seemed to be getting heavier and heavier with each passing Games.⁴¹ The Los Angeles Olympic Organizing Committee (LAOOC), however, took more than enough precautions to protect against financial ruin, and in doing so they changed the face of the Olympic Games forever.

First, the LAOOC sold television rights to American Broadcasting Company (ABC) for US\$225 million, while European and Japanese networks paid US\$22 and US\$11 million, respectively. Corporate sponsors such as Coca-Cola, American Express, Anheuser-Busch and Snickers contributed another US\$130 million. Forty-three companies were also licensed to sell 'official' Olympic products. For example, McDonalds sold the official hamburger of the Games, and the Mars Bar was the official snack bar.⁴² In a controversial move, the LAOOC also decided to sell miles along the route of the Olympic torch relay, meaning companies or individuals could only run in the relay if they paid a US\$3,000 participation fee. Greek politicians and sports officials were appalled by what they saw as the defilement of a sacred Greek symbol, and the mayor of Olympia said that he would not allow a torch to be lit in his city

(as was the tradition) if the relay continued. The LAOOC thus froze the sale of torch relay miles but not before US\$11 million had already been raised.⁴³ For the first time since 1932, the Games generated a profit. The United States Olympic Committee received forty per cent of the US\$225 million surplus, national governing bodies of Olympic sports in the United States got twenty per cent, the Amateur Athletic Foundation of Los Angeles received nearly forty per cent and the director of the LAOOC, Peter Ueberroth, awarded himself nearly half a million dollars.⁴⁴ After witnessing the effects of unbridled capitalism on the Olympic Games, after 1984, the IOC added rules to the Olympic Charter that defined the nature of financing and organizing the Games in much greater detail.⁴⁵

The issues of corporate sponsorship and product endorsement that emerged in 1984 would have a lasting effect on Japanese female athletes (and vice versa). There were few exceptional performances by Japanese women at the 1984 Summer Games, but as more and more events opened up to women, the Japanese delegation included women competing in more different sports than ever before. Japanese women competed in virtually every event that opened up to women in 1984, including synchronized swimming, rhythmic gymnastics, the marathon, long-distance cycling and rifle shooting.

The women's volleyball team won the bronze medal, which would cap off their five-time consecutive medal-winning streak. After 1984, the 'witches of the Orient' lost their status as a volleyball superpower, as they failed to make it into the top three positions in any subsequent Games (after 1984, the Chinese and Cuban women's teams rose to superpower status). However, in its debut appearance at the Olympics in Los Angeles, Japanese women did rise to the top of the sport of synchronized swimming and have remained there since 1984. In Los Angeles, synchronized swimmers Kimura Saeko and Motoyoshi Miwako won the bronze medal in the duet event, and Motoyoshi won the bronze in the solo event as well.⁴⁶ Japanese synchronized swimmers have come away from every subsequent Summer Olympics since 1984 with medals.

The 1988 Olympics in Calgary (Winter) and Seoul (Summer) were less impressive than Los Angeles in terms of Japanese women's performances, but that is not to say that progress was not being made. In 1988, Japanese women competed for the first time in such Olympic events as the 10,000-metre track race, tennis, sailing, canoeing, tennis and table tennis. Perhaps it was precisely because there were so many options opening up to sportswomen so quickly that Japan was unable to perform well in the 1980s. That is to say, while women in other parts of the world may have been involved in their respective sports for years or decades before their involvement with the Olympic Games, many Japanese women had only a few years experience participating in their sports. Moreover, many did not realize or expect that they would be able to participate in the Olympics, and therefore they were not working towards this goal until just a short time before trials would begin. Several of the

contributors to the Total Olympic Ladies' essay collection begin their pieces with a statement like '[a]s a child, I never really dreamed about going to the Olympics'.⁴⁷ While certain sports such as swimming and track and field events had been open to Japanese women for decades by the 1980s, many sports were only just beginning to gain recognition and popularity and therefore still had a very shallow talent pool in Japan. However, the trend towards corporate sponsorship and sport for profit would ultimately get taken on by Japanese sportswomen in a major way by the late 1980s.

Women athletes were gaining more fame and status through their on-air time on the television and radio. Just as Hashimoto Seiko gained recognition through her multiple Olympic appearances that eventually translated to a successful political career, other female athletes began to use fame garnered through sport to their advantage during and after their athletic careers. For example, distance runner Masuda Akemi won several medals in track events at the Asian Championships in the early 1980s and went on to take part in the first-ever women's marathon at the 1984 Olympics.⁴⁸ Though her athletic career was short and not particularly outstanding, she went on to gain great fame through publicity. She became a sports journalist, authored several books about running and became radio and television commentator for marathon races.⁴⁹ Her charismatic personality on the air kept her in the public eye for over two decades, and Masuda remains quite well known to this day.⁵⁰ Masuda exemplifies a type of female athlete who was becoming evermore prominent in the late 1980s and into the 1990s – one whose marketability and charisma were just as important, if not more so, than their athletic achievements.

Going for the gold: success and celebrity in the 1990s

By the 1990s, women had begun to make a serious mark on the previously heavily male-dominated domain of sports. For nearly every men's team, there was a female counterpart, and some women's-only sports such as synchronized swimming had come to gain a huge following in Japan. The number of women competing in the Olympics continued to increase gradually (from seventy-one women in Seoul 1988 to eighty-two women in Barcelona 1992), but the number of medals these women brought home skyrocketed in the 1990s. Japanese women had won three medals in Seoul (two bronzes in synchronized swimming and a silver in shooting), and in 1992 this number had tripled, with Japanese women winning nine medals – one gold (swimming), four silver (jūdō and marathon) and four bronze (synchronized swimming and jūdō). By the end of the 1990s, the number of Japanese women taking part in the Olympics had nearly caught up with that of the men. In looking closely at a few of the stars that emerged from Olympic Games in the 1990s, we can see how this shift from the background to the foreground occurred.

As previously discussed, Olympic stars do not usually emerge from Olympic Games alone – national, regional and global competitions are always taking place during the Olympic interim years, and these other large events receive significant media attention within Japan. In January 1990, for example, marathon runner Arimori Yūko caught the media's eye when she broke the Japanese 'debut record' (i.e. the fastest time for one's first-ever marathon) at the Osaka International Women's Marathon and then proceeded to break the Japanese record at the same event the following year.⁵¹ The same year, in 1991, she came in fourth place in the marathon at the Track and Field World Championships held in Tokyo. Relatively unknown before these races, Arimori had been a high school and college distance runner who joined one of Japan's top running clubs, Recruit, after graduating from the National College of Physical Education (*Nihon taiiku daigaku*).⁵² It was there that she came under the guidance of Coach Koide Yoshio, who was also a relatively unknown figure at that time. It would not be long, however, until they would both be thrust into the spotlight, first with Arimori's impressive performances domestically and then with her silver medal performance at the 1992 Summer Olympics in Barcelona.⁵³ As Arimori was the first Japanese woman to win a medal in an Olympic running event since Hitomi Kinue's heroic 800-metre run in 1928, parallels were immediately drawn between the two athletes. Both women hailed from south-western Okayama prefecture, and both had faced similar societal discrimination for participating in their respective events.⁵⁴

Significantly, Arimori was also the first Japanese female 'professional' athlete. That is to say, she was the first woman to declare herself independently responsible for her earnings, which would come from endorsements she garnered herself and from the cash winnings of races in which she competed. In order to fully appreciate the significance of 'turning professional', it is important that one understands the distinction between amateur and professional athletes in the Japanese context. In Japan, elite-level athletes are often 'corporate amateurs' (*kigyō amachua*), which is similar to the 'state amateur' status granted to athletes in the former Soviet Union and East Germany.⁵⁵ In the 'corporate amateur' structure, the athletes will often work in the company that sponsors them (e.g. at a desk job) for a few hours in the morning and then will practise all afternoon. This structure is most common among team sports such as volleyball, basketball and baseball. The players tend to identify themselves as employees of the company, and the 'work' that they do on the playing field serves as valuable PR that can often turn lucrative profits for their company. For individual sports such as marathon running, figure skating, tennis, golf or skiing, there is no professional league *per se*, so the route to professionalism in these sports is somewhat different from that of the 'corporate amateur'.⁵⁶

Arimori made her 'professionalization declaration' in 1996, following her second and final appearance at the Olympic Games in Atlanta, where she again finished less than a minute behind rival Valentina Yegorova, though this time

for the bronze medal.⁵⁷ Arimori had entered the Recruit Running Club directly from college, which perhaps laid the groundwork for her eventual professional career. In a 2003 interview with sport sociologists Shimizu Satoshi and Tomozoe Hidenori, Arimori says she believed that joining Recruit's running team would give her a better chance of joining the national team for the Barcelona Olympic Games, which was her goal at that time.⁵⁸ In the same interview, Arimori discusses the various challenges that came with her transition from amateur to professional status.⁵⁹ She notes that while her training methods remained more or less the same, the mood changed greatly when she went professional. While vying for a spot on the Olympic team, Arimori was far more cognizant of what the public's opinion of her was, but once she went professional, she cared less what people thought and more about the fact that she was being compensated for her performance.⁶⁰

Arimori's position on becoming professional is fairly ambivalent, but there were ultimately many positive outcomes for both Arimori and for the athletes who would follow her lead in turning professional. For one, the level of performance improved, likely from a combination of increased pressure and scrutiny (from fans, media etc.), better training facilities and global trends towards 'faster, higher and stronger' performances by female athletes. According to sport historian Machiko Kimura, the line between amateur and professional athletes in Japan has become increasingly blurred over the past couple of decades, as has also been the case in many other industrialized nations. She writes,

Top amateur athletes who perform at high level [sic] are less well known by the public than a professional with regard to opportunities of meetings, rewards, incentives, evaluation, sponsorship or promotion. [However,] the right to an athlete's portrait is owned by the Japanese Olympic Committee (JOC) in Japan, and any money earned was pooled in the JOC and used as a fund for training other athletes. Therefore the earnings and expenses of the individual athlete are completely unknown when accounts of the organization are made public.⁶¹

Most elite-level athletes in Japan are thus managed by the JOC and are only permitted to appear in advertisements for those companies that are official partners of the JOC. For example, Kodak, Coca-Cola, McDonalds and Panasonic are all official Japanese Olympic partners and frequently use Olympic athletes in their commercials or images of Olympians in their advertising campaigns. Arimori Yuko criticized this practice, as she thought it was ridiculous that an individual not have the rights to his or her own image.⁶² When she made her unprecedented declaration in 1996 (no male or female track and field athlete had ever gone professional), she broke off her partnership with the JOC and was therefore banned from using the Olympic rings or the official JOC slogan (*Ganbare Nippon!*) in any of her own product endorsements.⁶³ Kimura asserts that 'the "Professionalization Declaration" of Yuko Arimori, a marathon athlete, was sensational in the JOC and the Japanese Amateur Sports Federation'.⁶⁴

While it would take some time for the effects of Arimori's 'declaration' to fully come to light, it goes without question that she was a pioneer in the world of professional female athletes and that she had a major impact on female athletes who were to come after.⁶⁵ It is likely that her popularity as an Olympic athlete led to her professionalization, but her professionalization also no doubt boosted her popularity. Not only were her marathon times world class and her two Olympic medals matters of great national pride but also Arimori was a prime candidate for product endorsements because of her good looks and infectious smile. According to a 'Village Voice' article that was published shortly before Arimori came to the United States to take part in the New York City Marathon, 'In American terms, the slim 5-5 Arimori is frequently referred to as the Michael Jordan of Japan.'⁶⁶

When the *Village Voice* reporter asked Arimori why she decided to take part in the marathon that year, she replied, 'The New York City Marathon is a wonderful race for charity.'⁶⁷ Indeed, Arimori's most enduring legacies have not been through her commercial endorsements (which have included the sporting goods company Asics, cosmetics company Stefany and the popular sports drink Vaam) but rather through the charities that she actively supports. In 1998, Arimori established a non-profit, non-governmental organization called Hearts of Gold (*hāto obu gōrudo*), which was initially created to help Cambodian children who had lost limbs in landmine accidents. As the organization grew, its mission grew to include educating children in developing nations about HIV and AIDS, encouraging hope through sport for handicapped victims of wars around the world and various other initiatives promoting global understanding and peace on a grass-roots level.⁶⁸ Arimori remains a highly visible public figure to this day, speaking on behalf of her charities at United Nations events (she was named a Goodwill Ambassador in 2002) and appearing at numerous sport events around Japan (including her participation in the inaugural Tokyo Marathon in February 2007).

While Arimori was undoubtedly one of the most visible and influential athletes (male or female) to emerge in Japan in the 1990s, she was by no means the only one. Moreover, her declaration of professionalization proved to be the starting off point for more and more female athletes benefiting financially from the increasingly profit-driven world of sport. Arimori's two Olympic medals would be the first of four consecutive medals won by Japanese female marathon runners, the last two of which were gold medals won in 2000 and 2004. The sport of figure skating also became very popular in Japan through the Olympics of the 1990s. The increasingly close relationship between sport and capitalism manifested itself especially noticeably in these two sports – marathon running and figure skating. The stars that emerged from these sports from the 1990s onwards came to be known almost as much for the commercial products they endorsed as for their athletic prowess. In the next and final section of this chapter, I will look at some of the female athletes (and their respective sports)

who began riding this wave of celebrity in the 1990s and have continued to have resounding impacts on present-day Japanese society.

A level playing field? Women's sport in the twenty-first century

Many of the sports in which Japanese women began to excel during the 1990s are now considered to be Japan's strongest events in international competitions (for both men and women). These sports include softball, figure skating, marathon and jūdō. These sports have ushered in a new era of women's sport in contemporary Japan, as the off-the-charts popularity of some athletes has meant that some individual women and teams have come to have larger followings than their male counterparts.

Softball has been an Olympic sport since 1996, and the Japanese women took part in the event from the start, one of only eight teams to do so. After placing a disappointing fourth at the 1996 Games in Atlanta, they won medals at every subsequent Olympics.⁶⁹ The Japanese women took home the gold medal from the Asian Games in Doha in 2006 (beating Chinese Taipei and China), and in 2008, they beat out their long-time rivals, the United States, for the gold medal in a heavily publicized game. The publicity was in part because it was the last softball tournament scheduled to be in the Olympics – the sport was dropped, along with baseball, from the Olympic programme for the 2012 London Games.⁷⁰ However, in spite of the fact that the event appeared only four times at the Olympic Games, because of the Japanese women's international success the team received significant media attention.

Charismatic coach Utsugi Taeko led the national team for over twenty years, after being a player herself for over thirteen years. In a book about female coaches she co-authored with synchronized swimming coach Imura Masayo and rhythmic gymnastics coach Gomei Masako, Utsugi discusses topics ranging from her coaching philosophy to her views on females as athletic competitors. About the latter, she writes that in the male-dominated Japanese society, women have had to fight harder than men in order to get ahead, which should ultimately translate to tougher competitors. Currently, with nearly as many women in the workplace as men, women have to work double-duty in order to make an income and to keep the household in order (a task Utsugi suggests is *not* considered to be a male responsibility), which she argues has made women that much stronger.⁷¹ She also writes that in her own experience, winning at major softball tournaments has gained her the respect of male coaches and that the more her team wins, the more people will pay attention and the more likely equality of the sexes will be achieved. Utsugi's strong views on the social pressures surrounding female athletes have, in part, led to her unrelenting coaching philosophy and her team's great success in both Asia and the world. Star pitcher Ueno Yukiko joined the ranks of other highly

publicized female athletes after she pitched the first perfect game in Olympic softball history against China at the 2004 Summer Games.

The popularity and visibility of the women's softball team is interesting in that the women on the team do not tend to comport with traditional standards of beauty in Japanese society. Most female athletes in Japan, as elsewhere, have historically had their physical attributes scrutinized by the public in the form of media and tabloid discussions that tend to revolve around the athletes' femininity or lack thereof.⁷² Many popular athletes such as marathon runners Arimori and Takahashi Naoko (Q-chan) or table tennis star Fukuhara Ai (Ai-chan) are seen in photos or advertisements bearing huge smiles and looking decidedly *kawaii*, while figure skaters and synchronized swimmers are usually portrayed wearing make-up and embodying the feminine ideals of grace and beauty. The members of the women's softball team, by contrast, tend to keep their hair cut short, are rarely seen in make-up and wear baggy uniforms that in no way accentuate their female figures. While issues of femininity and the sexualization of female athletes will be examined in more depth in Chapter 8 of this book, I simply want to note at this point that the popularity of the softball team goes beyond the mere fact that Japanese fans immensely enjoy the sports of baseball and softball. It is representative of a growing acceptance and appreciation of sportswomen who deliver exceptional athletic performances, regardless of whether they conform to the feminine ideals of Japanese society.

Of course, athletes who do embody feminine ideals are also extremely popular, especially when they perform well internationally. Beginning in the late 1980s, women's figure skating started to gain popularity in Japan with the success of Itō Midori in both the Olympics and the World Championships.⁷³ One of Itō's claims to fame was her successful execution of a triple axel jump (a spinning jump with a forward take-off), as she was the first female figure skater to ever complete this jump in competition. She had first completed the jump at a regional competition in 1988 and was able to repeat it at the World Championships in 1989 (at which she won the gold medal). However, it was very important to Itō that she be able to perform the jump at the Olympic Games, as she believed it to be the most significant and important stage upon which one could showcase her talents.⁷⁴ After her successful completion of the jump at the 1992 Winter Games in Albertville, France, she won the silver medal, failing to beat Japanese-American competitor Kristi Yamaguchi.⁷⁵ With this win at one of the Winter Olympics' most popular events, Itō's celebrity grew significantly, which in turn would have a major impact on generations of young Japanese girls to come.

While Itō was the first Japanese woman to win a medal in figure skating, she was not the last. She has been credited for having launched a 'boom' in figure skating in Japan, which consequently produced several of the world's top figure skaters. In the 2006 Olympic Games in Torino, Italy, Japan's Arakawa Shizuka brought home the gold medal. On top of being one of the most widely watched

events of the Winter Games, Arakawa was the only Japanese athlete to win a medal at the Torino Games, which made the spotlight on her that much brighter within Japan. Moreover, in the entire history of the Winter Olympics, Arakawa became the first Asian figure skater (male or female) to win a gold medal.⁷⁶

Arakawa's win in Torino set into motion a flood of commercial goods and services related to her specifically and figure skating generally. Ice skating rinks were routinely filled beyond capacity, and the sales of figure skates increased by over twenty per cent following the Olympics. In addition to figure skating as a sport, merchandise related to Arakawa became hugely popular. For example, CDs of the music she skated to in her gold medal performance and the three-stone diamond earrings she wore became hot items. Products endorsed by Arakawa, such as *kinmemai* or 'golden bud' brand rice, became so popular that the company producing it had to expand its distribution to the entire country when it had previously been sold only in the Tokyo region.⁷⁷ The summer following the Olympic Games, Arakawa tried her hand at both acting and modelling, and she announced that she was retiring from her amateur career and would be continuing on in the world of professional ice shows.⁷⁸ Two books were published in short succession about Arakawa: one by the national broadcasting corporation, NHK, containing an interview and snippets about her training before the Olympics and one diary-like memoir written by Arakawa herself – the advertising slip on the cover proclaiming 'Arakawa Shizuka's first essay!'⁷⁹ The steady flow of Arakawa and Arakawa-endorsed products that stemmed from the 2006 Olympic Games is representative of the contemporary commercialized state of sport in Japanese society. While athletes have spurred sales in commercial products, the sale of commercial products has also affected athletes, in that more money means better facilities and resources, which generally translates to higher success rates in international competition.

The close interconnection between capitalism and sport that has developed in contemporary Japan will be explored in further depth in Chapter 8, but suffice it to say that female figure skaters have been closely involved with the merging of the two for many years. Perhaps in part because of the subsequent influx of money to the figure skating world, Japanese women are still consistently ranked highly in the international arena of figure skating.

From the huge number of international competitions in which to let their talents shine to the product endorsements that have become *de rigueur* for Japanese sportswomen, there are more opportunities for athletes in the twenty-first century to reach celebrity status than ever before. One athlete who has exemplified the ways that both athletic success and proper marketing can launch an athlete into the rank of top celebrity is marathon runner Takahashi Naoko. Often referred to by her cute nickname, Q-chan, Takahashi's success followed a similar trajectory to that of Arimori Yūko, with Takahashi being somewhat more publicized and commercialized than her *sempai* Arimori

(the two runners were part of the same running club (Recruit) and both had Koide Yoshio as their coach).⁸⁰

Takahashi's popularity began with a win at the Nagoya International Women's Marathon in 1998, where she also set a new Japanese record with her time of 2:25.48. Later that same year, she lowered her time by more than four minutes and broke her own record when she took the gold medal at the Asian Games in Bangkok. These successes in the late 1990s made the runner a gold medal contender at the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney. Takahashi did win the Olympic marathon in Sydney with her time of 2:23.14, setting an Olympic record in the process. She followed up this momentous event by taking first place and breaking the world record a year later at the Berlin Marathon with her time of 2:19.46. At that time, the 2-hour, 20-minute barrier in the women's marathon event was not unlike the 4-minute mile barrier that men were trying to break in the 1950s, so as the first woman to run under 2:20 Takahashi's international celebrity grew even greater.

In the spring of 2001, Takahashi signed a contract with the International Management Group (IMG), one of the world's largest sports, entertainment and media companies, which manages other major stars such as the tennis-playing Williams sisters and golfer Tiger Woods. Though she had begun appearing in advertisements while still an 'amateur' athlete and under the jurisdiction of the JOC, her move to the status of professional athlete when she signed on with IMG enabled her to profit far more from her athletic success. Since going professional, Takahashi has appeared in advertisements for a wide array of products, including Xylitol chewing gum, the *Tokyo Shimbun*, Ghana chocolate and Daiwa Securities.

Perhaps her most famous product endorsement has been for Vaam, a sports drink made by the Meiji company, which Takahashi and her coach Koide have claimed is responsible for her sustaining stamina and energy in her training and races.⁸¹ A 2001 *New York Times* article about the product said, 'Miss Takahashi, like many Japanese long-distance runners, is a devotee of [this] little-known drink that its proponents believe may revolutionize sports requiring endurance and rigorous training. ... The concoction contains a synthetic version of the juice that gives Japan's giant hornets the strength to fly distances of about sixty miles a day at speeds of almost twenty-five miles an hour.'⁸² As the article mentions, Takahashi was a proponent of the drink but at that time had not yet become the commercial face of the product. Arimori Yūko had in fact been endorsing Vaam for some time, but Takahashi's fame in 2001 eclipsed that of Arimori's, and when she went professional in April, she quickly took over as the main endorser of the product.

Takahashi discusses her move from amateur to professional athlete in the second to last chapter of her autobiography, *Yume wa kanau* (*Dreams come true*). Though the chapter is called 'Professional and Amateur' (*Puro to ama*), she focuses more on the fame that came with her Olympic gold medal than with

her actual move away from amateur athletics. She writes that the fame was difficult to deal with at first, as she was unable to ride the train or go shopping without being bombarded by fans, but that this initial hassle was balanced out by the fact that she was making a positive impact on so many Japanese children (who told her that she made them want to be marathon runners). In discussing her transition to the world of professional marathon running, she says that the move was made in order to make running the central focus of her life, rather than for financial gains. She notes that she was already more or less living the life of a professional athlete, so the move felt like a natural one to make at the time.⁸³ With the growing commercialization of athletes, and the all but forgotten rules about amateurism and the Olympics, it is likely that more and more Japanese athletes will make this 'natural' move to professionalism.⁸⁴

Another twenty-first century 'power sport' for Japanese women has been jūdō. Though it was not included as an Olympic sport for women until the Barcelona Summer Games in 1992, Japanese women have been taking part in it since the sport's inception. As was brought to light by American writer H. Irving Hancock's turn-of-the-century *Physical Training for Women by Japanese Methods* (1904), jūdō and other martial arts are perhaps the oldest form of modern contact sports that Japanese women have been involved with. Kanō Jigoro founded the first school of jūdō in the early 1880s, after having developed his techniques and theories from earlier forms of jujitsu.⁸⁵ One of the major changes that occurred with Kanō's 'modernization' of jujitsu was the acceptance of women. Kanō's first school, the Kōdōkan, allowed women to compete, setting the stage for women's active and equal participation in the sport of jūdō.⁸⁶ While it would take over a century for the IOC to recognize women's jūdō as an Olympic sport, it comes as little surprise that Japanese women have consistently ranked at the top of the sport internationally.

One Japanese woman in particular emerged as a star from the first women's jūdō competition at the 1992 Games in Barcelona – sixteen-year-old Tamura Ryōko. In 1990, Tamura had become a star when, at just fourteen years of age, she won the International Women's Jūdō Championships in her hometown of Fukuoka.⁸⁷ In 1986, a popular manga series by Urasawa Naoki emerged titled *Yawara!*, which chronicled the life of a young jūdō star named Inokuma Yawara who aspired to win a medal at the 1992 Barcelona Olympics. When the teenaged Tamura won the silver medal in the extra lightweight division in Barcelona, she instantly garnered the nickname 'Yawara-chan', after the fictional character she so resembled (by 1992, the series had also been made into a popular animated television show).

For the next four years, Tamura went undefeated in all major international jūdō tournaments and was favoured to win another medal when she went to the 1996 Summer Games in Atlanta. She had become such a popular figure by that time that she was chosen to be the country's flag bearer at the opening ceremonies in Atlanta. Tamura and her throngs of fans were shocked when she

lost in the final round of the tournament to an unknown North Korean athlete, sixteen-year-old Kye Sun-hi.⁸⁸ Tamura would have to settle for a silver medal again, but her failure to bring home the gold medal did not seem to diminish her popularity at all. She continued to receive intense media attention as she again went undefeated in the major competitions in the four-year Olympic interim between 1996 and 2000.

By the time the Sydney Olympics arrived, 'Yawara-chan' bore an enormous weight to bring home a gold medal – especially after being quoted as saying that her goal in Sydney was 'at best a gold, at worst a gold' (*Saikō demo kin, saitei demo kin*).⁸⁹ This quote would follow Tamura around for more than a decade, though it morphed over the years as her personal situation changed. After winning the much anticipated gold medal in Sydney, she continued to train and compete, and in 2003 she married professional baseball player Tani Yoshitomo (changing her surname in the process). After qualifying for the 2004 Athens Olympics, the quote changed to 'As Tamura a gold, as Tani a gold' (*Tamura demo kin, Tani demo kin*).⁹⁰ In December of 2005, the Tanis welcomed their first child into the world, as the public seemed anxious to find out whether Tani Ryōko would return to competition following the birth of her son, Yoshiaki.⁹¹ Tani's old adage now became 'As a mommy, a gold' (*Mama demo kin*).⁹² At the World Championships in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in September 2007, Tani showed that she was back in top form, winning an unprecedented seventh gold medal at the event and proving that she was ready to compete at her fifth Olympic Games in Beijing in 2008.

Tani came away from Beijing with a bronze medal, and although she made public her intention to try for a gold again at the London 2012 Olympics, in the spring of 2010 she turned her focus to politics. In April 2010, Tani announced her candidacy for the proportional representation section of Japan's ruling Democratic Party, and in July of the same year she was elected to the Upper House of the Diet.⁹³ When she joined the realm of politics, she was met with some criticism for trying to continue her athletic career while simultaneously balancing a political career and her now two children. Though it had been done before by speed skater/biker Hashimoto Seiko, Tani made the decision to end her athletic career in order to focus on politics. In October 2010, the thirty-five year old officially announced her resignation from competitive jūdō. According to the *Asahi Shimbun*, Tani's announcement was met with empathy from other female members of parliament, as they criticized the government for making it difficult for members to pursue outside interests (especially raising their children) while still faithfully serving their parties.⁹⁴

While the ultimate impact of Tani Ryōko on the realm of politics has yet to be seen, her impact on the world of women's sport in Japan is obvious. Her long career brought issues of age, marital status and parental status to the forefront of discussions of women's sport. As a heavily publicized seven-time world champion, five-time Olympic medallist, mother of two and member

of the highest vehicle of Japanese government, Tani is redefining the limits of what is possible and acceptable for Japanese women. She has been widely lauded for her efforts and successes in very public forums.

For example, an article about her return to competition following the birth of her first child in the magazine *Yomiuri Weekly* from January 2007 reads,

Tani's return does not only hold great significance in the jūdō world, but in Japan's sporting world as well. To date, there have been athletes who continue competing after getting married, but no top athletes who have come back after giving birth to a child. Moreover, if Tani proves to be successful in her comeback, the impact will go beyond that of rapid progress for female athletes – the social impact could also be great, as it will show that 'returning to work after childbirth' is a viable option for Japan's women today.⁹⁵

That a 'return to work' after childbirth has come to be praised in the media shows evidence of a dramatic break from past notions of what it meant to be a 'good wife and wise mother'. Importantly, the heavily publicized nature of female athletes in the twenty-first century has enabled their reach to go increasingly beyond the world of sport and to have an impact on women's role in society at large. In Chapter 8, we will consider the specific ways that female athletes over the past century have contributed to the redefinition of femininity, womanhood, choice and success in contemporary Japan.