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For Basketball Court and Company Cubicle: New Expectations for University Athletes and Corporate Employees in Japan

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During Japan’s High Economic Growth Period (1955–1973), school-affiliated sports clubs served as important socialization mechanisms creating strong, healthy, and disciplined workers who would later serve Japanese companies. Since the 1980s, however, there have been new approaches in the management of companies and sports teams in Japan, especially in terms of a new performance-based hierarchy that places the onus on individuals to think independently and be creative on the court or in the cubicle. While sports clubs continue to habituate members into a particular vocabulary that encourages effort, discipline, and teamwork – language that will continue to be used after they join corporate Japan – changing economic landscapes have ushered in the introduction of new coaching pedagogies to Japanese sports, and therefore new expectations for Japanese athletes. These athletic expectations happen to mirror new expectations of young Japanese workers. Drawing on long-term fieldwork with a university basketball club, this article demonstrates that while sports continue to be perceived as educational tools that build ‘team-players’ to serve companies, they are today being asked to cultivate independent, innovative, and flexible company employees as well; and reconciling these two rather conflicting goals has proved to be easier said than done.

Introduction

What values do sports teams and corporate teams share, and how are these values articulated? Certainly there is the value of ‘teamwork’, but is there something more? The sociologist and philosopher Theodor Adorno once wrote:

As yet we still lack an incisive sociology of sport… nevertheless one hypothesis, amongst others, springs to mind; namely that, by dint of the physical exertion exacted by sport, by dint of the functionalization of the body in team-activity, which interestingly enough occurs in the most popular sports, people are unwittingly trained into modes of behavior which, sublimated to a greater or lesser degree, are required of them by the work process. The accepted reason for playing sport is that it makes believe that fitness itself is the sole, independent end of sport: whereas fitness for work is certainly one of the covert ends of sport. Frequently it is in sport that people first inflict upon themselves (and celebrate as a triumph of their own
freedom) precisely what society inflicts upon them and what they must learn to enjoy.1

Although these words were written in the 1940s, the connections that Adorno highlights between the sporting and working world have yet to be explored in sufficient detail. Nor have the linguistic parallels between sporting and company life been adequately documented. Many politicians, business leaders, and scholars subscribe to the position that service to the economy is the central role of education, but few have asked whether sport, itself a potentially powerful educational conduit, also performs such a role. In this paper, I examine the close parallels between team sports and corporate teams, identifying the perceived educational connections and linguistic parallels between these two realms within Japan.

Sports as an Educational Conduit

Research on public educational institutions in Japan has mainly focused on the mainstream, state-regulated school sector as the primary socializing engine of the Japanese citizenry and corporate workforce.2 In particular, schools have been said to prepare young Japanese for performance in the ‘rigorous, hierarchical, and finely tuned organizational environment’ they will enter when they leave school.3 Meanwhile, few studies have acknowledged the similarly important educational role that sports play in Japanese society, especially in terms of preparing young Japanese for future corporate roles.4 The widespread insistence by many Japanese that sports are effective educational endeavors compels us to accept that Japanese children may be learning at least as much ‘beyond the four walls’ of state-regulated classrooms as they do within them.5

This point challenges several commonly used dichotomies within and about education: ‘core’ vs. ‘periphery’, ‘formal’ vs. ‘informal’, ‘mainstream’ vs. ‘exceptional/unnatural’. It is one thing to say that sports participation constitutes ‘non-formal’ education, and in some cases sports education certainly takes a backseat to classroom education. Compared with the rigorous barriers put in front of prospective Japanese schoolteachers, coaches in Japan can become coaches with relative ease. Excluding coaches at the elite and professional levels, Japanese sports coaches often perform their role as volunteers, little training curriculum exists, and what does is not always mandatory to master before taking up work as a coach. Still, participation in sports does further various educational goals, suggesting that sports can and ought to be relocated from the periphery of ‘real’ education studies and included within researchers’ discussions of ‘core’ education.

In Japan, because education bureaucrats have always been responsible for sports policy, the sporting space has long been considered educational space. Japan remains

1Adorno, ‘Free Time’, 194.
2Rohlen, Japan’s High Schools, 168.
3Ibid., 209.
4I have elsewhere investigated the ways in which Japanese sports policies are a function of education policies; how physical discipline is justified in educational terms, especially in sports settings; and how pedagogical patterns in sports coaching often mimic patterns in classroom pedagogy. See Miller, ‘Bushidō vs. Science’; Miller, ‘Taibatsu’; and Miller, ‘Beyond the Four Walls’.
5Cave, ‘Bukatsudō’.
one of the few nations in the world to place sports under the auspices of a governmental ministry also entrusted to oversee education. Moreover, in 2006 nearly all Japanese youth (90.3%) participated in some sport or exercise on a regular basis, and almost half (46%) actively participated in a formal school-affiliated sports club. This connection has deep historical roots, both in Japan and in the West. In the late Victorian and Edwardian periods (roughly 1870–1910), the British empire used sports to instill ‘ideas of civilized modern behavior’ in indigenous elites, ‘thereby allowing the British to establish indirect rule in various far-flung colonies’. Institutionalized sports were used as a non-verbal means of communication and an effective conduit for transmitting values that promoted the imperial project. Not coincidentally, Japan adopted sports – and the idea of ‘sports for education’ – around the same time, during the Meiji period (1868–1912). Of course, even though it was then that the Japanese accepted the idea that such sports could be educational, they had long believed in the educational value of their own indigenous ‘physical cultural activities’, such as the martial arts.

It is important to note that Japan was at this time attempting to become a nation that could be respected by Western imperial powers. Toward that end, in the Meiji period the Japanese government began developing a hitherto unprecedented system of mass education that included the use of physical education to build strong and healthy bodies for the nation and economy. Although physical education was eventually co-opted by Japanese militarists to prepare young men for Japan’s own imperial conquests, in the beginning Japan was only swimming with mainstream global currents in using physical activity and sports as educational tools.

Although sports were stripped of their blatant militaristic ideology after Japan’s defeat in 1945, Japanese sports policy has remained explicitly aimed at educational goals throughout the postwar period. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (Monbukagakushō, hereafter ‘MEXT’) openly links sports in schools with state-sponsored public education (Table 1). Charged with the task of bringing about ‘a fulfilled, lifelong sports life’, MEXT entrusts schools to cultivate the next generation of internationally competitive Japanese athletes as well as lifelong sports citizens who are developed in both psychological and physical terms. From the beginning of Japan’s modern era, then, Japanese sports have been associated with formal education and the broader goals of the education system. This connection has also meant that sports have almost always been tied to Japan’s national aims, whether it was furthering Japan’s imperial project in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, supplying able bodies to expansionist militarists in the 1930s and 1940s, or providing disciplined, ‘team players’ for corporate Japan in the high economic growth period (1955–1973).

Despite questioning by some scholars as to whether the values young Japanese athletes learn through sports are truly positive – Katsuta, for example, argues that Japanese athletes are trained to obey all rules, regardless of their merit – many others...
agree that sports serve as powerful tools of socialization: ‘All sports are undertaken as part of school education, and though the goals may differ depending on the child’s age, instilling sociality and the ability to cooperate, as well as proper etiquette and [an appreciation for] rules, are the principal aims of participation’ is the overview offered by one Japanese group.13 According to William W. Kelly, ‘the power of institutions is the power to normalize in the twin senses of idealizing and routinizing certain patterns of conduct’.14 Sports clubs affiliated with Japanese schools and universities undoubtedly idealize and routinize a general obedience to rules, but they also offer the opportunity to practice leadership, be a good teammate, and learn how to support or communicate with others. As Cave explains, extra-curricular sports clubs (bukatsudō) contribute ‘to the creation of [social] order’ by ‘combining an appeal to individual enthusiasm and agency, opportunities for intense relationships, and demands for disciplined commitment’.15

**Beyond the Myth of the ‘Quintessentially Japanese Company’**

After one’s days of study and play are over, the organization most likely to ‘idealize and routinize such patterns of conduct’, demand such ‘disciplined commitment’, foster opportunities for such ‘intense relationships’, and ask members to be ‘good team players’, is the Japanese company. Thus, while it seems sensible to acknowledge that sports can foster both positive and negative values (Table 2), it is equally important to explore exactly what sorts of values are perceived to translate well from the basketball court to the company cubicle.

Thomas Rohlen once called the Japanese company ‘the most important social institution in Japan’.16 Not surprising, then, that much has been written about both blue- and white-collar Japanese companies.17 Some of this literature has been written in cross-cultural perspective, occasionally overlooking the internal differences that exist within Japan. For example, scholars such as Besser have written about Japanese companies as if they were all the same.18 Contrasting ‘Japanese management’ with the ‘traditional Western management system’ of a bureaucracy, Besser characterizes ‘Team Toyota’ as the ‘quintessentially Japanese company’, replete with the ‘Japanese management’ features of lifetime employment, company ideology, group responsibility, and a ‘seniority by length of service’ (nenkō joretsu) system which she believes financially rewards seniority more often than it rewards merit. She finds other ‘quintessentially Japanese’ aspects of Japanese management as well, such as consensus decision-making, a division of labor done group by group (not individually), and a ‘community of fate’ organization in which employees have the sense of a shared stake with management (which fosters a greater employee commitment to the company).19

However, such comparisons of Western and Japanese management ‘systems’ are limited because they rest upon two false assumptions: 1) that Japanese (business)

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13Mizuno et al., *Sapōtsu kagakuron*, 19.
18Besser, *Team Toyota*.
19Ibid., 1–26.
culture is unique, and 2) that cross-cultural differences between Japan and the West are so significant that they justify ignoring the many internal differences within corporate Japan. Such ‘exceptionalist thinking’ is fueled by the so-called nihonjinron, or ‘theories of Japanese-ness’. Nihonjinron have led many observers to focus on the ‘unique’ aspects of Japanese (business) culture, especially the groupism that was said to keep Japanese organizations strong.\(^{20}\) Cole, however, identified a crippling methodological problem with nihonjinron-based theories of Japanese management: they assumed there was only one style.\(^{21}\) In actuality, Japanese management styles and techniques depended, then as they do now, on many variables, such as the size of the company, the type of company, whether it included various workers or just elites, whether it was white-collar or blue-collar, whether it was a manufacturer or a service-oriented business, and whether it was a domestic or multinational corporation. There is no single ‘Japanese company culture’, and probably never has been; even today, established conglomerates and large corporations act very differently from new-generation firms in the creative and information technology sectors, many of which provide comparatively flexible work schedules for their employees. As a result, there are various sets of expectations that executives within these many companies have for their future workers. We must remember this internal diversity, as well as the fact that Japanese companies – and the management practices used within them – are always changing.\(^{22}\)

**Outline of the Study**

My case study builds upon this assumption of diversity within Japanese business culture, as well as upon the assumption that sports are still perceived as powerful educational tools for the cultivation of a disciplined, team-oriented corporate workforce. It shows how one Japanese university sports coach is currently emphasizing ‘new corporate values’, such as creative and independent thinking, as well as rewarding individual performance rather than seniority to a greater extent than ever before. Working cooperatively within a team, understanding one’s role within the group, and speaking according to one’s position vis-à-vis others all remain important abilities valued by Japanese sports coaches and corporate executives, but in Japan’s recession and a fast-changing global economy Japanese sports are increasingly being called upon to teach young athletes how to be independent thinkers who can accept greater responsibilities at an early stage, if their performance and not simply their seniority merits them. There is a tension that develops as a result, however, between the ‘new’ expectations and the old, highlighting a significant gap between the discourses of basketball coaches and the practices of the university athletes under their command.

This article is based on discourse analysis of Japanese company organization, management, and Japanese sports-related literature, as well as on long-term field research alongside one of Japan’s most influential university basketball coaches (identified here by the pseudonym ‘Coach K’ to protect his identity). Drawing on these sources, I explored the expectations that Japanese sports coaches and corporate managers have for the members of their teams as well as the ways these coaches and managers are currently speaking about how they want their young athletes and workers to act.

\(^{20}\)Drucker, *Management.*

\(^{21}\)Cole, *Japanese Blue Collar.*

Long-term observational fieldwork was carried out with a university basketball club in the Tokyo area. At this field-site, in addition to frequent interviews with Coach K and his assistant coaches, questionnaires were distributed to his players regarding what they believed they learned in their sporting experiences. Specifically, I compared these empirical interview data with print and film representations of sporting and company life to explore the shared desire in each realm for team players who can work hard and show resilience.23 This comparison illustrates how certain educational experiences are believed to be shared by and valuable within both business and sport. It also shows how sports language is echoed in the Japanese business world, and how there are continuities in the goals aimed for and methods employed to attain success – and learn from failure – in both sport and corporate Japan. By evaluating these similar methods and goals, as well as the similarities in the language employed, we can begin to gain greater insight into the changing nature of leadership, teamwork, and hierarchy in Japanese sports teams and corporate organizations, as well as what makes individuals give their allegiance to a ‘team’.

I do not wish to suggest that all Japanese businessmen and women always adhere to the demands of the ‘corporate team’, nor do I wish to portray young Japanese athletes as automatons who only play sports to learn lessons for use in their future corporate lives. There are many exceptions to the conventional ‘salary man’ stereotype,24 which is too often assumed to describe all Japanese company employees. In Japanese sports as well, I have found much diversity evident within policy, practice, and pedagogy.25 At the same time, we cannot ignore the fact that certain dominant tropes are deployed in both Japanese sports and business that encourage allegiance to metaphorical ‘teams’. That being said, there are other, new expectations held by sports coaches and corporate managers in Japan today that appear to place more emphasis on the individual than ever before, expectations that merit attention because, among other things, they appear to conflict with widely held stereotypes of a ‘groupist’ Japanese society.

Representations of the Sports and Corporate Manager

Treatises on corporate management strategy have enjoyed a lengthy period of popularity in Japan, in large part because of the central role that corporations have played in the nation’s postwar prosperity; indeed, several of their authors have become household names. Perhaps the world’s most influential business-management theorist, Peter

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23Comparisons were made between my interviews and works such as the Japan Business Federation’s monthly magazine Keizai Trend, Funai Tetsurō, Becoming CEO of Five Companies by the Age of 40: It All Starts with Dreams and Will (hereafter, ‘Becoming’) (2010), and Iwasaki Natsumi, What If A Female High School Baseball Manager Read Drucker on Management? (hereafter, ‘What If’) (2009). Becoming is a how-to-guide for aspiring corporate managers, which draws on Funai’s half-century of business experience, both in Japan and abroad. What If is an immensely popular novel of ‘business fiction’, which has been serialized as a television anime on Japan’s public broadcaster, NHK, and will soon be released as a feature film. It is about a young female high school baseball team manager who employs the wisdom of management guru Peter Drucker to lead her team to success. Keizai Trend was selected because it is a valuable resource for understanding what Japanese corporate executives expect from their employees, Becoming was selected because it seeks to help others achieve success in a corporate environment, and What If was selected because it echoes some of the values perceived to be desirable in both the sporting and corporate realms, such as teamwork, effort, and resilience.

24Kumazawa, Portraits, 205ff.

25Miller, ‘From Bushidō to Science’.
Drucker, is now more popular than ever in Japan because his theories were revisited in a novel published in 2009. The novel, by Iwasaki Natsumi, has been spun into both a television anime serialization and a film about a fictional high school baseball manager named Kawashima Minami. *Moshi kōkōyakyū no joshi manējā ga Dorakka no manejimento o yondara* (What If a Female High School Baseball Team Manager Read Drucker on Management?) is currently among the best-selling books in Japan; in just its first year of publication, it sold nearly two million copies.

Drucker books, whether translations of originals or derivatives like Iwasaki’s, continue to hold a fascination for the Japanese public. On a day in May 2011, I counted 45 titles invoking the management guru in a reputable Kobe bookstore, the stock of these filling two long bookshelves. Drucker’s popularity is partly due to the fact that he once praised the allegedly Japanese cultural characteristic of groupism as a leading factor in the nation’s economic prosperity and social stability. The founders or CEOs of Toyota, Ito-Yokado and UNIQLO all name him as a formative influence. Drucker’s writings on leadership, teamwork, and success in business have been influential among business leaders around the world, but they have enjoyed special popularity in Japan.

In the beginning of *What If*, the protagonist Minami agrees to take over the managerial duties of her high school baseball team as a favor to a friend who has fallen ill. As team manager, Minami’s role is to do the necessary support work to ensure that her team can focus on playing baseball. Minami is dedicated, thorough, and hardworking. She energetically motivates and inspires the team, listens to the players, and sees things in proper perspective. She is portrayed as the consummate ‘team player’, even though she is not technically a player on the team.

Minami insists that the team can make it to the Summer All-Japan High School Baseball Championships (*Kōshien*), but even the team’s own captain and coach think Minami is wildly misguided in this belief. Considering their doubt a challenge to her managing ability, Minami buys a translation of Drucker’s *Management: Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices*. At first she thinks the book is about baseball and is disappointed to learn that it is not, but when she remembers that she has spent 2,100 yen for it, she decides it would be a waste not to read it. Minami soon begins referring to managers and players as ‘assets’ and dealing with issues related to marketing, labor, and innovation, including trying a new strategy that departs from the ‘old way’ of playing high school baseball. In her reading of Drucker on management, Minami focuses on the lines, ‘We have to be able to answer the question, “What is our core business?”’. After much soul-searching, Minami realizes that the core business of a baseball club is ‘leaving an impression on fans’ (*kandō o ataeru*), and it is this insight that becomes key to the way the drama unfolds.

The popularity of *What If* illustrates that many Japanese see a clear connection not just between sports and education, but also between sporting and corporate life. There are things to be learned through sports, and many of these lessons will be useful in the corporate world. As one blogger recently wrote, ‘I think *What If* is a great example to show how management can be done. It depicted most, if not all, of the fundamental elements in building a team (or an organization)’.

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27Iwasaki, *Moshi kōkōyakyū no joshi*, 57.

28Yamaguchi, ‘When Minami Meets Peter Drucker’.
Hierarchy, Leadership, and Independent Thinking

On the women’s university basketball team that I observed between 2008 and 2009, there were no inspirational leaders like Minami. In fact, there was something of a ‘vocal leadership vacuum’, despite the efforts of the team’s coaches. The head manager, Kitta, though an important organizational leader, worked behind the scenes and rarely spoke; Kume, the team’s senior captain, was a reluctant ‘vocal leader’;29 and though she was the team’s best player, third-year student Naka was only slowly finding her leadership voice as the team’s on-the-court leader.30 None of the fourth-year players were frequent starting members of the team, and only Kume was apportioned a notable amount of playing time. Though her peers appointed Kume team captain, her leadership efforts rarely took a vocal form, and since she did not play much in the team’s inter-collegiate matches, it would be hard to say she led by example, at least on the court. The team was led in scoring by two first-year players (Nani and Rasa) and the exceptionally talented third-year Naka. A first- (Nani), second- (Kusa), and third-year player (Naka) grabbed the lion’s share of rebounds. Because Kume was not often on the court, and because underclasswomen recorded the most significant on-court statistics, whenever the team found itself in challenging situations, the team’s younger players wondered who they should turn to for vocal leadership.

The proposition that seniority in service, more than talent and ability, serves to keep the Japanese group together has been argued by many, perhaps most convincingly by Nakane Chie.31 One of its corollaries is that leaders in Japan who can inspire loyalty to the group need not also possess personal merit. By these standards, Kume would have been a satisfactory leader; but since Nakane’s treatise was published in 1970, leadership in university basketball seems to have changed. Now, to be a vocal leader on any basketball team, a player has to be on the court long enough to garner the right to speak. Seniority is no longer sufficient to keep the group together.

One particular incident I observed brought this social transformation into clearer focus. On a cold autumn evening the team’s head coach (kantoku), Coach K, lost his temper during an important practice. It was a few days before a promotion/relegation match (irekaesen). Though this basketball club had historically been among the Kanto League’s best, the year I observed them they seemed destined to be demoted to the League’s second division, having lost too many games to stay in the top league. Throughout the season Coach K said he wanted his players to ‘think for themselves’, calling his philosophy ‘thinking basketball’ (kangaeru basuketto-bōru). The players were not, at least on this night, satisfying his request. The team’s starting members were scrimmaging against the second team, games that the starters usually won and, indeed, were expected to win. As the team’s best players, the starters were not supposed to lose such intra-squad matches, so when they mismanaged the final moments of the game and lost on a buzzer-beater, Coach K exploded:

29In many sports settings, ‘vocal leaders’ are often contrasted with leaders who lead by example with their performance (‘on-the-court leader’). In some cases, one person can play both roles but it is equally common to have one ‘vocal leader’ and one ‘on-the-court leader’.
30All the names of these players and staff are pseudonyms to protect their identities.
31Nakane, Japanese Society. One type of Japanese ‘leader’ is the matomeyaku, or ‘one who plays the role of bringing everything/everyone together’. Also common is the katakana term riidaa, which is derived from English.
What are you thinking out there?! Even middle school girls would know there were only 22 seconds left on the game clock. Think! Think! Think! ... It doesn’t matter anyway. There’s no overtime in this game and if you don’t know how much time is left on the clock I guess you do not really want to win. I can tell you until I’m blue in the face but if you can’t realize this for yourself, it’s just hopeless. Maybe if you played good defense it wouldn’t matter, but you don’t do that either. What do you think is going to happen when you play in the irekaesen next week? Huh? Do you think you can play like this and remain in the first division? Do you think that it’s enough to just come out here and run around the court like you did in high school? This is not high school! You have to think out there!

Coach K stormed out of the gymnasium, and a heavy silence ensued. The starters looked dejected. They turned to each other in startled silence, wondering what to do next. Soon afterward, all of the players held a team meeting without the coaches. The tension in the room was palpable. No one was quite sure who should speak first. Younger players sat with their chins on their chests, looking confused. Older players seemed eager to speak but chose to silence themselves. Finally, after a long period of quiet, Kume spoke up. She repeated much of what Coach K said, that the team needed to ‘think’ on the court and ‘communicate better’ with each other. Although other fourth-year benchwarmers added no comment, their nods in agreement seemed to suggest that the younger players needed to ‘shape up or ship out’.

This incident revealed Kume’s struggles to fill this ‘vocal leadership vacuum’, but it also showed how Coach K’s belief in ‘thinking basketball’ and performance-based meritocracy, rather than an emphasis on the coherence of the group and an age-based hierarchy, challenged his players to break out of the seniority paradigm. Coach K’s ‘philosophy of hierarchy’ was confusing to many players who were used to situations in which senior players played in games regardless of talent or ability, and younger players were restricted to support roles until they became upperclasswomen. As Cave explains, ‘In Japan, age-hierarchy often defines appropriate behavior’, so many of these players simply did not know how to behave in Coach K’s ‘new order’. His idea of ‘thinking basketball’ was also a challenge to understand; many players were used to so-called ‘shut up and follow me!’ (damatte, ore ni tsuite koi!) coaches who simply told players what to do and when to do it.

‘Thinking basketball’ was a philosophy Coach K had cultivated as a coach of several semi-professional, company-affiliated teams; but since these teams had been dissolved by their once sponsoring companies during Japan’s recession, Coach K’s own career path had been dealt a blow (ultimately he chose to go back to school and become a university professor and basketball coach), so he knew that for his own charges to be successful in Japan’s fast-changing economy, they too would have to ‘be quick on their feet’. While in the recent past coaches had simply expected their charges to listen, follow this age-based hierarchy, and act according to any superior’s orders, Coach K wanted the best players to play, regardless of age, and to think for themselves about their play. To Coach K, hierarchy was something that ought to be formed on the basis of merit, not seniority.

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Performance and Place

Coach K’s performance-based hierarchy also directly affected how players viewed each other. This became apparent when, at the end of the season, Rasa, one of the team’s standout freshmen, quit. She cited, among other things, a sense of guilt as the cause of her departure:

I had been thinking about quitting the team all of last season. There were many reasons for that, but I think the most important one was that I could not maintain the level of motivation that the rest of the team had. Everyone was working so hard but I did not have the confidence to do that myself. While everyone suffered so much when we lost and were so elated when we won, I was the only one who felt nothing. That was sad and painful. There were so many teammates who worked harder than me in practices and yet I was the one who got to play the most in games. I felt really bad about that.

Though she eventually returned to the team, Rasa’s brief hiatus showed how becoming a starter as a first-year player made her feel out of place within the group. Rasa felt that she had not put in as many hours of hard work as her seniors, and, based on her years of playing basketball for coaches who always apportioned playing time to the older players, Rasa came to assume that seniors would play regardless of talent or effort. When she found herself playing more than her seniors even though she knew they had been members of the team longer and had thus ‘worked harder than her’, she developed a sense of guilt and felt that quitting was the only way to rid herself of it.

When Rasa rejoined the team, it was a signal to her teammates that she was finally ready to accept her role as the standout player. This was a difficult step for Rasa to take, because it remained a fact that there was a form of seniority-based hierarchy on this basketball team; it was simply reproduced by the players themselves. When any player fell on the court during a game, it was always for a freshman to leap off the bench with a towel in hand to wipe up the sweat. This was not the coach’s rule, but rather a team rule that was widely understood and did not need to be enforced by a coach. Likewise, Ona, another first-year player, often worked out at the gym after lunch while other players practiced shooting because she said she needed to ‘yield’ (yuuzuru) to upperclasswomen. ‘It’s not a problem’, she explained, ‘I’ll just shoot baskets later when the hoops are free. Anyway, as a freshman I have to clean up at the end of practice, so I can’t do it then. Now you can see why I can’t wait to become a second-year player!’

If there were seniority-based hierarchical relations on this team, it was not because Coach K imposed them. It was not that he wanted to eliminate hierarchical relationships from the team entirely; he simply wanted to emphasize the fact that he was a basketball coach entrusted to train his team to win basketball games, not to ensure his players ‘yielded’ to their seniors. Older players wanted younger players to wait their turn, but Coach K wanted to win now. It was therefore difficult for many players to decide whether to do things the way they had done them on their high school basketball teams and recreate this seniority-based hierarchy, or to follow the coach’s performance-based lead.

As coaches like Coach K attempt to change the way that sports are done in Japan, we can see changes in the expectations that young people like Rasa have of their sports teams. Players on a basketball team, like employees of a corporation, must still fulfill their roles to the group and abide by its (often peer-determined) rules, but now they do
so bearing in mind that some leaders of Japanese organizations have new priorities which were not common in Japan in the recent past.

**Becoming a Team Player**

Despite these challenges for players like Kume and Rasa, many of my informants acknowledged that playing basketball, even under a coach like Coach K, helped them better understand the importance of teamwork. One of them, a fourth-year student called Ore, explained how important basketball was to her in this way: ‘By choosing to play sports at university, I was able to make a lot of friends, dive into playing basketball, and spend my youth in a way that I will treasure for the rest of my life’. I asked her what she learned through playing university basketball.

Through my experiences here, I learned of the intensity (kibishisa) at the frontlines of competition. I learned all sorts of things from our daily practices, including the way to play basketball, basketball techniques at the top level and the way a team operates. I also cultivated my ability to communicate the things I have learned through sports, including the value of effort and the ability to interact with older people. By belonging to a team since elementary school, my social personality was formed and I was able to learn how to talk with anyone.

Being part of this basketball club helped Ore communicate with various people, including her peers, coaches, subordinates and superiors, and even ‘old boys’ (‘OB’) and ‘old girls’ (‘OG’), who were once themselves members of the club.

Coach K’s coaching philosophy of performance-based hierarchy and individualistic ‘thinking basketball’ clearly posed challenges to players, but it did not stand in the way of Ore learning through her participation in sports how to become an articulate, sociable person. Even though she was not allotted much playing time in her senior season, simply being part of this ‘team’, with its diverse mix of personalities and ranks, prepared Ore for corporate life. Ore proved her worth to Coach K as much with her efforts in practice as with her performance in games. In fact, the coach thought so highly of Ore that he invited her to pursue a Master’s degree under him upon graduation.33 She was a great example of what many basketball enthusiasts call a ‘team player’ (in Japanese the term used is chiimu puree), a term widely heard in the corporate world as well.

**Families, Teams and Companies**

It is often said that sports teams are like families, and for much of the postwar period Japanese companies have been discussed in a similar light.34 For example, the bank that Rohlen observed in the 1970s was among the most important sources of intimacy and security for its employees, alongside the family, kin, and early friendships.35 In such

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33Reporting on cross-cultural studies of achievement-related beliefs, Sandra Machida has noted that ‘Japanese mothers and children emphasized effort’ by contrast to the focus on ability common among Americans; see Machida, ‘Maternal and Cultural Socialization’, 247–251. The high regard Coach K had for Ore may in part be explained by this perspective.

34Rohlen, *For Harmony and Strength*.

35Ibid.
companies, ‘affection and hierarchy [were] understood as mutually reinforcing rather than contradictory’. Because social harmony was paramount within this company and its work groups, when deviant behavior arose the errant individual usually withdrew from group activities so as to avoid open confrontation. When conflict arose within the company, removing oneself from the group was seen as the most honorable way of resolving the situation.

Indeed, that is exactly what Rasa did when she decided to leave her basketball team. Most of the informants at the life insurance company that was Fiona Graham’s field-site in the 1980s and 1990s lost their identity when faced with the prospect of becoming suddenly detached from the company, because identity was primarily formed by this group membership. Fitting into groups acquires such importance in Japanese life that, as Graham observed, ‘as long as one goes from school to university to a large Japanese company, one may never really need to develop a strong sense of individual identity’. On the other hand, individuals at the company knew they faced ostracism and bullying if they stood out from the group. This is a risk commonly encountered in group or team situations, and it is probably why Rasa felt bad about being such a talented player; it meant she was singled out ‘out of turn’ and forced to stand outside the group.

Another established familial feature of the daily operations of both workplaces and sports teams in Japan is so-called ‘senior/junior’ (senpai/kohai) relationships. Rohlen believed the senpai/kohai relationship was not a coincidental parallel between family and company life. The cultural logic of the parent/child and older/young sibling relationships in the former is often repeated in the superior/subordinate relationships of the latter. In exchange for obedience, senpai protect and teach kohai, with a ‘strong mix of encouragement and criticism, all in the context of a close friendship’, and kohai become senpai when it comes their turn. Rohlen indicates that these senpai/kohai relationships have been especially formative for young Japanese men for many decades, especially in sports teams, but the problem for Rasa was that she was being asked to be one of the team’s ‘on-the-court leaders’ even though she was not senior enough to be one of the team’s senpai, a role that almost always implies vocal leadership whether one can perform well on the court or not.

Sports and corporate teams differ from each other in important ways, of course. Their respective goals – winning a game vs. winning a project/contract or market share – are of different degrees of importance. A losing team in a sports game will not go hungry, though this is a real possibility for the employees of a business that does not succeed. Significantly, it is also the case that neither of these kinds of team mirrors the family exactly. Both sports teams and companies are ‘artificial’ organizations that must build group solidarity; there is no inherent unconditional love. Such ‘artificial’ group solidarity is often cultivated through ritualized social activities (e.g. doing morning exercises or ‘group training’, singing company songs, living in company dorms, and going on

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37Graham, Inside the Japanese Company.
38Ibid., 162.
39Ibid., 155.
41Ibid., 196, n. 9.
42There are other differences between sports teams and company teams, too. Sports teams can generate a strong sense of loyalty because they are usually joined voluntarily, whereas joining a company or a work group is generally viewed as a necessity of survival. As a result, some companies have difficulty securing the unstinting allegiance of their employees.
spiritual retreats). Similar activities occur on university sports teams, a fact that became apparent when Coach K arranged an informal ‘drinking party’ (nomikai) in one of the back rooms of the university gymnasium, even though some of the players were under Japan’s legal drinking age. Group solidarity was so important that the coach was willing to break the law to foster it.

Language and Behavior

Irrespective of the actual differences between sports teams, company teams, and families, however, it is clear that there are linguistic parallels signifying the perceived association between sports and company life, especially in terms of discipline and sacrifice. Sports language has long supplied common metaphors used by businesspeople, especially male corporate managers, regarding the competitive aspects of business. Sports-themed posters adorn the walls of many corporate offices, extolling the importance of character, determination, focus, and resilience. Japanese corporate managers often invoke sports-themed quotations to motivate themselves or inspire their underlings, and they often use terms like ‘persevere’ (ganbaru) to do so. It is not uncommon to find corporate managers recalling lessons from their sporting experiences to summon the willpower to work overtime. For example, many former students of high school basketball coach Tanaka Kuniaki believe that his use of ‘hard training’ made them strong adults and that their sacrifices for the team were worth it. One 51-year-old corporate CEO explained that after he was found smoking a cigarette, Coach Tanaka stood by his policy of ‘collective responsibility’ (rentai sekinin) and made the whole team run as punishment:

There were many times we were worn out by his ‘hard training’ [shigoki]. We were thirsty and we thought we would die... Nowadays, when I go drinking with Coach Tanaka, I think to myself, ‘Ah, that beer tastes good’, just like when he would let us drink water after our long training sessions.

It is in the interest of corporations to seek out such workers – and promote them rapidly – because they require little external motivation. Such workers have already learned through sports participation the value of sacrifice for a long-term goal and endurance for the sake of the group. Sports participation thus also conditions young athletes into a particular form of discourse and practice that they can employ, if they choose, in corporate life.

This is a sort of ‘linguistic habitus’, to use the term developed by Pierre Bourdieu; through such utterances, athletes and corporate employees condition themselves into a disciplined life that accepts the sacrifice of individual needs for the betterment of the ‘team’. The use of such ‘team’ language then reproduces the existing social structure, which itself values ‘team play’. For Bourdieu, habitus refers to the internal embodiment

43These examples can be found in Graham, Inside the Japanese Company; Rohlen, For Harmony and Strength; and Vogel, Japan as Number One.
44For an examination of the use of drinking parties for organizational solidarity, see Rohlen, For Harmony and Strength, 98–100 and 108–112, and Ben-Ari, ‘At the Interstices’, 129.
45Kopp, ‘Warning: Ganbaru Can Be Dangerous To Your Health’.
46Tanaka, Mite minufuri ka.
47Quoted in Tanaka, Mite minufuri ka, 34–35.
of external social structures that we acquire over the course of a lifetime, as well as the structure through which we produce our thoughts and actions. These thoughts and actions in turn create our external social structures. In other words, we create our social world through our individual actions (including our choice of words) while simultaneously embodying these social worlds in everything we do. The involvement of the body is a key part of why the language of discipline, effort, sacrifice, and resilience can be so powerful in both sporting and corporate life; since Bourdieu’s notion of habitus ‘requires the systematic and sophisticated training of the body’ and since sports clearly train the body, they can be very influential on the production and reproduction of human behavior.

Flexibility and innovation within the ‘team’

The enduring strength of this linguistic ‘team-oriented’ habitus in Japan makes it difficult for companies to expect independence-oriented thinking from their employees, yet while Japanese companies still demand that employees work well within a team setting, they are also increasingly asking them to be flexible, creative, and innovative. In fact, many corporate executives today believe such qualities are essential to Japan’s future economic growth.

Public figures such former McKinsey partner Kenichi Ohmae have emphasized the importance of adaptability and creative thinking for Japanese businesspeople to be successful. A close look at Economic Trend, the magazine of Keidanren (Japan Business Federation), also shows that executives from many large companies are interested in cultivating these newer qualities in employees. For example, Taniguchi Ichirō, Chairman of Mitsubishi Electric Corporation, writes, ‘In both the short- and long-term, it would be highly efficacious to construct an environment conducive to the development of human resources that are flexible and innovative.’ Miura Satoshi, President and CEO of Nippon Telegraph and Telephone Corporation, also lauds the Japanese innovators who have come up with a host of new products, including eco-friendly motor vehicles, convenience stores, and game consoles. Corporate bosses like Chō Fujio, Chairman of Toyota Motor Corporation, readily acknowledge the need for flexibility and innovation in a quickly changing, ‘globalized’ world. These executives know that there is an important connection between independent thinking and creativity and economic growth, as Higuchi Kōkei, Chairman of Tokio Marine & Fire Insurance, explains:

A decline in students’ academic ability, their lack of creativity and degenerating morale among them due to a weak will to learn are bound to lead to an
unavoidable degradation in the superiority of human resources, which has been the driving force of the economic growth of our country.55

Such executives do not seem to think that individual drive and responsibility to the group are at odds in any way; that is, company employees can be creative and innovative within a group setting.

There is further evidence that demonstrates this desire for independently minded team-players. Keizai Dōyūkai (Japan Association of Corporate Executives) undertakes an annual survey regarding the sort of human talent companies expect out of their new hires/recent graduates. In one part of the survey, employers are asked the question, ‘What sorts of abilities do you consider when you are hiring new graduates?’56 In 2008 and 2010, the following were considered the most important attributes of a desirable potential employee: 1) passion/desire; 2) the ability to act (‘being a go-getter’); 3) cooperativeness; 4) the ability to think ethically; and 5) the ability to solve problems. The first two attributes on this list seem to emphasize expectations of individual independence – no one can force you to be passionate, have desire, or have the will to act – while 3) and 4) imply the importance of thinking of others and thinking of the group.

Funai Tetsurō, one of the pillars of the Japanese postwar economy and one of the world’s 500 richest people, offers various suggestions for how young Japanese business-people may become corporate executives, yet he told me that he worried that too many of them lacked a ‘hungry spirit’.57 In contrast to the ability to work well with others, convey poise, and inspire support from fellow employees, traits that Vogel said characterized good corporate leaders in the late 1970s,58 Funai believes it is effort, discipline, drive, and tenacity that determine a good leader. He writes, ‘Leaders must have dreams. Leaders have to instill subordinates with dreams, too. To do that, leaders must struggle more than anyone else. That is why tenacity (shūnen) is so important.’59 Leaders must also be independent (‘you protect your own castle’),60 they must ‘act on their own’,61 and they must ‘be extremely disciplined with themselves’.62 It appears that executives at Japan’s oldest, largest and most profitable companies are today expecting young employees to be flexible, innovative, and thoughtful actors who can put their ideas into action to solve problems, all without causing unnecessary tension within the organization.

Conclusion

While recent changes to the Japanese economy have not challenged the perception that young people can grow as school and university sports participants, these changes have influenced the methods that some Japanese sports coaches, such as Coach K, employ to achieve such growth, in part because the goals of such sports-based learning have changed. This coach’s own experience suggests that company lives in Japan are now

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55 Higuchi, ‘Education Is Fundamental to Everything’.
56 Keizai Dōyūkai, ‘Kigyō no saiyō’.
57 Funai, Yonjūsai, 253.
58 Vogel, Japan as Number One, 149.
59 Funai, Yonjūsai, 245–246.
60 Ibid., 237.
61 Ibid., 246.
62 Ibid., 245.
more unstable, uncertain, and fast-paced than they were in the past, and there is evidence that some values young Japanese are asked to learn today (such as independence, innovativeness, and flexibility) differ from the ones expected of them in the past (such as group allegiance and respect for rank-and-file order). Interestingly, these changes in the workplace do not seem to have affected the rather high levels of sports participation that Japan enjoys, a trend that might have been expected considering the fact that young students now know they need to develop an array of ‘practical’ skills to secure employment upon graduation. The logical conclusion to be drawn is that young Japanese athletes – and the parents who encourage them to play – continue to see sports participation as something purposeful as well as enjoyable. While the popularity of What If attests to a consistently strong perception that sports are useful for preparing young people for (corporate) life, there is much disagreement within Japan about what sort of preparation that should be. Should sports raise independent thinkers or group-first thinkers, or perhaps people who can quickly alternate between the two?

Participation on a university sports team does prepare young Japanese for company life in many important ways, not least because the linguistic parallels evident between these two realms habituate participants into a ‘team’- or ‘family’-oriented way of life, but the claim that sports teams and corporate teams are similar ‘familial’ entities rests upon the assumption that the goals of individuals within such organizations dovetail with the goals of the corporate body. Increasingly, it seems unlikely that this assumption is always valid. In addition to the many thousands of Japanese company employees who commit suicide or die from overwork each year, an increasing number have seen their hours cut, benefits trimmed, and job security compromised. The proportion of part-time employees in the workforce has risen, and workers can no longer assume that their company will always have tasks for them to complete. As a result, the faith that many Japanese employees have in their companies has waned, and in the aftermath of the ‘triple disaster’ of 11 March 2011, trust in authority figures in general seems to be dwindling.

Coach K’s own career was significantly altered by abrupt economic changes prompting a loss of faith in the way things used to be. Now he prioritizes performance over seniority and independent thought over group deference; and his lesson for the players has been that nothing will be served to you on a silver platter, so you had better start thinking about how you can perform better as an individual so you can win more often as a team. That lesson seems to increasingly resonate within Japan’s business community as well.

Although he is quite influential in the Japanese basketball community, Coach K’s approach to coaching has certainly not yet taken over Japanese basketball, even at the university level. Nor have his new ideas always been well received. Proof of that comes from the fact that his own players have found difficulty reconciling his pedagogical approach with what they learned from other Japanese coaches at lower levels of basketball. Although such ‘new’ coaching expectations have not replaced ‘old’ coaching expectations, there is clearly a tension between the two that has yet to be reconciled. No matter how much coaches like K emphasize the need for ‘thinking’ basketball players, on the court his players have found it noticeably difficult to reconcile his rhetoric with the practice of basketball they had grown accustomed to under other coaches. Similarly, no matter how much corporate bosses emphasize the importance

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63 Miller, ‘Bushidō vs. Science’.
64 Fu, An Emerging Non-Regular Labour Force.
65 ‘A Question of Trust’.
66 Miller, ‘Bushidō vs. Science’.
of independence, flexibility, and innovation, in their cubicles Japanese employees are likely having trouble reconciling such new expectations with the group-first mentality characteristic of Japanese social life. More research on that issue still needs to be done, but the rhetoric that company bosses are now using has probably been as challenging for Japanese employees as it has been for the basketball players I observed struggling to adjust to Coach K’s ‘new’ pedagogy.

For many, of course, this is not an issue of ‘either old or new’ but rather one of ‘both old and new’. The review of Keidanren and Keizai Dōyūkai materials suggests that corporate bosses see no problem using the rhetoric of group spirit and creativity, deference to (senior members of) the group and individual initiative, because they believe that all of these skills and abilities are needed for the success of Japanese business in the global economy. The underlying premise is that these ‘old’ and ‘new’ values are not really in conflict after all, but my fieldwork demonstrates that many young people do sense a conflict between the so-called ‘traditional’ group- and seniority-oriented values and the so-called ‘new’ individual-performance-oriented values. In some cases they sense this conflict so strongly that they simply feel the need to withdraw, as we saw when Rasa chose to leave the team. All of this suggests that reconciling the ‘old’ with the ‘new’ is in fact more difficult than sports educators like Coach K and corporate executives would hope, and that the transformations such leaders advocate may have already come to the sports and business culture discourse, but they will take more time to reach the basketball court and company cubicle.

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