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Publisher: Routledge

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Asia Pacific Journal of Sport and Social Science

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rass20>

Japanese Women and Sport: Beyond baseball and sumo

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Published online: 22 May 2013.

To cite this article: Ali Bowes (2013) Japanese Women and Sport: Beyond baseball and sumo, Asia Pacific Journal of Sport and Social Science, 2:1, 70-71, DOI: [10.1080/21640599.2013.800318](https://doi.org/10.1080/21640599.2013.800318)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/21640599.2013.800318>

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Japanese Women and Sport: Beyond baseball and sumo, by Robin Kietlinski, London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2011, 187 pp., £45.00, (hardback), ISBN 9781849663403

The Japanese national football team's victory in the 2011 Women's Football World Cup, the first by an Asian team in a world football tournament at any level, has elevated women's sport in Japan to a new plane. Robin Kietlinski's timely book charting the history of women's sport in Japan offers a concise and well-presented record. In particular, this book addresses a critical lack of literature surrounding sportswomen in non-western countries.

The book highlights the important role which women have played in Japan's sporting movement since the 1920s (a role that is discussed at greater length in this issue by William Kelly). Japanese women are often considered to be stereotyped as weak, demure, quiet and overtly feminine. However, Kietlinski's discussion of Japanese women's contribution to sport demonstrates the inadequacy of this stereotype. As Kietlinski suggests, 'the success and international prominence gained by Japan's female athletes in particular seems to stand in stark contrast to the "traditional" image of Japanese women – an image of submissiveness and powerlessness created and supported by popular and academic discourse alike' (p. 1).

Kietlinski's work seeks to highlight women's contribution to sport in Japan, requesting a western audience consider activities outside of men's participation in baseball, sumo and martial arts. She intertwines the socio-political history of Japan with the story of its sportswomen. The book draws upon newspapers and popular and scholarly journals, as well as autobiographies and biographies of women athletes, thereby documenting the history of Japanese women's participation in competitive sport.

Chapter 1 asks, 'Why women's sport? Why Japan?' (p. 1), and introduces us to the general topic of women's sport in Japan. Kietlinski also highlights the dominance of western literature on women's sport (e.g. Hargreaves, 1994; Cahn, 1994). Chapter 2 contextualizes Japanese sportswomen against the backdrop of the development of sport in China and the Korean peninsula. Here, differences are highlighted between the East Asian nations. These first two chapters thus set the scene for a more detailed discussion of the history of women's sport in Japan.

Chapter 3 highlights the pioneers of women's physical education in Japan, similar to Hargreaves' (1994) work on women and sport in the UK and Cahn's (1994) on the USA. The influence of early female physical educators was central to the development of sport for women in Japan, with the early pioneers of physical education for women being heavily influenced by western systems. Increasing contact with the west, and Japan's desire to become a modern nation, led to the increasing popularity of the Olympic Games, to which Japan first sent representatives in 1912. Chapter 4 charts the career of Kinue Hitomi. Japan's first female Olympic medallist, Hitomi won silver in the first ever 800 m race for women in 1928, and is widely considered to have paved the way for Japanese women on the international sporting stage. This biography is presented alongside discussions surrounding the perceived contrasts, at the time, between womanhood and femininity within the masculine domain of sport.

Chapter 5 looks at the relationship between Japanese women and sport during the Second World War and occupation years (1930s–1950s). This discussion includes Hideko Maehata's legendary breaststroke swimming performance at the 1936 Berlin Olympics, where she became Japan's first female gold medal winner, and Japan's re-emergence on the global sporting stage in 1952 following the Second World War. Chapter 6 moves on to

the 1960s and 70s, incorporating the Tokyo Olympic Games in 1964 and the emergence of the Japan women's volleyball team, dubbed the 'witches of the Orient' after their gold-medal winning performance. The chapter focuses on those social changes that ultimately led to greater gender equality in sport.

Chapter 7 discusses the status of female athletes in contemporary Japan from 1980 onwards, focusing on the more recent successes of judoka Ryoko Tamura, who won seven world titles in addition to Olympic gold medals in 2000 at Sydney and 2004 at Athens and, similarly to Ryoko Tani, has gone on to forge careers in business and politics. Chapter 8 concludes the book. It outlines theoretical concerns surrounding Japanese women in sport, considering the ways in which female athletes have contributed to the redefinition of femininity, womanhood, choice and success in contemporary Japan. In this chapter, Kietlinski investigates modernity, globalization and commercialization, spectacle/performance and femininity. She also outlines areas which are in need of further research, admitting herself that, in her case, 'a broad and sweeping approach was taken to the subject matter' (p. 135).

Whilst Kietlinski clearly succeeds in documenting a general history of Japanese women in high-performance sport, there is a notable lack of discussion of the sporting lives of 'ordinary' women. Instead, there is a clear focus on the Olympic Games and Olympic athletes and on the effects of globalizing processes. Although these stories are important to tell for their own sake, as well as for the contribution they make to the jigsaw that is the development of sport for women in Japan, the book also highlights the need for further research into the wider engagement of Japanese women with sport. Indeed, Kietlinski herself admits that, in one of the first English-language forays into the history and sociology of East Asian sportswomen, she has said a lot, but there is much more to be written.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/21640599.2013.800318>