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Afterword

What about women's baseball and women's sumo?

Given the title of this book, it would not be complete without mentioning that Japan's two national sports, baseball and sumo wrestling, can no longer be held up as the all-male domains that they once were. Scholarship and media attention given to sport in Japan has largely been androcentric due to the very fact that the nation's most visible sports are virtually all male. In the twenty-first century, though, female athletes have begun to step into the already bright spotlight shining on these sports, again altering perceptions towards both female athletes and the sports themselves in the process.

A 2010 book titled *Yomigaeru! Joshi puro yakyū: Hiru wo supaiku ni hakikaete* (*It's back! Women's professional baseball – exchanging high-heels for spikes*) documents the resurrection and surge of popularity of women's professional baseball in twenty-first century Japan. Women's baseball was first played in an organized fashion in Japan in 1917, with sporadic matches between Japanese and American women's teams taking place through the 1920s and 1930s. The sport of softball emerged in Japan in the mid-1940s¹ and coexisted with women's baseball for a few decades. A professional women's baseball league was established in Japan in 1950, and although the sport itself never completely disappeared, at the professional level it was gradually overtaken by softball, and the women's baseball league formally disintegrated in 1971.²

In 2010, as the title of the book suggests, professional baseball for women re-emerged in Japan, with the founding of the Girl's Professional Baseball League (GPBL or *Nihon joshi puro yakyū rīgu*). The league consists of two teams, the Kyōto Asto Dreams and the Hyōgo Swing Smileys. Media reports suggest that the league got off to a strong start, with training sessions alone seeing more spectators than the training sessions of other popular sports like men's football (with several hundred fans coming to watch GPBL practices).³ Leading newspapers gave continual coverage of the league throughout the season, including lengthy articles highlighting the background and statistics of individual players.⁴

The inaugural teams of the GPBL were comprised primarily of young women who played baseball or softball on club teams in high school or college. One player from a high school baseball club, Yoshida Eri, was drafted in 2009 by the Kobe 9 Cruise, one of four teams in Japan's Kansai Independent League, to become the first female professional pitcher in Japan. A sidearm knuckleballer (dubbed 'knuckle princess' (*nakkuru hime*) by the Japanese media), she had reasonable success with her team in Japan, and when the

Kansai Independent League folded after her first season with them, Yoshida got a contract to play in the Arizona Winter League in the United States. This led to the eighteen-year-old getting signed for the 2010 season with the Chico Outlaws, a minor league professional team in central California that is part of the independent Golden League.⁵

Much hype surrounded the arrival of Yoshida to the Chico Outlaws, and the media reported that the crowds at her games were filling stadiums to capacity. Japanese and female fans alike flocked to see her play, as one of only a handful of women ever to play professional baseball in the United States and the first from Japan. In spite of all the media and fan attention, Yoshida's first season with the Outlaws was not good. The team lost in all of the games for which Yoshida pitched. She finished her season with zero wins and four losses, allowed more runs than any other pitcher on the team and was dropped from the roster when the team made the playoffs at the end of the season. Her relatively poor performance confirmed rumours that had been brewing in the media that her presence on the team was little more than a publicity stunt to get fans to come to games.⁶

The case of Yoshida Eri gets at the very heart of the issues surrounding women's sport in the twenty-first century. While she was an undeniably good pitcher, especially given her age and experience, perhaps her appearances in professional leagues in Japan and the United States *were* merely for publicity. And perhaps they were not. That it is unclear whether it was her athletic skill or her ability to draw fans that got her into the professional leagues is a sign of how inextricably connected sport, media and capitalism have become. Sport can only thrive because of the media and financial backing, and the media and industries thrive on the success of individual athletes and sports teams.

The burgeoning sport of women's sumo brings up similar issues, though at present the sport is only carried out at the amateur level and has yet to be professionalized.⁷ Known in Japan as *shin sumo* or *onna zumō*, the sport was formalized in 1996, when both the International Sumo Federation held the first women's tournament in Europe and when the Women's Sumo Federation was established in Japan. For a variety of reasons, the sport caught on slowly in Japan, with Europeans dominating women's sumo tournaments from their inception. Not only has the national sport of Japan been so male-centric that women have been officially forbidden from setting foot on the *dohyō*, or sumo ring, but a sordid history of lewd 'sumo' matches involving topless women and other similar forms of entertainment has led to a tremendous stigma being attached to women's involvement in the sport.⁸ In contrast to the long, gendered history of sumo in Japan, many of the top European wrestlers report that they had never even seen professional Japanese sumo when they got involved in their local women's sumo clubs.⁹

However, Japanese women in the twenty-first century are increasingly getting involved and being taken seriously in the sport. Local tournaments

and international bouts alike are attracting large crowds within Japan, and the media maintains regular coverage of them. Moreover, popular television dramas such as the 2010 *Dohyō Girl!* on TBS have drawn attention to women's involvement in the sport and helped to normalize the notion that sumo is no longer the all-male domain that it once was. The push for further inclusion of women in the sport was spurred in part by a 1994 decision by the International Olympic Committee to no longer allow single-sex sports to be introduced to the Olympic programme. With the hopes of eventually making sumo an Olympic sport, the International Sumo Federation has backed efforts to alter the image of sumo as being a single-sex sport.¹⁰

Like with women's involvement in baseball, it remains unclear as to whether spectators are interested in the sport *per se* or in the novelty or spectacle of women's involvement in traditionally male activities. What is clear is that allegations of game fixing and ties to organized crime have tarnished the respective images of men's baseball and sumo in Japan. Perhaps this has resulted in the public's favourable reception of new, unblemished versions of their most popular pastimes.

Regardless of how female athletes today are garnering their share of the media spotlight, the fact that women today represent a larger percentage of the sporting world in Japan than ever before is irrefutable. The twenty-first century inextricability of sport with the media and commercialism has had an arguably positive effect on Japanese women. Whether they get there by winning Olympic medals or by successfully endorsing products, female athletes are finding themselves in positions of great stature. These women send a clear message that nothing is off limits to young women, and they show that sport as a male-dominated realm in Japan is beginning to crumble.

Moreover, as media exposure through sport has repeatedly led to voter popularity at the polls, a number of prominent female athletes have reached positions of significant political power. These athlete politicians have lobbied for improved conditions for mothers in the workplace, for better day care facilities and for other policies that both facilitate gender equity and help to ease the burdens from Japan's twenty-first-century population crises.¹¹ The change that female athletes have precipitated in Japanese society over the past century is tangible, and the trend towards more female involvement in sport shows no signs of slowing down anytime soon.

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