



Butler University Digital Commons @ Butler University

Scholarship and Professional Work - LAS

College of Liberal Arts & Sciences

2007

Gender Lessons on the Fields of Contemporary Japan: The Female Athlete in Coaching Discourses

Elise M. Edwards

Butler University, emedwar1@butler.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.butler.edu/facsch_papers

 Part of the [Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons](#), [Sports Studies Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Edwards, Elise M., "Gender Lessons on the Fields of Contemporary Japan: The Female Athlete in Coaching Discourses" *This Sporting Life: Sports and Body Culture in Modern Japan* / (2007): 211-227.

Available at http://digitalcommons.butler.edu/facsch_papers/703

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Liberal Arts & Sciences at Digital Commons @ Butler University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Scholarship and Professional Work - LAS by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Butler University. For more information, please contact fgaede@butler.edu.

Gender Lessons on the Fields of Contemporary Japan: The Female Athlete in Coaching Discourses

Elise Marie Edwards

In general, female athletes tend to cry when practice does not go well or when they make mistakes. They talk too much with their friends and slack off when their coach is not around. If you try to reprimand them, they respond with angry, puffed-up faces, and on top of all of that they are likely to just throw everything away and quit! These are the distinguishing characteristics of the female athlete. [Comments of a gymnastics coach, cited in Nihon taiiku kyōkai 1986: 15].

Over the past century in Japan, educators, government officials, and cultural critics have heatedly debated women's athletic participation. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, when girls first participated in limited forms of physical education, the influence of physical exercise on a young girl's biology, moral character, and of course, femininity, was seriously discussed. Policymakers used scientific arguments and appealed to dominant popular opinion as they designed a variety of prescriptions for women's athletic participation. Not only did Meiji educators feel that sewing and other domestic skills were much more important in the education of a young Japanese woman, they also believed that overly-aggressive exercise posed serious dangers to the fragile female body, as well as to young girls' corruptible feminine demeanors (Narita et. al. 1988; Kaimizu 1988). Limitations placed on girls' athletic participation due to their assumed fragility, particularly when counterpoised with the eager pursuit of physical education for boys (Shimizu, this volume), actively reaffirmed and substantiated that presumed fragility. Only allowed to pursue restricted exercises, girls thus appeared physically limited. Relegated to "appropriately feminine" activities and movements, young women were effectively trained to embody what policymakers asserted was their "natural femininity." The Japanese physical education system's most overt structural sex biases persisted until 1989 when finally all school physical education courses were opened to both sexes. With the change, boys are now allowed to enroll in dance and girls can participate in judo, soccer, and several other sports from which they were previously prohib-

ited (Sano 1996). Throughout the past century, the modern Japanese physical education and sports systems have been critical sites for under girding scientific claims of sex difference, and for the training and performance of gender. The sports realm has also been one of the most effective sites supporting assertions of male physical superiority, which predictably has translated into male privilege and dominance in a variety of other social spheres.

Historically, sports educators, scientists, and administrators held critical positions in shaping debates, creating science, and developing policies that effectively restricted women's participation and maintained the sports fields as a male-dominated realm. In the present day, sports researchers and educators continue to hold similar power and control. From positions of legitimacy derived from the status of science as well as the professionalization of coaching, sports scientists and coaches produce expert knowledge that defines the personalities and abilities of females as athletes and individuals. The authority of coaches and other sports professionals also allows them to often say much more about athletes than those athletes are ever given the opportunity to say about themselves. The discourses and data produced by coaches, educators, and researchers in sports sciences influence how others understand female athletes, and also greatly affect how those athletes understand themselves. The structure of practices, the design of drills, and the instructions and information imparted on fields, in teams meetings, and in the pages of sports manuals all contribute to a player's somatic development, and her sense of identity.

As part of a larger study of women's sports in Japan I have looked at general discussions in Japan about coaching women, approaches to the study of women's participation in the sports sciences, as well as the "coaching philosophies" and practices of coaches in the Japanese L-League, the top semi-professional women's soccer league in Japan. In this chapter, although I focus predominantly on textual sources to ascertain how the Japanese female athlete is constructed in formal coaching literature, I also include ethnographic material from my work with the L-League.¹ I believe the textual sources are important as they ostensibly serve as "official discourse" written by coaches, trainers and researcher of sports and physical education. The writing that I am looking at appears in a variety of monthly magazines and journals, as well as popular books that appear in the "sports" section at local bookstores and libraries. The material circulates among a peer community of high level sports educators and coaches, but it is also consumed by more lay-readers, such as youth coaches and middle school gym teachers, who turn to them as authoritative resources and means of education.² Ethnographic material, of course, is equally important as it helps me draw comparisons between textual materials couched in theoretical language

and scientific justifications and on-the-field actions and behaviors that shape athletes' lives. In short, the ethnographic material helps me argue that this "official discourse" about female athletes does matter. Beyond revealing the consistency between the "official discourse" and that which happens "on the ground," the comparability of the two spheres, I believe, underscores the predominance of a particular construction of the female athlete that consistently compares and marks her as inferior to her male counterpart.

Throughout my textual and field research, I have found an inherently comparative mode of discourse, reflecting a vision of the sports world as first and foremost the domain of males and masculinity. The discourse originates in an assertion of sex difference, with female athletes consistently compared with males who are either directly mentioned or whose presence is implicit in the construction of the argument. The female athlete serves as the marked term to her unmarked male counterpart. The pathological and problematized "marked" female athlete is much less an accurate description than an oppositional category used to define everything that the "unmarked" true/male athlete is not.³

Coaches and educators pose girls and women as relative newcomers—and psychologically and biologically ill-equipped participants—to the sports scene. This is historically incorrect; Japanese women have participated in modern sports since the turn of the twentieth century, and competed in international competitions since the 1920s.⁴ Nonetheless, women's forays into athletics are still portrayed as fleeting, and even potentially hazardous ventures into a world for which they are not naturally suited, emotionally, mentally, or physically.

Spoiled and hysterical: The complex psychology of the female athlete

In the fall of 1998, *Aera*, a popular weekly newsmagazine, titled a feature article "Women become stronger by depending on men?" The article reported on prevailing stereotypes within the Japanese sports world about female athletes. An essentialized image of "*the* female athlete," constructed by the writer and his various sources, including coaches and professors of physical education (all of whom were male), was presented as a mentally and psychologically deficient individual, inferior to her male athletic counterpart (Itô: 62-63). She was portrayed as desperately needy of and dependent upon strong males in order to achieve success. According to the article, the majority of coaches considered their female players to be obsequious and dependent. Their athletes, coaches said, looked to them continuously for direction and affirmation. In comparison with male athletes, the female athlete was portrayed as much more rule-bound,

and less imaginative and self-assured in her development as an athlete. Unlike the omnipresent specter of the unproblematic and easily coach-able male athlete, the female athlete was presented as a troubling puzzle, a well of unpredictable emotions, and a continuous challenge to her coach. The article portrayed sports as a realm where boys and men naturally and independently excel, while females must rely on the guidance, intelligence, and know-how of a male to navigate the treacherous waters of sport. I have discovered in my research that the opinions presented in this one article are prevalent throughout coaching literature and reflected in on-the-field actions of L-League coaches.

In an interview for the *Japan Women's Soccer Manual*, a women's soccer guide produced by the L-League in 1994, the head coach of the Japan Women's National Team asserted that "a good coach has to be a great psychologist" (102). At a speaking engagement, in reference to questions about coaching females, the same coach said, "You know, there are always going to be things that I just don't understand about women." An attempt to be humorous? Yes, of course. However, the comment also reflects a sentiment prevalent among coaches I met in the L-League. The general consensus is that females are emotionally erratic and unpredictable, and psychologically wired in a way that hinders individual success in sports, makes team dynamics problematic, and more generally, does not predispose girls and women to athletic pursuits. In the *Women's Sports Handbook* (1986), a thick guide for sports instructors published by the Japanese Amateur Sports Association (*Nihon taiiku kyōkai*), females are described as having very little control over themselves or their emotions; instead, they are said to be at the mercy of individuals and events around them.⁵ Contributing sports educators frequently use words such as "hysterical" (*hisuterikku*) and "spoiled" (*amayakashii*) to describe that undesirable side of the female athlete, which they say continuously challenges the skills of coaches. Evoking images of temper tantrums and unruly children, male coaches talk about their teams as if they were emotional minefields where every word spoken and facial expression must be carefully calculated for fear of disturbing the subtle balance of the female athlete's emotions (e.g., *Nihon taiiku kyōkai* 1986: 44-9). The social deftness with which players' birthdays, relationships with players' parents, and personal favoritism must be handled in order to prevent emotional tirades from players takes up a significant proportion of discussions about coaching females (Ohnuki 1994: 103). This psychological fragility, coaches suggest, is seldom seen in the world of men's sports.

Compared to male athletes, who are described as much more self-assured and self-reliant, the female player is stereotyped as an emotionally connected and concerned woman, trapped in a web of relations with those around her. She has

little confidence, and her sense of self, coaches argue, hinges on positive reinforcement from friends, family, and especially, her coach. Therefore, as a university professor and the head coach of the women's national volleyball team argued in a co-written piece, it is important for the coach "to make each player think that she is the most favored" (Nihon taiiku kyōkai 1986: 44). L-League coaches often echo this sentiment. "They [the players] all say that they want to be treated equally," a head coach commented in an article for the League's *Soccer Manual*, "but the truth is that in their hearts each player thinks it feels unfair, and wishes that you would pay more attention to her" (1994: 211). It is problems with relationships with others—teammates and coaches—that supposedly cause the most difficulties for female athletes. In the *Women's Sports Handbook*, researchers argue that drops in levels of performance and cases of players quitting are the result of female players' problems with personal relationships (Nihon taiiku kyōkai 1986: 28-9, 68-69). They also claim the data reveal that males are dramatically different in this respect—a grand conclusion drawn from slight statistical differences (52-55).⁶ However, more interesting is how much this connectedness with others is underscored as a primary characteristic of the female athlete and the degree to which it is disparaged as a hindrance to athletic excellence.

Critiques of "the female athlete" do not end with complaints about her lack of independence; she is also commonly portrayed as shallow and vindictive in her relations with coaches and other athletes. Coaches and educators often portray female athletes as feeling and displaying great envy and jealousy. Some instructors argue that women show a great desire to monopolize (*dokusenyoku*), are prone to displaying prejudice, and are likely to turn small trivialities into momentous problems (Nihon taiiku kyōkai 1986: 16-17, 42). One female coach in the *Women's Sports Handbook* even suggested that for many female athletes jealousy seems to be the source of their motivation (*dōki no gen*) and potentially the key to their success. Female athletes "in particular" (read: more so than male athletes), she argued, tend to get jealous when other athletes have better results than they do, or if they have better clothes, or if they are cute, or if they seem to be a favorite of the coach (75). To the extent that this jealousy can be channeled into a competitive attitude and effort toward improvement, the same coach argued, it can be the female athlete's source of success. Ironically, one quality identified as a "strength" of the female athlete simply reconnect her again to the same negatively stereotyped, jealousy-ridden psyche.

Other female athletes' problems are described as extending beyond the problems of adjusting to a team environment. Recalling scientific arguments from the first half of the twentieth century about the fragility of the female nervous system and the delicate relationship between her mental and physical ca-

pacities, some present-day sports educators argue that the female athlete is psychologically under-equipped to handle the challenges of competitive athletics. One rather common argument is that female athletes have weak mental and psychological self-control, and thus are unable to cover their physical failings with greater mental effort like their male counterparts do. In turn, coaches, such as those in the handbook, argue that unlike male athletes the mental and emotional stability of female athletes is easily affected by technical or physical problems (Nihon taiiku kyōkai 1986: 33). In addition, they claim that women do not exhibit the same motivation or find the same value in competition as males. “It is a special characteristic of women’s nature” argues one writer, “to try to escape from things that are difficult” (ibid.:15). I have read and heard coaches’ arguments about the attitudinal changes that occur with the onset of female puberty, such as young women losing their interest in practice and competition. Instead of discussing the cultural or societal factors that might cause this to be the case, commentators treat these changes as natural and inevitable as girls make the transition to womanhood. These discussions of puberty and female late adolescence serve as another means of furthering an argument about the incompatibility of sport and femininity; sports commentators and educators often idolize the athletic capacities of the relatively gender-less (and arguably “boyish”) bodies of pre-pubescent athletes, and contrast them sharply with the disabling effects of puberty and the restrictive trappings of full physical womanhood (ibid.:144).

Where is the control, creativity, and independence? The mental inferiority of the female athlete

As far as boys are concerned, out of 10 things you only teach them 4 or 5, and then get them to think about the rest on their own; otherwise you run the risk of injuring their self-respect. Whereas with girls, you have to teach them all 10 things; they should be trained with thorough control, with the aim of teaching them all ten items so they can perform them perfectly. [comments of a former head coach of the Daiwa Securities (men’s) basketball team, cited in Itō 1998: 63].

This quote appeared in the *Women’s Sports Handbook*, but I was told the same thing almost *verbatim* by a women’s soccer coach at a tournament in 1999. Female players, coaches seem to almost unanimously agree, want constant attention and plenty of feedback and criticism, and demand that coaches explain everything, down to the very last detail. In another context, these same quali-

ties could easily be deemed desirable: the signs of a dedicated athlete, an eager learner, and an obedient student who wants to take advantage of her coach's knowledge and insight. In the case of many female athletes in Japan, however, this extremely eager and obedient behavior is said to reflect a lack of "independence" or "individuality" (*jishusei* or *jitaisei*). Educators producing manuals and L-League coaches alike discuss this dependence and lack of original or creative thought as if they were inherent ingredients of femininity that pose serious obstacles for young women who want to excel in sports.

beyond the portrayals of female athletes as incapable of thinking independently, there is also a discourse popular among coaches presenting female athletes as struggling mentally with higher-level technical and tactical concepts. Echoing the sentiments of the basketball coach cited above, a national-level track coach and university professor said the same article that coaches must be much more organized and methodical when coaching women than when working with men. When teaching a female player a skill, he argued, the coach must start at the very beginning, and if any steps are skipped, the players will be unable to master the technique; with men, several steps can be skipped and they will still pick it up almost immediately.

Similar sentiments about coaching can be found in the L-League. The coach of my former team said it was "no use" trying to teach the girls on the team advanced skills or tactics; he had tried in the past and found that over a short period of months the girls would forget what they had been taught, forcing him to start all over again from the beginning. At another team where I coached, one of my fellow assistants suggested we send the players to a "mental training" course. The head coach responded that the players on our team were "not at a level to understand or use the information successfully" (team meeting, October 1997). It was not the age, maturity, or skill level of the players that he inferred to be the problem but rather their gender. The assistant coach seconded his opinion by nodding in agreement and then commenting that other coaches participating in the seminar had told him that male athletes picked up the mental training techniques much more easily than females. For men, he said, the information was *hairi-yasui*, "or easy to mentally absorb, but it would "probably be more difficult" for women. Many comments within coaching discourse reflect the belief that males and females have different mental capacities. This belief also guides many forms of coaching practice which effectively, although unwittingly, (re)produce difference in keeping with the "natural" order of things. For example, in a 1995 article for primary school physical educators in the journal *Joshi taiiku* (Physical Education for Girls), teachers are instructed to design gym classes in such a way as to properly develop the

different qualities “inherent” to the two sexes. The goal of a PE curriculum, said the writer, is to help children recognize and develop the strengths unique to their sex; for boys these would be things such as “power and *ideas*,” while females should be encouraged to further develop their greater “attention to details” (Nagatsu, cited in Sano 1996: 168).

Although I never witnessed a coach directly tell a female player that she was mentally inferior to men, coaches made such comments to me in private, and the sentiment is clear in much of the training literature. Constant repetition of simple skill drills and the incorporation of playful activities that would appeal to young children reflect coaches’ opinions that female L-League players are incapable of understanding advanced tactical concepts, and not genetically inclined to truly mastering even simple skills. As one L-League coach explained to me, despite the fact that the majority of L-Leaguers are of college age or older, their attention span and intellectual maturity is “much like middle school boys.” “You have to keep them entertained,” he said, in order for practice to be effective. This particular coach substituted colorful small rubber “lifting,” or foot juggling balls, for regulation soccer balls for many of the practices with his L-League players. This kind of practice, he said, was “fun,” which he believed was the key component to keeping the female players engaged and amused. When I asked him about these balls, and the abundance of playful games only loosely related to soccer, he said this was a lot like a young boys’ team practice; doing much more than this, he suggested would be too mentally taxing on the girls and thus unproductive. The contrast was striking as I compared the L-Leaguer’s practice with the intense drills and mini-games that were going on (with regulation soccer balls) at the adjacent field where the company’s (male) J-League team, with players of comparable ages, was training.

While coaches complain about the lack of independence, imagination, or original thinking of female players, they create and perpetuate environments where obedience and following instructions are demanded above originality and independent thought. In the *Women’s Sports Handbook*, a coach and professor from a Tokyo university begins a section entitled, “Planning, tactical decision making, and organizational ability,” with the assertion that women do not show the same intellectual curiosity as men in developing their strategic planning ability, building their technical knowledge, and doing other things necessary to prepare for competitions. “In addition,” he writes, “it is generally thought that the female player’s ability to make tactical decisions or organize play is somewhat lower than a male’s.” Providing advice for coaches dealing with female players who “have difficulty thinking and playing independently,” he writes, “it is necessary to make the them do just as you [the coach] instruct, and

it is also probably necessary to spend a lot of practice time on set patterned plays that can be used in games” (Nihon taiiku kyōkai 1986: 17).

Physical inferiority

There are things that are mysterious and that I don't understand about the female body. For example, women's periods, or the fact that their bodies give birth to babies; there are things that even women themselves do not understand. So, even if a male coach has a lot of experience [with female athletes] and reads some scientific texts, there are some things that he can never comprehend. [comments of a professor and researcher at a top university for women's physical education, cited in Nihon taiiku kyōkai 1986: 102].

Historically, in Japan and elsewhere, arguments for and against women's access to athletics have frequently been couched in scientific reasoning about the nature of female biology. With the development of formalized physical education and women's growing participation in sports around the turn of the century, considerable discussion and heated debate revolved around the physical benefits and perceived threats of women's athletic involvement. Whatever the arguments put forth about the dangers or benefits of exercise for women, the female was seen as an entity tied physically and emotionally to her reproductive organs. Scientists and educators argued the female athlete was controlled by the cycle of her menstrual flows, and the radical changes brought on by puberty and menopause, stages which marked her body as inwardly focused, with a fragile biology and psyche, rather than strong and externally directed like her male counterpart (whose internal organs were rarely discussed and surely not as a hindrance).

In many respects the female was reduced to her uterus—the greatest item of concern for the pro-natalist Japanese state in its imperialist endeavors, and thus for scientific researchers and sports educators. The priority placed on her role as a reproductive vessel was clear in the arguments made for and against her participation in athletics. In Japan, as was true in many Western nations as well, increased (but carefully controlled) exercise was often promoted as a part of pro-natalist policies, and conversely, biological arguments about potential dangers to reproductive capacities were put forth at times when women's “over activity” began challenging social mores. Today, although there are significantly fewer limitations on women's sports participation, female athletes continue to be inextricably linked and even defined by their reproductive organs and capabilities.

While most guides to coaching male athletes never address issues of sperm count or the threat of sterility, discussions about the onset of menstruation (*shuchō*), the impact of cyclical periods (*gekkei*), and concerns about pregnancy (*ninshin*) and childbirth (*shussan*) on the life and performance of the female athlete riddle (even dominate) the material on the coaching of women. Almost fifty pages, or one quarter of the *Women's Sports Handbook*, focus specifically on the impact of sports on reproductive functions and vice versa. *The Female Body and Sports* (1994), one of the few books for the lay reader dedicated to women's sports published in Japan in the 1990s, contains little information about sports, and is instead yet another review of the potential risks and benefits of sports and exercise for women. The opening chapters of the book start with common themes: menstruation, anemia, and menopause. Once again, the story of the female athlete begins in her biological interior with her reproductive cycles and potential pathologies defining both the structure of her life, and the primacy of her existence as a reproductive being. While not denying the importance of this information, we must still question the dominance of this biological discourse in literature on women's sports, as well as the nature of its presentation. After several Women's Soccer World Cups, the consistent strength and popularity of the Japanese Olympic Judo Team, and the increased popularity of women's rugby and American football at Japanese universities and sports clubs, the continuing presence in these texts of questions such as "Is it dangerous for women to participate in contact sports?" seems dubiously motivated and reminiscent of earlier debates about the suitability of sports for women from decades ago.

On L-League teams and the Japanese Women's National Team, players are often required to report their menstrual schedules. This policy is connected to the same biological discourse that treats the female athlete foremost as what the feminist sports historian Raita Kyoko of Chūkyō University has coined the "birthing body" (*umu karada*). Coaches require vigilant self-monitoring and reporting by the players, regardless of whether or not the players experience any irregularities or discomfort with their periods. This imposed self-monitoring trains the young women to police their own bodies, and builds up the natural (and for many women, relatively unintrusive) biological cycle as a foreboding presence always threatening to undermine their athletic performances. At other moments, coaches suggest that women's biology is a unique source of strength and power. In an interview with the Women's National Team coach in an L-League publication, for instance, he says he finds that women are able to play "keep away" two to three times longer than men. This phenomenon is easily explained, he says, by the fact that women "never expose everything they are holding inside." By means of and odd (and ar-

guably sexist) compliment, this elite coach presents women and their bodies as mysterious and somewhat unfathomable. He goes on to propose that this conservation of strength can probably be explained by the fact that women “*instinctively* preserve the strength to birth a child” (Onuki 1994: 101). His statement effectively promotes an essentialized vision of female “nature” as he explains women’s strengths on the soccer field via arguments about their core identities and “instinctive” qualities as “birthing bodies.”

There is an undeniable contradiction in sports scientists’ efforts to make the organs, systems, and functions of the female athletic body knowable, while at the same time expressing confusion and bafflement at the unpredictability of that same body. Despite the contradiction, though, we can note that both claims serve the same purpose: to maintain the female athlete as physically ill-suited to sports. This strange combination of discourses, about the knowing the female body and about her mysterious unpredictability, is epitomized by the contrast struck by the text of a roundtable discussion (*zadankai*), which appears at the end of the *Women’s Sports Handbook* (1986). The topic of the discussion was an incident during the 1985 Tokyo International Marathon when an East German runner suddenly began to menstruate during the race, but continued to run and finished second overall. Throughout the discussion there was an air of disbelief that this woman would continue despite such an embarrassing eruption of her bodily functions; the consensus was that a Japanese runner would never continue under the same circumstances. The group cited examples of volleyball players and gymnasts who experienced sudden menstrual flows in the middle of competitions that were visible to both the fans and media. The almost childish intrigue in the perceived garishness of the events is difficult to dismiss. More striking, however, is that after completing pages of material instructing coaches about their abilities to monitor, control, and understand the effects of menstruation on the female athlete, this final discussion closed the handbook by again underscoring the unpredictability and uncontrollable nature of her body. Constructing the female athlete as needy of constant attention and careful regulation, and yet still prone to unforeseeable overflows, failures, and embarrassments, the handbook’s larger message is that the female body is not properly equipped for the demands of sports.

Perhaps even more pervasive a discourse than that which binds the female athlete to her reproductive function is the constant gender comparison, by which female strength, speed, stamina, proportions of fat and muscle, and all other physical qualities are measured and assessed in relation to a male standard. This comparative approach characterizes most academic material on the physical aspects of the female athlete.⁷ Whether the topic is muscle fiber, max

VO2 measurements, or bone structure, researchers rarely discuss female athletes without comparative male data. The primary effect (and at times, seemingly, the motivation) of this approach is to assert biological and physical differences between the sexes, and maintain the inferiority of the female athlete. The sex bias of these comparative scientific methods are mirrored on practice fields and in meeting rooms; L-League coaches often invoke a male standard and then point out their female players' inferiority in comparison to that standard. For instance, at one team meeting I attended, a coach opined while drawing diagrams, "Well, in a game like this a men's team would use this kind of defensive scheme, but seeing that women can't run as fast as men, that's not possible for our team." I have also attended L-League team meetings during which coaches pointed out male players' superiority at technical skills, such as dribbling and shooting the ball, as if this in some way might be helpful to their female players. In interviews, coaches refer to a "gap" (*gyappu*) between male and female players, stress the need for women to "catch up," or claim that "in comparison to men, [women] are still lacking"; such attitudes again reaffirm the notion that male athletes define a standard against which all is judged, and towards which women must aspire (Onuki 1994: 210-12). These kinds of gender comparisons, arguably, serve no practical purpose since female and male players never face each other in official competitions; however, they continue to have undeniable effects in the realm of sexual politics.

It is true that some coaches do try to avoid "female vs. male" comparisons. Some acknowledge the irrelevance of comparisons for a sport in which men and women do not compete; others argue that their research findings or coaching guidelines are applicable to all athletes regardless of sex. However, such judgments are still the exceptions rather than the rule. A round-table interview included in an L-League publication serves as a good example. Despite a couple of coaches' comments that differences between male and female players are of little concern for them, the interview continues to pursue the line of questioning, pushing the participating coaches to talk about the "gap" between the levels of women and men. The conversation once again ends up focusing on differences and what women's soccer and its athletes lack in comparison to the men (Onuki 1994: 210-218).

As we have seen, the creation and evaluation of the female athlete vis-à-vis an idealized male norm occurs not only with respect to her physiology but also to characterizations of her emotional and mental qualities. A preoccupation with sex differences and a belief that male behavior and performance defines the norm influences the majority of research studies, the contents of coaching manuals, the organization of practice menus, and even coaches' remarks dur-

ing team meetings. In all aspects of sports, the male model serves as the baseline, the control, the norm, against which women are tested, evaluated, and valued. And an adherence to this perspective, in turn, reaffirms and recapitulates men's dominant position in sports by creating data that emphasizes differences and produces dichotomies, which intrinsically result in a hierarchy with males placed safely at the top.

Conclusion

Over the past decade in the U.S. and the U.K., there has been growing academic interest in male coach/female athlete relations. Although substantive empirical work is still limited, recent studies have begun to wrestle with the complex power dynamics of these relationships and the ways that broader cultural gender stereotypes and inequalities affect the behaviors, expectations, and experiences of coaches and players (Tomlinson & Yorganci 1997, Heywood 1999). These studies have been useful in interrogating the power-dependency dimension of coach-player relations and the complications for female athletes when gender biases are an added component of that power dynamic. Researchers have focused ethnographically on athletes in their efforts to document biased and even abusive treatment of players by coaches. Mirroring many of my findings in Japan, a recent study of track athletes in the U.K. (Tomlinson & Yorganci 1997) found that female athletes were consistently treated as inferior to their male counterparts. Belief by coaches in the reality of biological differences between the sexes, the researchers found, translated into immediate assumptions about female inferiority in sports and unequal treatment of women athletes in training situations (*ibid.*: 143-44).

The authors of the study of track athletes attributed the unequal and abusive treatment experienced by female athletes to "the organizational sexuality characteristic of the sports culture" (134), but I do not find this conclusion particularly helpful. It verges on the tautological to argue that coaches act in a sexist manner because the sports subculture itself is inherently sexist. Instead, it is critical to uncover the structures of representation and the mechanisms of transmission producing knowledge that supports "organizational sexuality" in sport.

Taking cues from feminist critiques of science and knowledge production, I have looked at coaching manuals and other materials produced by coaches and sports scientists in Japan to see how the female athlete is discursively constructed. I also looked at how the understanding of "the female athlete" produced by this discourse translates into the treatment of women athletes on the soccer field. I have argued that central to almost all knowledge production about women in

sports is a preoccupation with sex difference and its manifestations, which is reflected in research studies and coaching practices that either overtly or implicitly compare female athletes mentally and physically with males and then mark them as inferior. In the natural sciences, feminist critics have argued that a preoccupation with sex differences, coupled with a blatant disregard for similarities and consistencies across the sexes, is at the heart of a dominant androcentric science that inherently benefits men (Harding 1987: 94, 100). Although feminist scholars have aggressively questioned the premises, practices, and effects of a so-called “value-neutral science” over the past few decades, little of that work has been brought to bear on the science of sports. As we continue to explore more critically the methodological and epistemological bases of sports science, including coaching, we will begin to more fully understand how sex and gender bias is woven into the structure of the system. I think we will find that the stakes extend far beyond the realm of sports. Research studies that define women in relation to a male norm, and stories of strong male coaches managing and guiding talented but unfocused and overly emotional female players support and justify gendered hierarchies in worlds far away from the fields and courts of sport.



Endnotes

- ¹ I pursued my dissertation fieldwork in the L-League over two years between 1997 and 1999, and had direct professional experience with the League as both a player and coach from 1992 to 1998. Research for this article was funded by The Japan Foundation, a SSRC International Dissertation Research Fellowship, and the 1999 Summer Program in Japan co-sponsored by NSF and Mombushō.
- ² One of the most popular general coaching journals, *Coaching Clinic*, and a periodical more specific to the soccer community, *Soccer Clinic*, were staple items in the offices and clubhouses of most teams in the L-League. In addition, all L-League coaches regularly receive copies of the L-League's monthly newsletters, the Japanese Football Association's magazine, and other materials, such as the Japanese Women's Soccer Manual produced by the L-League office in 1994, all of which are filled with commentary, new ideas about coaching, and official Association-led directives from the National Team Staff.
- ³ The idea of marked and unmarked terms is central to anthropology and critical to everything from theorizing on sexuality and gender to analyses of the relationships between colonized and colonizer. I have taken direct inspiration, however, from David Halperin's discussions of the terms in his writings on constructions of heterosexuality and homosexuality (1995: 42-8).
- ⁴ In 1924, the first Japan Women's Olympics (*Nihon joshi Orinpikku taikai*) was held with women participating in six events. In the same year, the first annual Meiji Jingu Tournament (*Meiji Jingu kyōgi taikai*) was convened and women participated in track, basketball, volleyball, and tennis. In 1928, Japan was one of six countries to send female competitors to the first Olympics opened to women, the ninth official Games in Amsterdam. Japanese women were prominent competitors in early international sporting events, with Hitomi Kinue being one of the most dominating of all time. Hitomi held four world records in track in the late 1920s in the 100 and 200 meter dashes, as well as the triple jump and long jump. Japanese women athletes have participated in all of the Olympics since that time, with a gold medal-winning performance in 1964 (the first time that volleyball was an official Olympic sport for both women and men) standing out as one of the brightest sporting moments ever for Japan.

- ⁵ I drew quite a bit of material for this article from the *Women's Sports Handbook* (1986). For that reason, I would like to note that it is an edited volume with contributions from fourteen different individuals, the majority of whom hold university positions in physical education departments and/or work for national sport associations. I have drawn material from several of the contributors who come from a wide array of sports backgrounds. It is also important to note that this volume was officially sanctioned by the Japan Amateur Sports Association, and produced expressly as an educational guide for coaches of female athletes of all ages and levels, although it does seem weighted towards coaches of more elite athletes.
- ⁶ One of the most popular psychological measures in Japanese sports research is the Taikyō Sports Motivation Inventory (Taikō kyōgi dōki kensa or TSMI). Accepted by the majority of sports scientists as an “objective” measure of an athlete’s motivation, TSMI results are used to construct arguments about differences between male and female athletes. The gendered dimensions of athletes’ self-reporting are not taken into account. In addition, in most cases female and male scores only differ by a few tenths of a point—hardly the differentials one would expect necessary to make grand conclusions about inherent sex differences. There is also no accounting of individual variation, and with the scores as they are it is easy to presume that there are multiple examples where individual scores radically contradict gender stereotypes drawn from the tests. If anything, the TSMI tests appear to make a much stronger argument for consistency and similarity across the sexes. The surveys, however, are administered in studies that begin with an initial premise of sex difference; no matter how inconclusive the numbers rendered, they are typically used to support a preconceived argument about “natural” differences between males and females. Feminist critics studying other areas of the sciences have suggested that to a great degree ‘sex differences’ is a category created by both sexist science and analytic traditions that focus on distinctions over sameness (cf. Harding 1986).
- ⁷ I have reviewed numerous academic journal articles to come to this conclusion. The fact that a male standard directs the design and influences the evaluation of scientific sports studies on women is also argued by Sano Nobuko in her bibliographical review of hundreds of books and articles published in Japan between 1985 and 1995 on various topics related to women and sports (1996).

References

- Halperin, David (1995) *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Harding, Sandra (1986) *The Science Question in Feminism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Heywood, Leslie (1999) "Despite the Positive Rhetoric about Women's Sports, Female Athletes Face a Culture of Sexual Harassment." *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 45(18): B4-B5.
- Itō Ryūtarō (1998) "Otoko ni ison shite onna wa tsuyoku naru?" [Can Women Become Stronger While Being Dependent on Men?]. *Aera*, November 23, 62-63.
- Kaimizu Kayoko (1988) "Senzen no gakkō taiiku seido ni okeru joshi no tokusei ni tsuite" [Discussion of Girls' Special Qualities in the Pre-War Physical Education System]. *Fujimura Gakuen Tōkyō Joshi Taiiku Daigaku kiyō* 23 (March).
- Narita Jūjirō (1988) *Supōtsu to kyōiku no rekishi* [A History of Sports and Education]. Tokyo: Fumaidō.
- Nihon taiiku kyōkai (1986) *Joshi supōtsu handobukku* [Women's Sports Handbook]. Tokyo: Gyōsei.
- Onuki Tetsuyoshi (1994) *Nihon joshi sakkā manuaru* [The Japan Women's Soccer Manual]. Tokyo: Nihon Terebi.
- Sano Nobuko (1996) "'Josei to supōtsu' in kansuru bunken shōkai" [An Introductory Bibliography on Women and Sports]. *Josei bunka kenkyū sentā nenpō* No. 9-10. Ochanomizu University.
- Tomlinson, Alan and Ilkay Yorganci (1997) "Male Coach/Female Athlete Relations: Gender and Power Relations in Competitive Sport," *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 21(2): 134-155.

