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## From Grade Schooler to Great Star: Childhood Development and the “Golden Age” in the World of Japanese Soccer

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## From Grade Schooler to Great Star

### *Childhood Development and the “Golden Age” in the World of Japanese Soccer*

Elise Edwards

*The enjoyment of sports,  
The enjoyment of soccer,  
The joy of moving your body,  
The feeling the moment you score a goal.  
The experiences and things learned  
During the golden age  
Are great assets for the future.<sup>1</sup>*

If you are a parent living almost anywhere in Japan with preschool-age children, you may have seen advertisements for or already participated in one of the Japan Football Association’s (JFA) “soccer kids” festivals. These festivals target children six years and under and are a central component of a JFA educational initiative launched in 2003, interchangeably called the “kids’ programme” and “kids’ project.”<sup>2</sup> The JFA hosts these daylong, high-energy gatherings for preschoolers along with other events, such as “ladies and girls festivals” and “family *futsal*,” several times per month in prefectures from Hokkaido to Kyushu.<sup>3</sup> Uniqlo, Japan’s globally known clothing manufacturer and retailer, sponsors the most heavily advertised and attended premier kids’ events. In 2015, the JFA proudly held fifteen official “Uniqlo Soccer Kids” events, and for each provided a complete report on the day’s activities, including photos, reflections from coaches and prominent attendees as well as tallies of the number of “soccer family” members—kids, parents, and other guests—in attendance. In less densely populated prefectures, such as Toyama and Fukui, attendance runs between two thousand to three thousand people, while events held in Tokyo (at prominent sports venues such as Tokyo Dome and Seibu Stadium) easily draw close to ten thousand attendees, including well over two thousand participants under the age of six.

At these events, parents often hear presentations from JFA coaches and receive pamphlets outlining the importance of physical activity for their children, and, in particular, the importance of play. These inform them that it is vital that children learn to play with a soccer ball, of course. However, the pamphlets point out that it is equally critical to provide children with environments where they can learn many other movements: to run, climb, swing, balance, throw, and so on. Parents are instructed to allow their children to play freely, and to avoid intervening even when they are having “trouble” with playmates. Some pamphlets also look ahead in children’s development and inform parents that around the age of nine or ten, their son or daughter will be entering the all-important “golden age.”

A concept introduced by top JFA technical staff in the mid-1990s, the golden age is the period between the ages of nine and twelve years when the opportunity for physical skill development is said to peak. Since the early 2000s, the rapid growth of JFA development programs targeting youth players and their coaches has popularized the golden age to the point that it is now ubiquitously recognized and frequently used in youth soccer coaching contexts. While “youth development” was certainly a part of soccer programming for the JFA and its associated local clubs in previous decades, the JFA’s kids’ program, inaugurated in 2003, constituted an unprecedented reorganization of resources and activities focused on increasing the number of children playing soccer and the quality of the training provided to them. At the organization’s own admission, a great impetus for the change was the men’s national team’s disappointing performance at the 2002 World Cup, which Japan cohosted with South Korea. A handful of key administrators within the JFA developed the new approach, and with it, a new understanding of children’s development and potential.

The concept of the golden age popularizes what I will call a vision of a segmented childhood, places a new sense of primacy and gravity on a particular period within new age divisions, and reframes the relationship between youth experience, future potential, and adult performance. The golden age child sits at the center of a system of age grades and developmental stages that popularizes a reformulated vision of the early years of a child’s life and figures one’s potential in adulthood as intricately and indissolubly tied to experiences and learning accrued prior to the age of twelve. The JFA’s kids’ project also draws on more long-standing assumptions about the importance of play in child development and is positioned as a clear response to contemporary anxieties around childhood and children. JFA officials appeal to popular fears about children and their future to justify and underscore the value of their activities, yet offer up their own unique set of problems and solutions as well. JFA officials’ desires for stronger national team players to help the country win a World Cup, and concerns among parents and society more broadly that children’s futures are less than bright, converge in a new game plan that explicitly outlines a path of proper development and skill acquisition that may impose new kinds of pressures and educational expectations on children at

exceedingly young ages. Consistent with earlier nationalist projects that have tied Japan's successful future to the proper education and training of children, the JFA locates and imagines not only future World Cup championships, but also Japan's future more broadly, in the bodies of children. (An alternative future is represented by juxtaposing images of soldiers and children; see chapter 9.)

#### CHILDREN AND NATION

While many JFA administrators and coaches have long extolled the societal benefits of soccer, the men's national team's disappointing results at the 2002 World Cup inspired a dramatic overhaul of the organization's mission and methods, which meant a new approach to the general population and an increased focus on a particular subset of citizens. In its own words, winning a (men's) World Cup by 2050 was going to require a "reformation" and a "reborn JFA" focused and ready to provide children with "the appropriate content at the appropriate age" (JFA 2004: 9). JFA leaders also boldly claimed that the new approach would be good not only for soccer but also for the nation. New marketing efforts promoted the JFA as interested in social welfare and the sport of soccer as a means of producing happier and healthier citizens. The organization liberally attached terms such as "grassroots" and "soccer family" to campaigns encouraging people to participate in soccer regardless of age or ability. The most pronounced shift in the JFA's approach, however, was a new focus on children. "Children are our 'fortune,' so let's get started!" begins the opening line of the JFA's Kid's Programme pamphlet (2004). Having laid out ambitious targets to grow the "soccer family" to five million strong by 2015, and to a whopping ten million by 2050, JFA officials had to increase soccer opportunities for young children, which they have done with considerable success.<sup>4</sup> On the ideological front, the organization also constructed a narrative about the current state of Japanese children, the societal dangers they face, and the role of soccer in curing both the children and their maleficent environment.

Despite its ambitious targets for the "soccer family," the current popularity of soccer in Japan points to the existing societal reach of the JFA and its potential influence in the future. Annually, approximately 7.5 million people—about 6 percent of Japan's total population—play soccer either competitively or recreationally. Almost one million soccer players, males and females ranging from youth to seniors, are formally registered players with the JFA. Based on survey evidence from the JFA and the Sasakawa Sports Foundation, it is reasonable to estimate that at least a quarter or more of all adolescents play soccer and are involved with soccer educators in either school or club settings at some point in their elementary and middle school years. In Japan, as in the United States, soccer is the most popular children's sport. A recurrent survey question in magazines and newspapers involves asking elementary and middle school students about future career

aspirations. I have yet to see a survey in the last five years in which the top answer for boys was something other than “become a professional soccer player.”

Both online and in print, the JFA’s youth program coaching and promotional materials are replete with images of young children of all sizes running with abandon across manicured expanses of green grass, standing contentedly in coordinated uniforms in front of coaches and parents, and playing in large groups, grinning mouths open, their giggles and shrieks almost audible. Both boys and girls appear in the majority of images, thus visually implying that *all* children are “JFA kids.”

However, the running narrative in promotional materials also presents the impetus for the kids’ project as the desire to improve the men’s national team and win future men’s World Cups. The fact that a gender-inclusive children’s development program is presented as intended to help the country win a future *men’s* World Cup is just one example of the ambivalent relationship that the JFA has with female players. Japan’s women’s national team, popularly known as Nadeshiko Japan, won the women’s World Cup in 2011. While it has been impossible for JFA leaders to ignore the team, which captured the hearts of the nation and won the prestigious National Honor Award, the women’s team’s achievements have never factored into the “JFA Dream” (2005a), and the JFA does not recognize the women’s team’s World Cup win in 2011 as *the* World Cup championship for which they have been so arduously striving. This does not mean, however, that top soccer officials are against the promotion of girls and women’s soccer. Central to all JFA initiatives is a commitment to the value of soccer for promoting the physical and emotional health of all children regardless of gender. JFA coaches and administrators also now commonly acknowledge that supporting female soccer players ends up benefiting the men’s side of the sport: beyond expanding the nation’s soccer fan base, soccer-loving mothers are a critical means for ensuring the production of future stars. The fact that the men’s national team’s performances serve as *the* measure of the nation’s soccer prowess is significantly shaped by the financial landscape of global soccer, in which men’s competitions are the premier money-making events. In addition, persistent assumptions about inherent male superiority in almost all athletic realms set men’s performances as the yardstick for calculating not only individual skill, but also the sporting skill of a nation. With regard to the JFA’s kids’ project, a genuine faith in the positive, child-strengthening—and thus the nation-strengthening—potential of soccer guides the “soccer for all” approach; however, the male bias in Japan and internationally also guarantees that the performance of the country’s “best” team—the men’s national team—will be the barometer of the quality and success of all youth development programs, and that a *men’s* World Cup championship will be the ultimate goal.

Returning to the idyllic scenes of young boys and girls frolicking with soccer balls in JFA kids’ project publications, one is immediately struck by the jarring counterpoint often present in the accompanying text. “Children are in danger!”



FIGURE 11. “Children are in danger!” or “Children are danger!” from a section on “changes occurring in children,” JFA’s Kids’ Programme pamphlet, 2004.

large bold script exclaims across the bodies of preschoolers rolling with great hilarity over each other on the ground (figure 11). Due to the ambiguity of the Japanese language, the text could also read “Children are danger!” There is reason to believe the double entendre is intended. The images communicate quickly and positively that soccer is good and fun for children. However, as the reader is drawn in, the text proclaims that beyond the images, and even within the children, danger is present. The logic of the narrative is that a carefully and scientifically managed childhood *could* be idyllic—and this is the future that the JFA wants to promise. Playing both the role of doomsayer and savior, and posing children as both at great risk and of great promise, the JFA engages with some of the most popular contemporary tropes about children in Japan—as well as the national body more broadly—while also trying to make a case for its own societal importance.

Rather than focusing on soccer, as one might expect, much of the content in “Kids’ Programme” publications is devoted to the perilousness of children’s corporeal and psychological development. For instance, a one page of the pamphlet aimed at parents has an entire page dedicated to current statistics on the most common childhood problems, including physical ailments, school-related issues, juvenile delinquency and criminality, *and* the country’s declining birthrate (JFA 20094). (Perhaps “kids are in danger” in part simply because there are fewer of them?) Drawing from an issue of the “Children’s Physical and Mental Health

White Paper” (Kodomo no karada to kokoro 2005), which includes a compilation of preschool and elementary school teachers’ reflections on students’ “abnormalities in physical function,” the JFA pamphlet presents a rather curious list of “top ten” issues, including bad posture, an inability to sit still in class, lack of flexibility, regular complaints about being “tired,” dry skin, and abnormally low body temperature. Longitudinal data is also included, comparing recent data on “abnormalities” with top ten lists from 1990 and 1978, all to underscore the alarming fact that the most common ailments for primary schooled aged children have increased two- to three-fold (JFA 2004: 6).

The problems witnessed in children today, according to the JFA, are caused by dramatic changes in their social and physical environments. A prominent narrative in JFA coaching materials engages in a popular dyadic trope contrasting an idyllic “past” with a problematic “present” (JFA 2004: 5). Children are cast as disadvantaged by a world filled with television, computer games, and other distractions encouraging solitary play. The loss of large families means they are prone to over-scheduling and over-policing by ambitious parents and unable to benefit from the competition and socialization lessons that apparently come with numerous siblings. The “past” is figured as a time of greater discipline and social consciousness, yet also a space of greater freedom to play, to engage with friends, and to explore personal interests (for more on play in the past, see chapters 2 and 8). Teachers held higher status, parents were better disciplinarians, and there was great interaction and connection across generations. According to the JFA, the present social decline takes physical form in the bodies of children, who are increasingly obese, have poor posture due to inadequate back strength, lack dexterity with their hands, suffer from flat feet, “lay atop their desks,” and are “unable to sit properly in their chairs” due to overall physical infirmity.

Echoing the JFA’s ambiguous entreaty about children being “in danger” or actually “dangerous” themselves, several scholars of Japan have pointed to the rise of a discourse over the last two decades that envisions not only children at risk, but also children *as* risk (Allison 2013; Arai 2000, 2003). Repeating concerns commonly circulated in the media, the JFA alerts readers that “today’s children” are potential victims of school bullying, health problems such as high blood pressure and obesity, and psychological threats such as “acute social withdrawal syndrome” (*hikikimori*). Then again, they are also perpetrators. Since the 1990s, tabloids have regularly featured stories of children as the most pathological of criminals, attacking and sometimes killing their parents or other children. While steering clear of the most sensational stories, JFA materials point to the more commonplace problems that many fear are precursors to the most extreme behaviors: children cannot concentrate, exhibit sudden emotional outbursts, skip school, disrupt and commit violence in classrooms, and are arrested at ever-higher rates. The consistent culprit for all problems—physical, psychological, and behavioral—is a radical reduction in the time children play outside. Reversing that trend, by engaging children in

soccer and other sports, will not only save children, according to JFA officials, but the Japanese nation.

Leading scholars of childhood have consistently contended that societal paranoia about dangerous children, or childhood in danger, is typically connected to broader malaise rooted in socioeconomic instability and uncertain futures (Allison 2013; Arai 2003, 2005; Frühstück 2003; Ivy 1995; Stephens 1995). Failing children become both metaphors for and physical evidence of a nation in danger. Throughout JFA materials, changing sociocultural realities, particularly in the realms of home and school, are marked as prime causes of the physical and psychological decline of children. However, the causal relationship also becomes ambiguous: Children's weak and inactive bodies are presented as both reflecting and producing social and moral decline of the nation. "It's not just the soccer world," states current JFA president, Kawabuchi, at the opening of one kids' publication, "the entire Japanese nation must sense the impending crisis and come to grips with it" (JFA 2004: 2). Similarly, pointing to the JFA's "Dream" project and the ultimate goal of winning a men's World Cup by 2050, the organization states that "this is not simply a goal of the JFA, but rather a promise exchanged with all of the people of the nation" (JFA 2011: 2). Japan's "future" depends on parents and other adults applying JFA knowledge in their "own real lives" and taking responsibility to make sure that children are healthy, happy, and in an environment where they can "strive for large dreams" (2). More than anything, however, the future depends on children; they are not only "assets for the future," but "leaders" needed in order for the promise exchanged between the JFA and the nation to become a reality (2). While children are posed as bearers of great responsibility, sport is figured as the only resource left to correct the social ills that are hurting their chances at success. "Sports possess things that are lacking in society," readers are reminded regularly, and provide the only route to restoring them (see JFA 2004: 4). The JFA's child-focused project is nothing less than a nation-saving campaign.

This is not the first time that leaders in Japan have drawn connections between the bodies of children and the health of the nation, and, additionally, trusted in outdoor play and sport for children as a means of strengthening the national body. Until the final years of the Asia-Pacific War, physical education and school sports were central components of the Japanese imperialist state's efforts to train stronger and more disciplined soldiers, and produce healthier mothers capable of reproducing greater numbers of future soldiers to populate Japan's growing empire (Narita 1988: 97). During the Occupation, administrators for the Supreme Commander of Allied Powers (SCAP) again identified children's physical education classes as critical sites for rebuilding the war-torn nation and strengthening the moral fiber of the country. Educators from the United States, for instance, proposed that democratic ideals could be effectively inculcated through activities such as baseball, basketball, badminton, and square dancing (Edwards 2003).



The nationalist rhetoric infusing the JFA's kids' program resonates with language used to justify earlier initiatives. The organization has legitimized its efforts to corral the financial backing of municipalities for new professional J-League teams by asserting that soccer promotes positive citizenship in the form of "sports volunteerism" as well as new relationships between residents, local governments, and corporations that hold the promise of a "happier country" (J-League 1993). The "JFA Academy" system, a year-round residential school and soccer training system started in the early 2000s for promising middle- and high-school-aged players supports a model of "elite education" that the JFA argues is necessary to train leaders ready to "pull up" the rest and help Japan compete on the "world level" (Tashima 2007: 34). The JFA consistently connects its projects with broader national affairs, actively shaping popular understandings of "Japan's problems" while offering up soccer as the surest path to solving them.

While the JFA has eagerly expressed interest in helping the nation-state, the state has reciprocated at times by working in the interest of soccer, and much of that support has been focused on youth. Beginning in the 1980s, government officials, notably Prime Minister Nakasone, dedicated more money to a variety of sports, including soccer, as a means of addressing perceived problems with Japan's image internationally, national pride domestically, and school children specifically. Poor performances by Japanese athletes at international competitions motivated much of the support, but for Nakasone sport was just one prong in a broader plan focused on schools and other institutions that he felt needed to do more to instill national pride, protect "national culture," and positively influence Japan's troubled youth (Seki 1997).

The issue most quickly targeted by Nakasone's advisors and consistently supported financially through the early 1990s by the Ministry of Education and the Japan Sports Association (JASA) was the education of well-trained coaches. In 1987, approximately thirteen hundred soccer coaches were licensed instructors with the JFA, and licensing courses were held at most once annually. By 1993, however, the JFA announced ambitious plans to create sixty coaching academies nationwide and to train and license ten thousand new soccer instructors within the next five years (JFA 1994: 4–11). In 2000, the JFA had exceeded its goals, reporting a total of almost twenty-two thousand licensed coaches. According to the JFA's most recent published reports, in 2015 the count reached almost seventy-five thousand, with the largest proportion (over forty thousand) holding "D" licenses, the most common license for those coaching children's teams (2015). The nationalist interests of state leaders' allowed the JFA to build the country's largest contingent of licensed coaches in any sport in Japan, and more than half of them are trained to work with the youngest of players, those under twelve years—including those in the "golden age." While the Nakasone administration was more focused on gold medals, and the JFA more on the men's World Cup, both goals justified and motivated large

expenditures of money and energy and an intensified focus on training children in more programmatic and calculated ways.

The JFA's new formula, tying an elusive World Cup championship to the proper training of the country's youngest soccer players, inextricably links World Cup success, the welfare of the Japanese nation, and the health and well-being of children. It also, however, often conflates them as one and the same. In coaching and promotional materials filled with smiling children and foreboding messages about their welfare, the JFA presents coaches as knowledgeable protectors of children and green soccer fields as havens from a range of contemporary problems negatively affecting childhood. While much of JFA rhetoric engages with an existing discourse about dangerous and endangered children, the organization is also popularizing new knowledge about childhood. The JFA's kids' project is constructing new ways of conceptualizing children, their potentials, and the greatest threats to their well-being.

The ultimate concern for the JFA when it comes to Japan's children is not a general state of ill health, inactivity, or lack of outside play, but rather that children are not learning what they should when they should. According to JFA kids' program materials, many common contemporary child health issues, such as poor posture, fallen arches, inadequate dexterity, and other physical ailments are occurring because children are not learning "age-sensitive abilities" at the appropriate times in their development. "Critical periods" are being missed and a generation of children is under threat of compromising their adulthoods. While couched in images of frivolous and frolicking children's play, the JFA's kids' program is very deliberate and specific in its goals: to provide learning environments "appropriate to a child's stage of development." The JFA's kids' program is built on a model of child development that privileges age as the most reliable predictor of a child's abilities and potential, creates hierarchies of value between children, and marks the period known as the golden age as a time in human life like no other. Similar to the JFA's ambivalent messages about children as promise but also under threat, the construct of the golden age presents an analogous tension of promise and fear as it celebrates the possibilities of this magical window for learning, while simultaneously underscoring the failures that have already occurred and are yet to come if it is not approached properly.

#### THE CRISIS OF CRITICAL PERIODS

Takeshi Ono is credited with introducing the golden age paradigm to the Japanese soccer world. He began writing about the concept as early as 1996, and by the early 2000s it had become the centerpiece of the JFA's kids' development project. In the mid-1990s, Ono was arguably at the peak of his influence in the JFA, as a member of the coaching staff of the 1998 men's World Cup team and a JFA Technical

Committee member. Now the head manager of a second division J-League team, Ono no longer holds the sway he once did; however, his systematic and scientifically infused approach to youth soccer players has become the bedrock of the JFA Technical Committee's kids' project.<sup>5</sup> His central argument is that there are particular ages when it is "most advantageous" to develop particular physical abilities and skills. Ono and other coaches regularly refer to these stages of development as "critical periods" (*rinkaiki*), a concept employed in various neurobehavioral fields of child development, such as developmental biology and psychology. Throughout JFA coaching directives, the golden age—the *most critical* of the critical periods—and the developmental periods that surround it are presented as crucial "windows of opportunity." Often in a truly alarmist tone, the publications contend that if critical periods are not approached correctly, the talents of future soccer players—and the future potential of children more generally—will be compromised.

While it is possible to find references to the golden age in conjunction with other sports in Japan and other countries, I have found no other sports league or federation that employs the concept in such a thorough and programmatic way. Also, when Japanese coaches from other sports reference the golden age, they often allude to it as a product of the JFA and its coaches. The primary author of the golden age concept, Takeshi Ono, has stated in various publications that many international football associations employ the paradigm. While it is true that you can find blogs and coaching materials in which coaches from many countries reference the "golden age of development" or the "golden age of learning," here and there, their engagements in no way compare to those of the JFA.

The JFA's reformulated strategy for building a world-champion soccer team starts with the assumption that bigger numbers beget better possibilities: statistically, a larger pool of players increases the odds of finding a superstar. And, while increasing the overall size of Japan's soccer playing population is desirable, the players of greatest interest are some of the youngest of the country's citizens: children under the age of 6 (U-6). These children constitute the base of a development system imagined as a pyramid of players and teams in graduated layers that increase in age and talent and decrease in population while nearing the peak. The full adult men and women's national teams comprise the peak. The other layers between the base and the peak are made up of discrete age groups: U-8, U-10, U-12, U-14, U-16, and U-18. The gradual narrowing of the pyramid indicates that attrition occurs—either voluntarily or via selection—as age increases; the older you get the less likely it is that you will play. The message of ultimate interest to the JFA, however, is that in this schema, a larger base promises a higher peak. Therefore, national team success is largely dependent on the broad and enthusiastic participation of children. Faith in the value of large numbers is not unusual in the world of sports, and, in fact, the logic is often used to explain the success of teams from exceedingly large countries such as the United States, China, Russia, and Brazil. What is arguably distinctive about the

JFA's formulation is the implicit understanding about the relationship between age and potential talent.

In the JFA's pyramidal system, even more crucial than the size of the population, or base, is its age. According to the organization's expositions on coaching children, the ratio of talent is *highest* in the youngest of players, a potential easily lost if not quickly identified and properly nurtured: "We have come to realize that the younger the age the more potential talent there truly is" (2005b: 5). The child's body is imagined as abundant with untapped potential—but that potential diminishes with age. Mirroring the pyramidal shape of the larger soccer playing population, the individual athlete's life-course too is shaped like a pyramid; individual potential diminishes as one grows older. This realization, of course, brings with it a weighty responsibility: "From the perspective of physical growth and development, we know that the amount and range of outside activities that preschoolers experience has an extremely large effect on their future growth" (JFA 2005b: 5). The prospects for mature adult athletes are predetermined, it would appear, on what they did or did not do as preschoolers.

The JFA kids' project engages with existing dominant tropes about childhood but also creates new delineations, complexities, and hierarchies. In contemporary fields of child development, ranging from psychology to neurobiology, it is common to see the child "figured as a more dynamic body than its adult counterpart" (Castañeda 2002: 56). In the JFA age-graded model, children are not only more dynamic and full of potential than adults, but also more so than children just a year or two older. Increasing age may bring greater maturity, but it does not hold greater promise. In contrast to this "dynamic child" paradigm, there also are competing popular and scientific portrayals of children as incomplete, or still "lacking of knowledge, abilities, competencies, morality, or other qualities seen as critical to adulthood" (Montgomery 2009: 56–58). In the JFA's kids' training system, although youth soccer players are always presented with the tacit form of a mature, ideally trained, and capable adult athlete in the background, contrasts between age-levels are foregrounded and treated as much more important. These contrasts, however, are also complicated, as age-levels are not always construed as clearly linearly connected. A fourteen-year-old, for instance, is not simply a more complete version of a twelve-year-old; the fourteen-year old may actually be clumsier and less able to acquire new skills. Age groups have their own unique characteristics and abilities, yet they are also wholly interdependent. If the physical and cognitive potentialities that emerge at one age-level window are not developed and mastered, they cannot be accomplished as successfully (or at all!) in later years; and, thus, it follows that whatever development is targeted in the following stages becomes compromised as well.

While age group divisions existed prior to the kids' program, under its new plan the JFA has segmented existing age groups into smaller units as well as created a brand-new division for preschoolers. The two-year delimited age groups created

as part of the JFA's soccer education program do not map onto the age divisions that determine memberships in teams, or registration with the JFA. When the JFA counts the country's soccer-playing population it uses age groups constructed by the education system: elementary, middle school, high school, and post-high school (e.g. college teams, adult club teams, etc.). When local soccer clubs or community groups organize teams, they often use school grades rather than biological ages when composing teams (although, admittedly, these two categories are isomorphic in the Japanese school system). However, for many clubs and teams, even school age is relatively insignificant. Women's soccer clubs, for instance, commonly pool their middle- and high-school-grade players together on a "junior" team, and then have a "senior" team composed primarily of high school graduates. Put simply, the typical vagaries of team composition indicate that frequently age corresponds with ability only in the most general of ways.

The new educational components of the "JFA Dream," however, have dissected and privileged age in new ways. JFA-organized training camps for the most elite players reflect this fact as they split youths up into U-18, U-16, U-14, and U-12 cohorts. International tournaments governed by FIFA (Fédération Internationale de Football Association) impose age grades for competitions for players under twenty-three-years of age (e.g., U-23, U-20, U-17, U-15), thus requiring the JFA to identify and train players for those competitions. However, the JFA's system does not map perfectly onto the one prescribed by FIFA. Furthermore, its educational program extends the age divisions down to those under six years old, a system, to the best of my knowledge, with no counterpart in any FIFA-devised curriculum. Also, it is a system with a gravitational center—the golden age—dictating how age divisions preceding and following it (the "pre-golden age" and the "post-golden age") are understood and valued.

Paradigms of time-limited stages are not new in the sciences of child development; however, the popularization of this model of child maturation in the realm of Japanese soccer coaching, and sports in Japan more generally, is to the best of my knowledge unprecedented, and, I argue, significant. As early as the 1920s, Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget began formulating a theory of children's intellectual development as composed of distinct stages loosely associated with different ages (1970). Unlike the nineteenth-century linear models that preceded it, Piaget's system imagined a series of stages marked by transformative shifts in cognitive capacity. Mastery at one stage was required to pass to the next, and skills attained in previous stages were also thought to transform as new cognitive capacities were achieved in later ones. Analogous to the way a stairway is connected and allows ascent, but is at the same time composed of discrete steps, "Piaget's stages yield a discontinuous but also cumulative, increasingly complex cognitive system" (Castañeda 2002: 48).

In his writing on the golden age, Ono regularly calls on the authority of science to increase the legitimacy of his claims. In addition to using graphs and technical

terms, he references some of the most classic—as well as sensational—examples from biology and psychology to explain the concept of “critical periods”: kittens with eyesight impairment caused by light deprivation; Amala and Kamala, the “feral” Indian twins reportedly raised by wolves in the 1920s and left developmentally impaired; and, the story of Genie, a young girl confined to her room for thirteen years, leaving her severely behaviorally and developmentally harmed. Perhaps Ono includes these cases, which are far afield from the worlds of sport and soccer, to grab his readers’ attention. Whether intentional or not, he links the development of present-day Japanese children with arguably fear-inspiring narratives of drastically different times and even species, underscoring the criticalness of critical periods. “Similar to those cases,” he writes, a “critical period” for developing children’s athletic ability also exists. The most important of those windows, the “golden age,” is between the ages of nine and twelve, “when the neural circuitry of the cerebral cortex is almost complete” (Ono 2005). This period, when the outermost folded neural tissue finalizes its growth, is the “climax for development of movement” and the “optimal time for learning.”

According to Ono’s exposition, the golden age is not just special, but almost magical, with the human body exhibiting abilities never seen before, and never to be seen again. Ono argues that during this period, and *only* during this period, children are able to grasp and perform new movements quickly and nimbly. This capacity for “instantaneous learning” contrasts strikingly with adults, who have to intellectually comprehend every movement to become proficient. Golden age children, Ono proclaims, “immediately understand a movement when they see it,” and can execute it completely and perfectly. Children at this age are cast as almost superhuman. There is nothing “regular” or “normal” about them: “They totally jump over the regular process of learning acquisition” (Ono 2005). This exceptional ability is attributable, Ono asserts, to the “plasticity” of children in this period: their brains can agilely respond to changing circumstances and movements. This plasticity, however, does not last, and the threat of squandering this “critical period” always looms. Furthermore, the stage that follows is as notably unimpressive as the previous one is spectacular. When children enter adolescence and puberty, “they become clumsy,” Ono writes, and due to rapid growth in size and strength, it is difficult for them to learn new skills. Even after puberty ends, the learning abilities associated with the golden age “do not return.”

Discussions of child development in Ono’s works and JFA materials clearly reflect the influence of psychological paradigms traceable back to Piaget; however, when it comes to explaining the golden age, they rely on very early work in the biology of growth and development. They point to the genesis of the golden age in the “Scammon growth curve,” a conceptualization of infant and childhood growth developed by biologist Richard E. Scammon in the 1930s. Dusting off old data and combining it with new, Scammon came up with a schema of child development that diverged significantly from earlier models.<sup>6</sup> Scammon found that different

parts of a child's body—limbs, immune system, neurological system, internal organs, and so on—grew at different rates. When he graphed these varying growth rates together, they produced an image of nonsynchronous curves, a picture of syncopated growth captured in one frame.

Scammon's work has been foundational in the field of human growth and development and his schema shaped and continues to be reflected in the work of evolutionary biologists, physical anthropologists, and others studying human development. He may, however, be most alive in the hands of JFA coaches. Moreover, in the work of Ono and others, the "critical periods" reflected in Scammon's plotted lines take on meaning unique from that intended by Scammon and other biologists who followed with similar research. Scammon's original graph did not factor in the presence or absence of environmental stimuli over the course of a child's development. Instead, the system was assumed to be autonomic. Children's biological development, according to Scammon's formulation, is a process not requiring any particular inputs, and certainly not external vigilance to make sure that windows of development are not missed. It is a process that occurs automatically, "a remarkable picture of syncopated growth that clearly represents a great deal of internal, invisible coordination" (Hall 2006: 83). Inserted in the age-based training regimens constructed by Ono and others, however, the complexities of nonsynchronous development signified by Scammon's graph present physical potentialities and learning opportunities that need to be seized and managed. It is not a chart of automatic occurrences, but rather a plotting of "windows of opportunity" that if properly approached can maximize developmental potential—and, thereby increase the possibility that a "star" will appear. Less optimistically, the graph maps "windows of opportunity that nature flings open, starting before birth, and then slams shut, one by one" (Begley 1996: 56–57). Arguably, Scammon's research does not provide the best evidence in support of optimal periods or of the cornerstone of the JFA's youth development program, the golden age. One could argue, however, that Scammon's now iconic graph and the staying power of his original research provides an authority that Ono and other JFA administrators believe lends credibility to the golden age concept and its corresponding proclamations and projects.

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, more than anything the Scammon curve underscored missed opportunities for Ono and other JFA Technical Committee members who were convinced of the inadequacy of Japan's youth development program: "In the case of most children, these important years for the development of movement simply pass without us capitalizing on them; and, trying to regain what has been lost is incredibly difficult" (Ono 2005). Even if training is approached correctly, according to Ono, every developmental opportunity is shadowed by the looming possibility of failure. It is this conviction that has provided much of the impetus for the JFA's new age-delineated kids' program.

## THE FATE OF TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY CHILDREN

It is too early to know the full effects of the JFA's golden age paradigm and its corresponding educational curriculum, including the new Uniqlo-sponsored kids' festivals. However, conversations I have had with current and former soccer players as well as an informal survey of players and parents of all ages make it clear that the concept of the golden age is well known and has already had palpable effects. Almost half of the people I spoke with and surveyed said that knowledge about the golden age influenced how they approached training individually and how their coaches designed practices. Several noted that they understood that during the golden age period they were "like a sponge," and "could more easily absorb things," so they made a point of trying to get in as much practice time as possible and committed significant time to repetitively training specific skills. Some also expressed concern about missed opportunities ("I wish I had started soccer earlier in life"), and questioned what the golden age paradigm meant for those beyond the age of twelve ("What are you supposed to do when the golden age is over?"). This sample of responses points to some of ways that the concept of the golden age might influence contemporary understandings of childhood and the possible effects of those new understandings. As the JFA continues to expand its kids' project, it is important to note that while JFA officials agree with many scholars and social critics about children and childhood being at risk, they hold different ideas about what the biggest risks happen to be. They also see different responses as necessary to improve the situation of Japan's children, and thereby assure Japan's future.

Since the burst of Japan's bubble economy in the final decade of the twentieth century, scholars, journalists, government officials, and other commentators have expressed a range of concerns about Japan and its future. And, as is often the case in moments of cultural discomfort, many of the concerns have been focused on children. Not surprisingly, the problems of youth have frequently been linked to the failings of Japan's education system, although ideas about what needs to be fixed and how vary widely. Regardless of political affiliation, since the 1980s Japan's reform debate has been "dominated by the language of 'crisis' and 'systemic malfunction'" (Takeyama 2010: 57). For many right-wing politicians, and most prominently, Prime Minister Abe Shinzō, a lack of "moral" and "patriotic" education has left school-age children feeling "worthless," and, in the words of famous neo-nationalist and Abe administration advisor, Watanabe Shōichi, believing that "Japan is no good" (McNeill 2013; Penney 2014). Others have criticized both "relaxed" and creative classrooms and overly competitive and rigid school environments, with some concerned that the former discriminate against already disadvantaged children, and others that the latter are introducing competition at ever-earlier ages to the detriment of children's creativity and psychological well-being (Arai 2005, Tawara and Leibowitz 2008). Many are also concerned that neoliberal logics inherent in practical classroom dynamics and nationalistic



“moral” education are effectively (re)producing inequality and self-responsible subjectivities to meet the needs of a capitalist system requiring a “fine-tuned supply of elite and non-elite workers” (Field 1995: 65; also see Arai 2005, 2013). In contrast to Ono and JFA officials, whether it is concerns about insufficient patriotism, or increasing inequality, politicians and other education critics do not tend to express fears about children at particular ages, but rather make more blanket arguments about how the quality of education for all children—from elementary ages through high school—is lacking. It is not that grade levels and age-specific aptitudes are not recognized, but rather that we do not see arguments about a “golden age” for creativity or moral education. While there generally appears to be a more expansive and less segmented notion of childhood and youth in education discourse when compared to the JFA’s age-graded schema, in recent decades a few critics have argued that childhood in its entirety is disappearing.

Due to birthrates consistently ranked among the lowest in the world, scholars have asked if Japan is becoming a “childless society,” and Japanese government officials have tried to implement a variety of policies and campaigns to stem the tide. Others have more radically asked if “childhood” is even available to those infants who are born. In the mid-1990s, while debates ensued about appropriate education reforms, Japanese literature scholar and social critic Norma Field was one of the most vociferous critics of the “soft violence” inflicted by the Japanese education system on children (1995). She argued that the education system more than anything else was destroying childhood in Japan, and, in fact, making childhood identical to adulthood in the most negative of ways. The unremitting demands, excessive discipline, and relentless competition in contemporary schools, she argued, were causing children to have “adult diseases,” such as high cholesterol, high blood pressure, and ulcers (53). Parents and teachers no longer treated children as individuals needing protection, but rather as subjects to be pushed, disciplined, and even punished in order to insure their eligibility for employment in Japan’s “frantically competitive society” (60). For Field, school and work had become “increasingly continuous,” and the goals of education were devoid of “a modicum of autonomy from the goals of the economy.” She found proof in parents’, teachers’, and students’ parallel experiences with chronic fatigue and stress—ailments produced by a system that made inhumane demands of children as well as the adults who supported them (62). In light of golden age logic, it worth noting that Field severely criticized a movement popular at the time that promoted the benefits of educating children when they were “age zero,” or even still in utero.<sup>7</sup> Similar exhortations to capitalize on infants’ memory capacities, or the proclivities of a child’s right brain (which reportedly remains particularly receptive up through the age of seven), or the small motor skills of two year olds, were equally specious and problematic, because the goal was not to produce happier children, but rather “adults tolerant of joyless, repetitive tasks—in other words, disciplined workers” (54).

The JFA too is critical of the education system as well as parents' complicity in a structure that keeps children "over-scheduled," "over-policed," and unable to experience the psychological freedom and physical activity of the nostalgically imagined "past" (JFA 2004: 4). However, much of the training recommended as part of the JFA's new youth program involves significant repetition and discipline. From the JFA's perspective, if the activities are "age appropriate," disciplined practice, even at early ages, does not threaten childhood, but instead helps to protect it. Some might argue that this simply a different path to producing the disciplined and self-responsible subjects needed in the contemporary labor market.

### CONCLUSION

Arguments about new continuities between childhood and adulthood forged by the disciplinary mechanisms of the education system are credible and intriguing, not least because it was the advent of formalized education that greatly shaped the delineation of these modern categories of personhood in the first place. It is also worth contrasting ideas about the disappearance of childhood with the vision of development figured by the JFA's "golden age." Rather than erasing the division between childhood and adulthood, it creates new and significant divisions within childhood itself, and arguably establishes discontinuities between the categories of children and adults that did not exist previously. The JFA regularly proclaims that "children are not little adults" and should not be treated as such. In the JFA schema, children are categorically different from adults and not linearly connected across a clearly evolving path of development. In addition, the space of childhood has become more complex, bestowed with internal differences and hierarchies previously unimagined. Rather than fueling anxieties about children without childhoods, the JFA's paradigm poses the conundrum of children never becoming fully formed adults, or, never becoming adults equal to the potential present within them at birth. The flexible yet stage-dependent child embodies the fear that "critical periods," and the golden age in particular, will not be adequately utilized, leaving the child—and the future adult—incomplete and possibly not even close to realizing his or her true potential. Despite all of the discontinuities between childhood and adulthood suggested by the JFA's model, it is reasonable to wonder if, in fact, childhood is not simply being tethered to adulthood in new and potentially troubling ways, since future World Cup wins are conceptualized as largely dependent on how many six year-olds are playing soccer *and* training properly.

The JFA's golden-age-centered system is just one of many contemporary engagements with children and childhood in Japan that attempt to make sense of and propose solutions to the various anxieties attached to youth. For some the answer to unstable presents and uncertain futures is a desperate effort to guarantee children's success in careers and life by drawing education and work into ever-more seamless connection. In contrast, JFA top coaches argue that childhood should

be protected and children not rushed into adult tasks. “The appropriate stimuli at the appropriate age,” goes the mantra. Instead of teaching children to be adults, the JFA suggests, we must help them be *better children* if there is going to be any chance of promise in their adulthoods. “We can’t just wait for children to grow up,” writes Tashima Kozo, the present technical director of the JFA, who has continued to develop and assiduously promote the golden age system first envisioned by his predecessor Ono almost twenty years ago (JFA 2004: 10). If not offered the right environment- and age-appropriate stimuli, he argues, critical periods will pass with nothing achieved. Scammon derived his curve from measures of growth and development understood to happen automatically; his curves chart development that is assumed to happen naturally in children in a range of environments. In noteworthy fashion, visionary JFA coaches appropriated that data and their graphic representation to advocate for a view of children as not only endangered but also victims of a society that has waited for them to grow up on their own.

The JFA now sits as not only one of Japan’s most popular sports organizations, but also one of the most influential national cultural institutions. Its teams, coaches, and development programs reach all corners of the country and fans and players of all ages. In an effort to produce World Cup-winning teams, the JFA has created a system that delimits childhood in new ways, placing primacy on the acquisition of motor skills, coordination, and athletic talent. It is easy to imagine how a periodization of childhood development derived from measures of physical growth could be applied to other areas of aptitude and which begin before the age of six and end at eighteen, formulate a model of development that is much more interdependent and less forgiving. There are no second chances; windows of opportunity close permanently as age progresses. This new worldview also proposes new hierarchies of value among children, which among many other things place great importance (and, one might assume, pressure) on some children, particularly young children, and lower the expectations and potentials of others.

## NOTES

1. Words featured on the inside cover of the JFA’s “Kids U-10 Coaching Guidelines” (2003).
2. I will use the terms “kids’ program” or “kids’ project” to reference this initiative except where “Kids’ Programme” is the proper title used in a JFA publication. It is noteworthy that the JFA uses the British English spelling of “programme” on the covers of pamphlets and on websites intended for coaches and parents. In Japanese-language publications, the deliberate use of the British “programme” indexes the JFA’s overwhelmingly European orientation and identification.
3. *Futsal* is a variant of soccer that originated in Uruguay in the 1930s. It is typically played indoors on gym floors with five players per side.
4. The JFA has not come close to meeting these ambitious targets. In 2013, the JFA counted all individuals registered with the JFA as players, kids’ instructors, *futsal* referees, and so on, and reported a total of approximately 1.5 million in the “family.”
5. Ono’s expositions on the golden age are featured in JFA coaching publications, on websites (see Ono 2005), and in his book *Creative Soccer Coaching for Training World-Class Players* (1998).

6. Scammon combined contemporary measurements of children's internal organs and lymphatic tissue with data collected by a French nobleman in the mid-eighteenth century, who meticulously documented the physical growth of his son from infancy through adolescence.

7. Before his death in 1997, former Sony CEO Ibuka Masaru wrote several books focused on early childhood development and education, with titles such as *Why Age Zero? Life is Decided at Age Zero* (1989), and *The Fetus Is a Genius: Education Begins before Birth* (1992). Both an education advisor to former Prime Minister Nakasone, and the head of the Organization for Child Development, Ibuka argued that attending vigilantly to early child development was critical to guaranteeing quality of human character, even more so than intelligence.

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