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## The Promises and Possibilities of the Pitch: 1990s Ladies League Soccer Players as Fin-de-Siècle Modern Girls

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## *Chapter Eight*

### THE PROMISES AND POSSIBILITIES OF THE PITCH

1990s Ladies League Soccer Players  
as Fin-de-Siècle Modern Girls

*Elise Edwards*

When the Japanese women's national soccer team, Nadeshiko Japan, bested the greatly favored U.S. team in the World Cup Final on July 17, 2011, in Frankfurt, Germany, it was one of several "firsts" achieved by the skillful and inspiring team. It was the *first* time Japan had beaten the Americans in twenty-six meetings stretching back over two decades. Even more historically significant, however, was that this World Cup Championship was the first for an Asian soccer team, women's or men's. The level of interest in the match could be gauged by a new Twitter record set by fans within seconds of Kumagai Saki's decisive final kick in the penalty shoot-out—a shot heard around the world in the wee hours of the morning in Tokyo. A flurry of 7,196 tweets per second easily overwhelmed the previous Twitter record.<sup>1</sup>

Even months after the Japanese women's historic victory, "Nadeshiko Fever" showed few signs of subsiding. The semi-professional Nadeshiko League—the newest incarnation of what had been dubbed the "L-League" (short for "Ladies' League") for more than a decade and no more financially secure than its predecessor—experienced a dramatic new wave of interest and record-setting match attendances. A new average League match attendance of over 6,500 fans was more than nine times the figure before the World Cup. With well over 20,000 fans filling the stands at games in which national team players appeared, earlier records were quickly surpassed and easily rivaled the numbers at men's J-League (Japan League) contests. "Nadeshiko Japan" was chosen as the top media buzzword of 2011, as well as the second most important domestic news event, just

behind the Great East Japan Earthquake on March 11, 2011, and the subsequent tsunami and nuclear meltdown (Jiyū kokuminsha 2011; *Daily Yomiuri* 2011a).<sup>2</sup>

For most of the players, there was a dramatic shift from obscurity to spotlight, with adulatory attention coming from journalists, advertising agents, and even Japan's prime minister, Naoto Kan. Many of the players—the majority of them veritable unknowns before the quarter-final round of the World Cup three weeks prior—were enthusiastically courted by companies and advertisers to serve as the spokespeople and public faces for a range of products. Several players signed lucrative sponsorship deals, while others pursued second careers as pop stars; the most prominent few appeared regularly on nightly variety shows. Just weeks after the final penalty shot whizzed by the U.S. team's formidable goalkeeper, it was widely reported that the economic vortex set spinning by the team's success had produced a one trillion yen (\$13 billion) windfall, a much-needed emotional and financial boost for Japan's beleaguered economy (Brasor and Tsubuku 2011).

The Nadeshiko team's masterful play throughout the 2011 World Cup, with their signature quick passing and impeccable technique, earned them comparisons to Lionel Messi's FC Barcelona squad of the men's game, touted by many as the best soccer team ever assembled (*Times of India* 2011). Their consummate skill and accolades made it difficult to remember that women's soccer participation rates had paled in comparison to those in rival countries, and that before the Nadeshiko team's fourth-place finish at the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing, the sport and its players existed for several decades in almost total obscurity.<sup>3</sup> In the span of the few weeks of the 2011 World Cup tournament, Nadeshiko Japan's players went from relative unknowns to their country's most celebrated and adored stars; obscurity made way for fame and visibility. Suddenly an image of Japanese femininity—confident, thickly muscled, often short-haired, and undeniably aggressive—overwhelmed the airwaves, introducing the world and the vast majority of Japanese citizens as well to a form of Japanese womanhood previously unseen, let alone imagined.

Owing to the relative invisibility of women's soccer until recently, many journalists both within and outside of Japan treated the Nadeshiko team's World Cup win as more of a Cinderella story than was warranted, and women's soccer as an anomaly that reflected little understanding of the history of women's soccer, or of women's sports more generally. While Nadeshiko Japan's recent successes can be traced to an array of factors, the most significant was the decision by a handful of companies beginning in the late 1980s to aggres-

sively sponsor women's soccer teams and to provide the country's most promising players with employment and places to train. What has become one of the most powerful soccer development systems in the world for women began with the coming together of unlikely "teammates": athletic young women and industry-leading corporations. The story of the rise of women's soccer engages directly with issues of mobility, modernity, gender, and labor in contemporary Japanese society, and its telling reveals the multiple axes upon which these analytic frames intersect and co-constitute each other.

In this chapter, I describe how female soccer players and the businessmen who sponsored them were captivated and inspired by soccer for reasons that, on the surface, often looked dissimilar, but that at their core were very much alike. Both players and corporate managers involved with women's teams conceptualized soccer as a vehicle for mobility—whether in one's personal life or in corporate markets—and, in turn, imagined that mobility to be intimately tied to ideas of a reconfigured and more globally focused modern Japan and a new vision of ideal workers, as well as atypical forms of femininity. For both the players and their sponsors, mobility was directly and causally linked with practices and "ways of being" construed as "modern," which I use here in the spirit of Bruno Latour to designate "a new regime, an acceleration, a rupture, a revolution in time" (1993: 10).<sup>4</sup>

As Japan stands in the afterglow of the women's national team's unforgettable victory, and as we revisit some of the history leading up to that achievement in the stories of some of its earliest teams, we can trace the way that women soccer players came to embody modern notions of change salient in recessionary Japan, and we can see the effects of this arbitrary yet historically significant linkage.

Like the modern girls of the 1920s and 1930s who preceded them, Japanese female soccer players were linked—because of their engagement with particular physical practices and forms of presentation—with a broad range of ideas and ideals that stretched far beyond the realities or possibilities of their lives. While image and reality often differed and the progressive experiences afforded by soccer were often as short-lived as the corporate sponsorships, there was a period of time in post-bubble-era Japan when women's soccer held a significance that dramatically changed the environment of women's sports in the country and planted the seeds for further successes that have reshaped domestic and international perceptions of Japanese women in the opening decades of the twenty-first century.

In the 1990s, the image of the L-Leaguer, as constituted by L-League officials, company executives, and the players themselves, represented personal dreams, social concerns, and corporate visions that forged new relationships between modernity, mobility, labor, and gender. L-Leaguers were women on the move—moving not only across soccer fields but also into new spaces of labor and leisure not typically thought of as traditional female domains. For the players, this movement was often personally liberating and life-changing; for companies, it symbolized visions of progress and greater gender equality, and therein, new image-making possibilities. An exploration of the perspectives and motivations of both the players and the companies who employed them, the points of overlap in their understandings of and investments in the sport of soccer, as well as the disconnect between images of L-Leaguers as idealized corporate citizens and the actual realities of players lives, will highlight not only the centrality of gender in visions of modern change at the turn of the millennium but also the inconsistencies and contradictions of the L-League's modern project, which remain salient to this day.

The material for this chapter was collected over more than two decades of steady involvement with the L-League/Nadeshiko League and the larger world of soccer actors and organizations in which it is embedded. From an array of positions, including L-League player, coach, and fan, I have conducted field research with teams, corporate owners, Japan Football Association administrators, and, of course, countless players and coaches. My approach to understanding the world of Japanese soccer is interdisciplinary, drawing from sites where soccer and soccer players are discursively constructed, including fan magazines, coaching journals, and corporate and team brochures, as well as interviews and interactions with company and team managers, coaches, and players.

### Soccer's Modern Image

Although by happenstance, Japan's "soccer boom" (*sakkā būmu*) coincided with the bursting of the economic bubble and its recessionary aftermath in the 1990s, and soccer was regularly presented in popular media as a product of and an antidote to economic instability (Edwards 2003). Despite its century-long history as a pastime and institutionalized sport in Japan, coaches, journalists, and executives of corporations sponsoring teams reinscribed soccer as something *new*, a cultural space that attracted and cultivated athletes with colorful and individualistic personalities. Reporters and pundits, soccer's supporters

and detractors, all pronounced it to be a new and unprecedented sporting realm, with players who had dyed hair, piercings, and jewelry, and who engaged in audacious on-field celebrations after goals; it was “everything that the tightly controlled samurai version of baseball [was] not” and possibly even the springboard to a larger “social revolution” (Sterngold 1994: 4; Morris 1995: 82; Takahashi 1994; Kutsuwada 1993).

In the year of the men’s J-League’s launch, a famous former professional turned J-League coach was memorably quoted as saying that soccer players were the “first professional athletes [in Japan] permitted to display [their] personalities” (*Newsweek* 1994). This ability to “display one’s personality,” in turn, was seized by coaches and journalists alike as the quality that made soccer the most “un-Japanese” of all popular sports, and also rendered it a critical site for cultivating new abilities and sensibilities for Japanese youth who needed to compete in an increasingly competitive global economy (Katō 1997: 150).

With its premier event, the World Cup, standing as the most internationally inclusive of all sporting events, soccer became metaphorically connected to the challenges of globalization more broadly. Many of the skills that Japanese soccer players would have to acquire to close their “gap with the world” paralleled the “revolution” in business practices and entrepreneurial abilities deemed necessary for Japanese business to regain its competitiveness (Kiryama 1998; Katō 1997: 78; Gotō 1995). Whereas baseball was cast as the symbol of an older Japan and all that was good about the industriousness and group-oriented mythology of “Japan, Inc.,” soccer was posed as the modern sport of the future, providing fields of possibility, literally, to train new subjectivities, sensibilities, and pathways to success (Hashimoto 1998: 292–93; Gotō 1995: 175). In the final decade of the twentieth century, for many people in Japan, soccer represented a break with the past, and for those who liked the sport, this change was optimistically cast as a way out of the economic and social malaise that seemed to have a stranglehold after the bursting of the financial bubble.

Despite its masculine associations, young female players could not help but be attracted to soccer’s new and revolutionary image. Unlike many of the other modern girls analyzed in this volume, young girls and women typically did not take up the sport of soccer—as one would a career path as an SDF soldier, stewardess, or even elevator girl—imagining that it would provide mobility in the form of income, world travel, or greater independence, although for the most talented few it eventually could provide some of those things. Mobility

of another kind, however, did seem to attract many to the sport: the chance to move through and experience not only a predominantly masculine space but also one that was marked as culturally new, even transgressive.

The youth players and the L-Leaguers I interviewed reaffirmed popular media portrayals that presented soccer as something novel, exciting, and reflective of a freer and more expressive youth culture. Echoing journalists, these players imagined and experienced soccer as unequivocally modern because it marked a rupture with the past and with tradition, which they saw embodied in postwar Japan's celebrated "group ethic," and more specifically the sport of baseball. Soccer fields were spaces where they could be "more free" but also where "individuals were important," and they could "express their individuality a lot more than [in] baseball." For several players I interviewed, the "more free" and "less Japanese" character of soccer was captured in the relative absence of hierarchical "senior-junior" (*senpai-kōhai*) relationships, which were dominant socializing structures in conventional girls' high-school sports, such as volleyball and softball.

Many young women I have met over two decades of involvement with the L-League were self-defined rebels or individuals who claimed to be "different" (*chigau*), "out of the ordinary" (*futsū to chigau*), or "different than ordinary Japanese" (*futsū no Nihonjin to chigau*). For them, soccer provided a space that allowed, accepted, and at times celebrated that difference. More than regimentation and discipline, soccer promised ways to escape hierarchical relationships, to explore more unconventional forms of dress and expression. Many young players had impressive collections of replica jerseys from all of their favorite international teams and loved that soccer provided the opportunity to wear them on their daily train commutes to and from practice. Many L-Leaguers enthusiastically engaged in what I call "soccer style," which mimicked the fashions (oversized jeans worn low on the hips, men's button-up shirts left untucked, brightly colored brand-name tennis shoes, and spikey hairstyles) and relaxed yet self-assured mannerisms of the J-Leaguers as well as international male players whose images were readily available across different media.

Soccer was imagined and experienced by these young players as a space to cultivate one's individuality—to achieve a mobility of selfhood. The image of soccer as a realm of freedom and modernity that broke radically with tradition, which attracted so many of the L-League's early players, also appealed to the company executives who chose to sponsor teams, although the mobility they sought, of course, was quite different.

In the early 1990s, several large companies decided to support L-League teams, inspired by the idea that these young women and their sport would help them recast their corporate identities and link them with leading-edge thinking and progressive change. The iconoclastic and change-embracing image of men's soccer swirling through the media beginning in the late 1980s provided ample symbolic material to which they could tether new corporate campaigns. Company investments in women's soccer, however, were also informed by an image of women's soccer circulating internationally that connected the game with socially progressive and economically dominant first-world modernity.

While “ground zero” for men's soccer in 1990s Japan—from which soccer's greatness emanated—was unquestionably South America, the geographic core of the women's game was positioned solidly in the United States and Northern Europe. Images of fair-haired Norwegians and strong, smiling American players, hoisting trophies over their heads or sliding stomach-first across the grass in a goal celebrations, were seen by many as part and parcel of progressive sociopolitical systems; women striding across soccer fields symbolically suggested that women were making strides in many other areas of society. Many of the companies that sponsored women's teams wanted to cash in on this image to appeal to new Euro-American business clients, and to symbolically signal—in some cases to their own workers, and in others, to domestic customers—that other progressive transformations within their companies were afoot. While players saw soccer as a means of circumventing, at least temporarily, more conventional life courses and gendered expectations, for many of the companies that supported them, the sport held the promise of image-refashioning via its popular associations with femal social mobility.

### “Dream” Projects and “Creative Intelligence”: Corporate Investments in Women's Soccer

In 1989, the L-League's predecessor, the Japan Ladies Soccer League (JLSL), which then consisted of six teams from the Kantō and Kansai areas, was inaugurated as the nation's premier women's league. A handful of women's club teams, including Shimizu F.C. and Yomiuri Women's Soccer Club, had been established in the early to mid-1980s in soccer-friendly areas, such as Tokyo and Shizuoka Prefecture. These teams formed the core of the JLSL and were joined by new corporate (*kigyō*) teams, such as Fujita Construction, a firm that already supported men's teams and had the facilities and staff to start up quickly. Over the following two years, executives at several companies, including Nikko



Securities, Shiroki Industries, and the Tasaki Pearl Company, built teams and facilities from scratch, thus growing the JLSL to ten teams by 1991. In 1994 the JLSL was renamed the “L-League” (“L” for “ladies”) to form linkages with and to benefit from the boom in fan interest in the men’s J-League.

In the JLSL’s inaugural year, Nikko Securities executives announced that the Dream Ladies would be the athletic incarnation of the spirit of the company’s new bold “corporate welfare” project called the “Nikko Dream,” made possible by many years of steady profits. One initial component of the Nikko Dream was the implementation of two-day weekends for all workers, an uncommon practice among large financial firms at the time. The ambitious plan also called for the creation of new dormitories and family housing units for company workers, as well as the acquisition and building of resorts and recreational facilities, including those at golf courses, ski areas, hot springs, and beaches. Other corporations followed suit and cast their L-League teams as the public faces of company-wide “welfare” programs. The Fujita Tendai team, owned by Fujita Construction and headquartered in Tokyo, for instance, was run out of the “For You Division,” which, similar to the Nikko Dream project, was focused on quality-of-life issues, such as housing, leisure activities, and other programs for its employees.

Publicity campaigns flaunting “dream projects” to improve conditions both at and away from work for employees were, at least partially, responses to broader labor issues and debates salient at the time. As Japan entered the 1990s, journalists and government officials alike directed increasing attention to improving the well-being of workers, including tackling such problems as excessive overtime work and weeks of unspent vacation time. With topics like “death from overwork” (*karōshi*) receiving considerable coverage in both the domestic and international press, the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare pressured employers to cut overtime and weekend hours required of workers. They also found ways to guarantee that workers received their legally allotted vacation time. In addition to the external critiques of their white-collar workplaces, Japanese corporations faced a shrinking labor market and had to devise schemes to attract top university graduates. For a small number of companies, supporting women’s soccer players and creating winning teams emerged as a strategy not only to promote welfare projects but also to promote themselves as employee-friendly enterprises.

In talking to L-League company workers, I quickly realized that many assumed that their companies’ decisions to sponsor *women’s* soccer, rather than

men's soccer or another sport, were rooted in simple economics: in general, women's teams and lesser-known sports were cheaper to fund, and quick success was more likely since there was little competition. Top executives' personal passions for soccer were often another important factor in determining the direction of sponsorship. Even so, corporations quickly provided much more carefully articulated and business-savvy rationales for choosing women's soccer. In interviews and press conferences, company spokespeople frequently underscored the logic that made women's soccer a "perfect fit" with the central tenets of their companies. For instance, in a photo-rich article announcing the launch of the Dream Ladies in the September 1989 issue of *Friday*, then one of Japan's most popular weekly scandal and sports magazines aimed at businessmen, the Nikko Securities president was quoted as saying, "Soccer fits our bright, tough, and healthy image perfectly. Men's soccer [in Japan] still has a long way to go, but women's soccer has a real future" (*Friday* 1989). The president's comments seemed to reflect both the prediction that female players were going to fare better than their male counterparts on the international stage (a prediction proven correct at the 2008 Olympics and the 2011 World Cup) and the belief that women's soccer was carving an uncharted path and thus had a "real future."

Nikko Securities' public relations group created a romantic story for the mass media, replete with a sense of fated destiny and forward-looking vision, with the president as its main protagonist. According to this story, the president's decision to start the team came from his realization that women's soccer was the "future." He hoped that those watching both outside and inside the company would conclude that Nikko Securities was forward-thinking due to its support of women's soccer. The company's purported concern for employee welfare was also regularly paraded via images and stories about the team: Nikko Securities was not only providing young women with a wonderful environment in which to pursue their dreams, but was also guaranteeing them jobs upon their retirement from the team at any of their nationwide branch offices. Executives clearly hoped that their employees, as well as their customers, would assume that the same compassionate business practices extended to them.

Several other corporations used images and stories of their L-League teams in promotional campaigns similar to that of Nikko Securities. Shiroki Industries, an automotive parts manufacturer headquartered in Nagoya, stated in their company narrative that women's soccer was "fresh" and "new" and that their L-League team ideally represented the "New Shiroki Movement," a broad-

based strategy to increase, among other things, product diversification, internationalization, and employee training. The guiding theme of the movement and new corporate motto was “Creative Intelligence,” which sales brochures and other materials defined as capturing the originality and inventiveness that defined the company’s efforts. In the first half of 1990, as plans for the new team named Serena got under way, numerous articles echoed Shiroki Industries’ press release that the team “perfectly fit” its image as a “fresh” company “looking towards the twenty-first century” (*Nihon Keizai Shinbun* 1990).<sup>5</sup>

Ishimaru Masayuki, the man in charge of creating the Serena team and who was promoted to president of Shiroki Industries soon after, presented the Serena team as representing the company’s more general policies and perspectives toward female employees. In an article in the *Mainichi* newspaper, Ishimaru was quoted as saying, “This is the era of women, and [Shiroki Industries] is aiming to fully utilize women’s abilities” (*Mainichi Shinbun* 1990). Just weeks later, in a regionally broadcast radio interview, Ishimaru said that Shiroki Industries wanted to create a company where “the active involvement of women will increase the motivation of male workers, and male and female employees will learn together and make each other better” (*Tōkai Nichi-Nichi Shinbun* 1990a). Article headlines furthered the view of Shiroki Industries as a progressive and women-friendly company. For instance, the large type above one article read, “Expecting Great Things from the Strength of Women” (*Tōkai Nichi-Nichi Shinbun* 1990b).

The evolution of the L-League from a club to a corporate team entity, as well as the creation of more teams, coincided with a critical period of public discussion and legal actions relating to women and work in Japan. The year 1985, which marked the inauguration of the “New Shiroki Movement,” also saw the passage of the Equal Employment Opportunity Law, which took effect in 1986. Prominent international reportage on sexual harassment cases against Japanese firms produced an unflattering and generic image of Japanese corporations as unfair to women.<sup>6</sup> Shiroki Industries management’s explicit presentation of its commitment to women’s soccer team as representative of its broader commitment to women’s employment that “fully utilizes their abilities” was, in part, a concerted response to discussions of women’s rights and labor.

At the same time, Shiroki Industries featured the Serena team in efforts that seemed to ignore or erase gender. Specifically, corporate images posed the players as generic employees who benefited from their policies. For instance, photographs of Serena players were the only actual images of “employees” in

the human resources section of the 1998 company profile brochure. The accompanying text begins:

Shiroki Industries believes that talented employees are our greatest asset. Our hope is that, while our employees make the most of themselves as individuals, they will also be active participants at work and home. In order to achieve these goals, we seek to build a “creative and energetic company” by establishing working environments that emphasize cooperation between management and labor, improving working conditions, and providing ways for employees to utilize their leisure time. (Shiroki Industries 1998: 18)

The text suggests reciprocal obligations between company and workers: in return for Shiroki Industries’ paternalistic concern, employees must make the most of themselves and show dedication to their greatest social obligations—work and family. The blurring of team players’ images in one of the most prominent photographs suggests vigorous movement and speed and a sense of rapid progress and aggressive action. The blurring also renders the figures



*Figure 14* “Talented employees are our greatest asset.” Shiroki Corporation (1998) corporate brochure.

anonymous and genderless: they are any and every employee, dressed in the Shiroki Industries uniform, their bodies in matched strides, moving in unison and pursuing the same goal. They are a perfectly coordinated, seemingly automated, corporeal and corporate unit.<sup>7</sup> The image's arguably modernist bracketing of gender is echoed in the text, which presents an equally modern and nontraditional picture of employees' lives: it suggests that "work and home," the public and the private spheres, are not only on equal footing, but also equally the domains of females and males; it also draws leisure into the realm of work, a move it would seem that was meant to break starkly with a more traditional image of Japan, Inc.

While gender may have been downplayed, and soccer privileged in moments by executives and media personnel at Nikko Securities and Shiroki, they always existed in combination, and the female soccer player was thus produced and deployed as iconic of the "future." Replete with linkages to countercultural rebelliousness, Euro-American feminism, and revolutionary female embodiment, L-Leaguers seemed the perfect symbolic vehicle for corporations eager to convince their own employees and international clients that they were on the move, modernizing employment practices and, even more fundamentally, modernizing the nature of work itself. Unfortunately, the image of modern work promoted by these corporations in the 1990s contrasted sharply with the L-Leaguers' actual employment experiences.

### Being an L-Leaguer: Image versus Reality

The ability of female players to take advantage of soccer as an alternative space was in many ways enabled by discourses produced by corporations, coaches, the mass media, social scientists, and the L-Leaguers themselves that portrayed interactions with soccer as progressive and different from the average life course for women. The symbolic positioning of soccer on the margins or outside of daily life was reinforced by the concrete actions of coaches and administrators who effectively circumscribed the physical and social movement of players and confined them to limited spaces. Rigorous training and game schedules kept players on soccer fields for a good part of the day, six or seven days per week. Dormitories and training sites were located in outlying areas, and some enforced strict curfews. In addition, an unwritten but strictly followed L-League rule required that all players be unmarried. Those who decided to marry needed to quit their teams. L-Leaguers' "work" was cast as incompatible with wifehood and, by extension, motherhood. The right to

work as a soccer player was bound to an implicit agreement that, regardless of her age, an L-Leaguer must remain an adolescent.

To many players, the L-League environment was socially and experientially limiting. To others, however, the denials, prohibitions, and circumscription of movement created new freedoms and safety from unwanted demands and expectations. For most of the players with whom I spoke, the unwritten understanding that they could not marry as long as they played was a welcome respite. Soccer provided a means of quieting anxious parents eager for their daughters to wed. Others told me that they never wanted to get married, and soccer provided a way to postpone potentially difficult conversations with their parents.

L-League coaches and administrators commonly treated players as naive adolescents, a tactic that justified their control over the teams but also allowed them to dismiss seemingly “boyish” behaviors and same-sex romantic interests as fleeting childish fancies. For instance, when I tried to talk to a coach about the signs of a budding romantic relationship between two teammates, he quickly ended the conversation by dismissing what he called “odd behavior of kids” and “immaturity.”

Joining an L-League team offered life-changing experiences of social mobility. The dormitory living arrangements placed players in much more monitored environments than they would have experienced living on their own, a fact lamented by many players; yet these accommodations provided new freedoms as well. In some cases, L-League contracts meant the chance to leave a small town with limited employment possibilities. For many, contracts required leaving the family home, a move that normally occurred after marriage for young women from largely working-class backgrounds. L-League participation afforded players opportunities to travel across Japan for matches and training camps. However, except in the case of a handful of the most talented L-League players, the social mobility afforded by soccer was not accompanied by economic mobility. Although sponsoring corporations had deployed women’s soccer players as heralding new modern visions of labor and mobility in the form of employment opportunities, no new or revolutionary work opportunities materialized for L-Leaguers; if anything, their job prospects were narrowed by the demands of their sport.

The Shiroki Industries and Nikko Securities players’ actual experiences were worlds away from that of the idealized workers exhorted to “be both active participants at work and home” (Shiroki Industries 1998: 18). Regardless

of their educational backgrounds, the vast majority of players were relegated to menial jobs on shop floors and in offices. At another L-League team, players were assigned to work as waitresses and caddies at a golf course.

The unwritten rule against marriage and childbirth made contributions to “home,” at least in the respects intended by the corporations, impossible. The players’ marginalized position in the workplace existed throughout the L-League: players were often rotated from one worksite to another, much in the same way that temporary and provisional employees are used. Companies rarely put time into training them for more skilled jobs, as they might have done for other entry-level employees. According to the team executives I interviewed in the late 1990s, players were compensated according to the pay grade for their work in the factory or office. However, in many cases, players’ wages probably were not commensurate with the lowest-paid female workers at their companies. In my interviews with players in the late 1990s and early 2000s, it appeared that, in addition to the provision of room and board in a company dormitory, the best-paid players received an additional 100,000 to 120,000 yen per month, but most received less than half of that.<sup>8</sup>

Possibly because of this treatment, most L-Leaguers were uninterested in the non-soccer aspects of their employment. The primacy put on soccer was not surprising, however, in an environment where coaches emphasized the need to cultivate “professional consciousness,” namely an unfaltering, full-time commitment to their development as players, both on and off the field. According to this rationale, if one wanted to be a “professional,” all other aspects of life—family, school, and other work—had to come second to athletic training.

In the late 1990s, seemingly in recognition and support of players’ exclusive focus on their athletic development, Nikko Securities and other teams began offering players “professional contracts” (*puro keiyaku*). But what on the surface sounded respectable and lucrative was, in fact, a tactic to alleviate the parent company’s responsibilities. While “professional contracts” almost never included a salary raise, they eliminated players’ work responsibilities off the soccer field. Efforts to get players out of offices and factories so that they could spend more time in the gym and on the soccer field were also convenient ways to relieve companies of the burden of guaranteeing employment after a young woman’s soccer career had ended, since they were no longer legally considered full-time regular employees (*seishain*). It was no surprise that players, who were training in environments where they were exhorted to be “professional” while receiving little encouragement for their effort as company workers,

eagerly signed these new contracts. The new contracts also made it possible for companies to immediately terminate players' employment when a team folded, which occurred suddenly and unexpectedly for the Nikko Securities Dream Ladies and several other teams in 1999.

The L-Leaguers' marginalized employment positions contrasted sharply with the company publicity materials that depicted them as ideal mainstream employees. At the same time, the players' liminality as model corporate "family" members, as well as the gender-bending nature of their sport, arguably made them perfect representatives for the impossible task of personifying the kind of gender-neutral worker promoted in the Shiroki Industries brochure. Exemplifying neither typical male nor female employees, L-Leaguers embodied an ambivalence to which more exciting possibilities could be attached. Symbolically separated from factory drudgery, actively connected to images of women's empowerment, and firmly detached from any markers of mainstream female domesticity, Serena players and their friends on other teams were avatars of a new corporate ideal of creativity, energy, and "freshness." At the same time, they were icons of latent possibilities and uncharted opportunities for their fellow workers, fans, and other aspiring young female athletes. The realities of these young women's lives, unfortunately, were often very different from these ideals.

### Conclusion: From Individuality to Insecurity?

While a handful of journalists argued that soccer represented the dangers of unfettered globalization, many more corporate executives, athletic coaches, players, and fans in 1990s Japan heralded the sport as the perfect model of the more internationally attuned sensibilities required for Japanese citizens to compete in the twenty-first-century economy.

The United States and Northern Europe led the way in creating soccer opportunities for girls and women in the 1970s and 1980s, thus giving the sport a progressive image in terms of gender equality. Japanese corporate executives made the decision to sponsor L-League teams to benefit from soccer's international image, as well as from the publicity generated by female soccer players, whom they believed looked and acted different from other women in the world of sport. They also saw women's soccer as a means for acquiring more business clients worldwide and for countering global mass media reports of a male-dominated and misogynistic Japanese corporate culture.

Like the corporate leaders who sponsored them, L-Leaguers perceived soccer to be progressive and iconoclastic, but they were interested for different



reasons: they saw the job of soccer player as a chance for new experiences, mobilities, and life courses. Soccer provided opportunities for self-realization in ways unintended by coaches and administrators. It gave young women a way to challenge, even transcend, the social expectations that they found restrictive, onerous, or simply unfair. As Miriam Silverberg analyzed, the 1920s and 1930s modern girl “stood as a vital symbol of overwhelming ‘modern’ or non-Japanese change instigated by both women and men during an era of economic crisis and social unrest” (Silverberg 1991b: 263). Arguably, the L-Leaguer was an analogous figure in the 1990s.

Both interwar modern girls and late twentieth-century soccer players showed progress and mobility to be inherently gendered concepts, connecting female bodies to broader ideas of stability and change. Just as modernity has been tied consistently to various ideals of femininity and womanhood (as is highlighted throughout the chapters in this volume), it also typically presupposes socioeconomic mobility. While the L-Leaguers have certainly been young woman on the move, the vast majority of them have not enjoyed the upward economic mobility experienced by so many of the other modern girls in this volume. Their labor as muscular athletes was very modern indeed, but it was not matched by the financial gains or employment opportunities that their corporate sponsors publicly advertised with the aid of their images.

Although modernity is inherently rife with inconsistencies and contradictions, it is the disjuncture between mobility in the form of “freedom of opportunity” and “self-actualization”—iconized in the form of the L-Leaguer beginning in the 1990s—and labor and economic mobility that needs to be addressed while looking at Nadeshiko Japan’s recent achievements.

The recent successes of Nadeshiko Japan in the 2008 Olympics and the 2011 World Cup would not have occurred if L-Leaguers had not paved the way for women in the sport thanks to corporate interests in their symbolic potential. Nadeshiko Japan’s surprising World Cup victory has brought unprecedented public attention to women’s soccer and a level of visibility never before experienced by many Japanese women athletes. The players have found themselves held up as model citizens, global ambassadors, and national heroes lifting the spirit of their country after the trifold disaster brought about by the earthquake on March 11, 2011. Several journalists also raised public awareness of the tenuous financial situations in which many of these players have lived for years while focusing all of their energies on soccer success (Leighton 2011; Yomiuri 2011).

At the time of their World Cup victory, less than 5 percent of the approximately 230 players in the Nadeshiko League were under professional contracts with their teams, and a handful more had part-time employment with other corporate sponsors, who gave them job assignments that allowed them to train at the level required of top athletes (*Daily Yomiuri* 2011b). However, the majority resorted to unsatisfying and low-paying part-time jobs at restaurants, shipping warehouses, pachinko parlors, grocery store stockrooms, and the like, so that they could purchase their own shoes, pay team dues, and hope to make practices pushed to the evening hours to accommodate everyone's work schedules.

While many commentators have emphasized the irony of these players' predicaments and decried the inequities in compensation between Nadeshiko players and their male counterparts, who have not had the same success on the international stage, several others have celebrated these young women specifically because of the adversity they have faced. "Corporate Japan needs soccer women's hungry spirit," wrote *Nikkei Weekly* economic magazine reporter Iguchi Tetsuya just a week after the World Cup (Iguchi 2011). In contrast to male soccer players who are often richly, or at least adequately rewarded for their athletic talents, for almost two decades Japanese female players have weathered meager and inconsistent financial support at best. However, for Iguchi, the Nadeshiko team's "remarkable performance" is a direct product of the "acute worry" brought about by this persistent insecurity. He compares the players' situation to that of Japanese female corporate employees, who have suffered years of discrimination and inequity in male-dominated workspaces; they too, Iguchi argues, serve as consummate models of the character and attitude toward work needed from laborers for Japan to succeed in the future.

More than twenty years after the birth of what has become the Nadeshiko League, female soccer players appear to have reclaimed their status as modern girls of their age, symbols of change in Japan's current moment of crisis and unrest. It also appears likely that they will once again be cast as exemplars of ideal laborers and representatives of Japan's economic and labor environment more broadly. There is a strong possibility, however, that the previous disconnect between players' lived experiences and the corporate narratives to which they were tied may fall away in a neoliberal economy that not only acknowledges, but also finds its productive energy in, insecurity and "acute worry."