INTRODUCTION

Sports Celebrity in Japan:
A Transnational History

The men of Japan are brought to tears in spite of themselves. Naturally, the women cry, too.
—Emi Sui’in, “Mourning Dewanoumi”

At 2:10 in the afternoon on 19 June 1922, Japan lost a saint. The sudden death of the retired wrestler Hitachiyama Taniemon initiated what the writer Emi Sui’in and others described as a nationwide wave of grief. A skeptic might suspect hyperbole, especially since Emi’s ode to Hitachiyama first appeared in a sumo specialty magazine. Certainly the loss of a national leader might evoke such a reaction—one need only consider the Japanese response to the death of Emperor Meiji ten years earlier—but a retired sumo wrestler?

There is, however, good reason to believe Emi’s reference to a national outpouring of emotion on the loss of Hitachiyama. Compared with earlier wrestlers, Hitachiyama’s death generated an unprecedented degree of press coverage, which would have made his passing difficult to miss.\(^1\) Numerous articles comment specifically on the popular response, noting that several thousands waited to say a final farewell to Hitachiyama as his body was taken to Ueno train station and then to his hometown of Mito, in Ibaraki prefecture. Papers also reported that the monetary gifts of condolence within days of his death had already reached 18,000 yen.\(^2\) A memorial service held in December attracted
It was not just Hitachiyama’s death that attracted attention. Fifteen years earlier, in 1907, an editorial in the *Yomiuri shinbun* began by noting that Hitachiyama was one of the most recognized individuals in Japan, his fame such that “from the nobles above to the servant boys below, there are none who do not know his name.” The editorial also pointed out that Hitachiyama’s name had become virtually synonymous with sumo. Hitachiyama figured prominently in various Japanese “Who’s Who” books of his day, including several that listed him along with both national and international nobility, military leaders, and intellectuals. Courted as a potential candidate for the National Diet because of his fame at home, he was also known abroad, having toured internationally and met such foreign dignitaries as President Theodore Roosevelt.

Often called the “saint of sumo,” Hitachiyama has regularly been credited with having “saved” sumo through his popularity and his influence on the sport after retirement. Hitachiyama was more than just a sumo wrestler, more even than the sumo grand champion that his rank of yokozuna denoted. He was a national celebrity, and more importantly from the perspective of this book, he was one of Japan’s first modern sports stars, whose passing seized the attention and emotions of Japanese society.

Given his standing as a sports star, the media and popular attention Hitachiyama received are hardly surprising. In the sports-saturated world of the twenty-first century, details about the personal lives, training regimens, and bodily measurements of sports stars appear in the mass media with such regularity that information of this sort is largely taken for granted. It is not hard to imagine that almost anyone could locate a number of specific details about a particular athlete, including age, height, weight, hometown, or marital status. Even without the advantages of an internet search engine, these and other kinds of information are easily accessible in any number of articles and television reports, on the back of collectors’ cards, on team rosters, or in pregame introductions at sporting events. A dedicated sports fan might be able to provide these kinds of details from memory. Indeed, the sparing use of adjectives like “media-shy” and “private” to describe celebrities of all sorts suggests that the absence of detailed information about stars is more striking than its presence. Yet why do we know so much about these people?

This book challenges the assumed naturalness of knowledge about sports stars by exploring how and why it became acceptable, and almost
expected, to have access to intimate details about athletes. Tracing the emergence and evolution of sports celebrity in Japan from the seventeenth through the twenty-first centuries, this study reveals that sports stars are socially constructed phenomena, the products of both particular historical moments and broader, cumulative discourses of celebrity that became transnational in reach. At the same time, this work argues that the largely unquestioned mass of information about sports stars not only reflects, but also shapes society and body culture. By examining how various constituencies, including stars themselves, have molded and deployed the celebrity images of individual athletes, this book exposes the ways in which representations of sports stars mediated Japan’s emergence into the putatively universal realm of sports, unsettled orthodox notions of gender, facilitated the wartime mobilization of physically fit men and women, and later, masked lingering inequalities in postwar Japanese society. Despite the prominent role that sports stars have played in Japanese history, most narratives of Japan’s past have, intentionally or not, written them out. This book writes them back in.

As the first critical examination of the history of sports celebrity outside a Euro-American context, this work also sheds new light on the transnational forces at play in the social construction and impact of celebrity images. A general lack of attention to historical specificity has fostered powerful misconceptions that sports stars in the non-West are mere imitations of some Western “source.” In fact, standard narratives of the history of sports celebrity are based on some grossly oversimplifying and lamentably ethnocentric assumptions. Two stand out in particular: that the emergence of modern sports stars began when William Randolph Hearst created the first newspaper sports section in the New York Journal in 1895, and that Hearst’s innovation was then imitated in other countries. This book challenges these kinds of assumptions by examining how domestic traditions, practices, and concerns in Japan actively engaged with incoming international trends and ideas to produce forms of sports celebrity that simultaneously influenced sports stardom in the West, which was itself far from coherent when it first arrived in Japan.

**Origins: Continuities, Changes, and Cultural Imperialism**

As Hitachiyama’s fame suggests, sports stars in Japan have been subject to intense public scrutiny since at least the late 1800s, when sumo wrestlers were recruited to represent Japan’s newly reinvented “national” sport at home and abroad. Of course, celebrities, including the many
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sumo wrestlers whose portraits survive in Tokugawa-era (1600–1868) woodblock prints, had been around long before this. Any discussion of sports stardom in Japan must necessarily address the ways in which these earlier examples of sumo celebrity shaped later manifestations, an issue explored in Chapter 1 of this study. It is worth noting in particular that in contrast to stardom in Europe and the United States, Japan’s sports culture was centered on individual stars almost from the beginning, a fact that not only belies common stereotypes about Japanese society, but also helps account for the rapid emergence of individual sports stars in team sports such as baseball.9 Examining such continuities in representations of sumo stars helps to check the all-too-easy assumption that sports stars are simply by-products of Japan’s efforts to “Westernize.” It also brings the distinctive features of what I describe as “modern” sports celebrity into perspective, for even in the case of sumo stars, a number of factors combined, beginning in the latter half of the nineteenth century, to produce something very different from earlier forms of celebrity.10

Among the most crucial developments of this period was the emergence of new kinds of media networks, both in Japan and around the world. From at least the 1890s, sumo coverage was a staple in many Japanese newspapers. By the turn of the century, newspapers and nascent specialty magazines frequently published “day in the life” reports about such sumo stars as Hitachiyama. The new media networks meant that increasing numbers of Japanese could follow the daily exploits of their favorite star—whether that star visited a geisha or a doctor. The advent of new media forms such as magazines, film, radio, television, and now the internet have provided ever more ways for people to learn about sports stars, and have also altered the nature of stardom itself.

Another factor shaping modern forms of sports celebrity in Japan from the late nineteenth century onward was the introduction and diffusion of new, primarily Euro-American, ideas about sports and physical culture. This process led not only to the emergence of Western sports in Japan, but also to the “sportification” of such native forms of physical culture as sumo and the martial arts. The institutionalization of sports organizations and the creation of numerous sports competitions at the local, national, and international levels provided Japanese athletes with multiple forums at home and abroad where they could be seen and demonstrate their abilities. But Japanese athletes were not the only ones being seen.

Beginning in the early 1900s, images and descriptions of Western sports figures appeared with increasing regularity in Japanese media
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sources, offering an important reminder that the average Japanese reader of a sports page has long been aware of a world outside the archipelago. In light of this simple fact, the histories of sports and modern sports celebrity in Japan cannot be viewed solely in a nationally bounded vacuum; they must be addressed as multi-dimensional, transnational phenomena. While domestic traditions and practices played a critical role in the emergence and evolution of sports stardom, these same factors—and increasingly, sports stars themselves—constantly interacted with and were shaped by broader forces, particularly those associated with imperialism.

The early presence of Western stars in the Japanese media points to the need to conceptualize sports and sports stars as products of a highly conspicuous (if often ignored) form of cultural imperialism. The willingness on the part of Japanese society to embrace Western sports should not blind us to the power relations that lie behind them. Western sports were introduced to Japan, and much of the world, as a defining and necessary feature of “civilized” societies. According to the hegemonic imperialist logic of the late nineteenth century, especially in the United States, a lack of sports was a sign of backwardness and underdevelopment in both body and mind. Indigenous forms of physical culture were by and large classified as unscientific, undisciplined, inferior, or simply “barbaric,” thus justifying their exclusion from the allegedly universal category of sports. One American writer, for instance, described sumo in 1898 as an “unsicenced [sic] tug between two big overfed creatures who would rather be sitting over a pipe and cup of saké. They would make but a short stand against a disciple of the catch-as-catch-can or Græco-Roman style of Anglo-Saxon wrestling.”

Given remarks such as these, “teaching” sports to the Japanese was as much about Westerners confirming their own superiority as it was about sharing a “love of the game.” The Japanese acceptance of, and eventual success in, sports provided further proof, ex post facto, of claims to universality. From a Euro-American perspective, Japanese interest in sports proved that the West had been right about sports all along. But Japanese successes in sports also revealed the tensions inherent in what was, at its very core, a co-constitutional process.

By co-constitution, I refer specifically to the fact that both Japanese and non-Japanese looked to one another to define themselves, a process of mutual self-definition through opposition. In other words, the transnational interactions at the heart of modern sports have helped reinforce and even create distinct national and regional identities on all sides. That is not to say that co-constitutional processes are symmetrical or equal. As
the following chapters demonstrate, Westerners have looked to Japanese sports and sports stars to define themselves, but not nearly to the same extent that Japan has looked to the West. Moreover, transnational sporting exchanges have often been premised on mutual assumptions of Euro-American superiority. The co-constitutional nature of such exchanges becomes especially apparent when these assumptions are challenged, as perhaps best exemplified by Japanese and Western media commentaries about a so-called “yellow peril in sports” linked to Japan’s international sporting gains in the years before World War II. The peril only emerged when the “student” threatened to outperform the “teacher.” Understandably, the co-constitution evident in the introduction and diffusion of sports in Japan also figures centrally in the social production of sports stars.

Frameworks

In order to understand how these transnational and co-constitutional processes have operated in a Japanese context, this study draws from a wide variety of source materials—media coverage, biographical accounts, bureaucratic memoranda, literary works, athletes’ memoirs, interviews, and films—to examine sports celebrities from multiple perspectives. In doing so, it employs insights from an equally diverse range of disciplinary and theoretical approaches, including history, anthropology, sociology, sports studies, and media studies, as well as gender, film, and literary theory. Among this deliberately eclectic mix of analytical tools, four concepts and frameworks that inform the following chapters merit particular attention here, beginning with the central role of image and representation for sports stars.

SPORTS-CELEBRITY IMAGES

Because of the seemingly quantified and achievement-based nature of sports celebrity, athletes are sometimes portrayed as more “real” or “authentic” than other types of celebrities. Closer examination, however, reveals that the celebrity status of sports stars is produced and consumed in the form of various representations, or what film scholar Richard Dyer calls “star images.” Treating sports stars as products of socially constructed celebrity images does not make them or their accomplishments any less “real” or significant, but rather opens up the potential for “mining the cultural significance of a star by examining the network of ideological discourses from which they emerge.”
As subsequent chapters demonstrate, the celebrity images of sports stars are not only real, but also quite powerful and useful, even long after the sports celebrity has died. Such power and usefulness stem in large part from the malleability of star images, which allows people to extract and mobilize the “meanings and feelings, the variations, inflections and contradictions, that work for them.” Sports stars themselves often willingly employ their own fame to represent diverse, and at times conflicting, causes. Consequently, both the production and consumption of these sports-celebrity images vary depending on the particular socio-historical contexts. As Daisuke Miyao has pointed out in his study of transnational film star Sessue Hayakawa, geographical space also shapes celebrity images, since a star’s image can take on dramatically different meanings depending on the location where it is being produced or consumed.

Moreover, like the movie stars Dyer and Miyao have examined, the images of sports celebrities “are extensive, multimedia, intertextual.” Far from a lack of source materials, for most sports stars the issue at hand is an overabundance of sometimes minutely detailed information about seemingly every aspect of their lives. While commentary about athletic performances is central for sports stars, media coverage of various sorts, biographies, illustrations, photographs, fictional works, advertisements, and even what Dyer describes as the “way the star can become part of the coinage of everyday speech,” all serve as critical elements of a sports star’s image. The result is an inescapable web of representation where some strands (athletic achievements, for instance) may be particularly significant, but are necessarily interwoven with others.

The emerging images of sports stars blend the visual and the written, integrate fact and fiction, and are themselves composites of earlier images. A staged photo became emblematic of Hitachiyama’s career-long rivalry with another wrestler. A children’s story turned details from Hitachiyama’s autopsy into a science and health lesson. Biographies selectively combined all these “facts” to tell why Hitachiyama was the saint of sumo. The point in this study is not so much to determine the accuracy or reality of these images, but rather to dissect them, exploring both the factors involved in their production and their societal influence.

SPORTS-STAR SYSTEMS

If sports-celebrity images share much in common with those of other stars, they are also unique. Although comparisons of actors, singers, and other celebrities are common and certainly contribute to celebrity im-
ages, from the very moment of their emergence, sports stars are necessarily defined through differentiation with other sports stars, becoming instantly embedded in what I call “star systems.” Previous scholars have used this phrase to describe the socio-economic and institutional factors that produce celebrities, especially in the movie and music industries; however, I employ the concept of star systems as a kind of shorthand for describing the process by which sports stars are constructed in relation to, and frequently in opposition to, other stars.21

This approach highlights the critical—though often overlooked—role that such comparisons and differentiations play in defining how images of sports celebrities are produced and how these images are understood in a society. In many ways, this differentiation is built into sports in the form of direct competition between athletes. Even team sports are often cast as contests between individual players (pitcher versus hitter, goalkeeper versus kicker, Shaquille O’Neal versus Yao Ming, and so forth). The obsession with records, a defining feature of modern sports, also acts as a kind of star system in which any record-breaking athlete is instantly placed into a comparative framework with all record holders before and after. It is important to note, however, that any given sports celebrity operates simultaneously in multiple systems of differentiation, and that the particular stars being compared or the evaluations of the comparisons depend on the situation and context. It is not hard to imagine that an individual sports star might simultaneously be compared to a contemporary rival, a “great” from an earlier time, a competitor from another country, or a player in a completely different sport. American baseball star Barry Bonds offers a case in point. His highly publicized quest to break the Major League record for career homeruns linked him to Babe Ruth, Hank Aaron, and the still-reigning world-record holder, Oh Sadaharu, a Japanese baseball star. At the same time, Bonds’ alleged involvement in a doping scandal linked him to such recent baseball players as Roger Clemens, Mark McGwire, and Alex Rodriguez, as well as several athletes in track and field. In this sense, star systems can transcend time, space, or sport—or even real life.

For example, Gushiken Yōkō, the boxing world champion examined in Chapter 5, was frequently described as “Japan’s Rocky” (Nihon no Rokkī). This designation referred, of course, to the fictitious boxer portrayed by Sylvester Stallone in a movie that originally appeared around the time that Gushiken became champion. The Japanese weekly magazine Purēbōi (Playboy) linked this reference to Gushiken’s impoverished childhood, which, the magazine claimed, helped produce the strong
punches of “Japan’s Rocky.” Gushiken himself dismissively pointed out that no real boxer would coddle a pet turtle or call out his lover’s name at a title match, because if he did, he would obviously lose. Here, the same comparison from different perspectives results in different evaluations, but all of them contribute to the celebrity image of “Gushiken Yōkō.” In another case, a biography comparing Gushiken with Japanese baseball great Oh Sadaharu adds another facet to Gushiken’s celebrity image, suggesting that Gushiken possessed the same dedication to craft and work ethic that were so often credited for Oh’s success. This comparison serves at the same time as an affirmation of Oh’s impressiveness, since the baseball player was represented as a great not only within his own sport of baseball, but in the sports world in general.

The particular value of thinking about sports stars within the context of star systems lies in two points. First, star systems highlight the co-constitutional nature of sports celebrity. As in the case of Gushiken and Oh, the respective images of the stars being compared are shaped, in part, through an exchange of what Pierre Bourdieu has called “symbolic capital . . . the acquisition of a reputation for competence and an image of respectability and honourability.” Such exchanges need not be positive, nor are they necessarily equal; in most cases the lesser-known figure has more to gain or lose from the comparison. Moreover, even in those cases where the comparisons are specifically based on shared characteristics, they produce an excess of meanings beyond those intended. Readers more familiar with Rocky, for instance, bring to the comparison a particular understanding of what that figure represents: boxer, manliness, hard work, the American Dream, lower-class background, Italian-American ethnicity, to name a few possibilities. These preconceived ideas, in turn, create a parallel (or in a negative contrast, an antithetical) image of Gushiken, whether or not the issues associated with Rocky are actually relevant to Gushiken as a celebrity. The point here is not to question the validity of particular comparisons, but to see these “loaded” comparisons as central in the creation of sports stars. I want to consider how such polysemic star systems reflect and shape the concerns of the societies producing them.

This raises a second point: star systems also draw attention to the construction of sports stars as a situational phenomenon, emphasizing the importance of the particular contexts, social forces, and agendas involved in the production and consumption of sports-celebrity images. Female track star Hitomi Kinue (discussed in Chapter 3), was frequently represented as a national hero and even featured in school textbooks.
Yet she was also an object of profound gender anxieties in society at large. In the context of international competition and world records, Hitomi’s Japanese-ness served as the defining aspect of her identity, but when viewed in comparison with male and other female athletes at home, it was Hitomi’s femininity—or more accurately, concerns about her lack thereof—that proved most salient. By exposing these kinds of seeming inconsistencies in how sports stars are portrayed or portray themselves, star systems also point to the need to see identities, whether national, racial, gender, ethnic, or class, as themselves situationally defined. This fact is all the more significant given that sports stars are frequently called upon to represent identities of all sorts, often simultaneously. The popular appeal of sports stars stems, in part, from their larger-than-life embodiment of the performative and situational nature of identity, issues that people face daily in their own lives, whether consciously or not.

SPORTS-STAR PARADIGM

In addition to star systems, another key element shaping sports-celebrity images is what I describe as a “sports-star paradigm,” a pattern or model shaping how sports stars have been conceptualized, depicted, and interpreted. As argued in Chapter 2, this paradigm began to take shape in Japan in the early 1900s, arising with particular vividness and lasting effect in the narratives surrounding sumo star Hitachiyama, who was cast in the role of an athletic self-made man. Because Hitachiyama was one of Japan’s first modern sports stars, the narrative patterns and rhetorical techniques used in crafting his image have had a profound impact on how later athletic celebrities have been portrayed and understood. Just as in Hitachiyama’s case, later images of sports stars would rely on depictions of their exceptional skills, bodies, and character to explain their rise to sports stardom. At the same time, these exceptional features were conventionally downplayed to give simultaneous prominence, or even precedence, to the “self-made” nature of their stardom, achieved through hard work and dedication. Devotion—to sports, to nation, and perhaps especially to families—also appears as a central component of the sports-star paradigm from Hitachiyama’s time up to the present. Popular imaginings of sports stars regularly portray sporting success as both consequence and proof of the stars’ filial piety and their willingness and desire to serve the interests of the nation. Naturally, sports stars after Hitachiyama show considerable variety, stemming from the particulars of their situation, but they also retain, to a sur-
prising degree, many of the central components of the paradigm already apparent in Hitachiyama’s celebrity image.

The sports-star paradigm examined in this book shares several similarities with developments occurring outside Japan around the same time, especially in the United States. Charles Ponce de Leon’s examination of the role of sports journalism in the construction of American sports celebrities reveals the prominence of what he describes as the “ideal of sport, a set of values that journalists in the early twentieth century crafted to insulate themselves from the ballyhoo that was central to the commercialization of sports.”27 At the center of this ideal was an appreciation of the exceptional skills and bodies of athletes, exemplified by increasing use of techniques and devices aimed at giving readers the “tale of the tape” about various stars, as well as details about their seemingly superhuman exploits. This American ideal of sport placed concomitant emphasis on the self-discipline, motivation, personal sacrifices, and hard work that allowed these stars to excel.28

In the face of parallels with developments occurring in the United States during a similar time frame, it is imperative to note that the emergence of a sports-star paradigm in Japan is not simply a case of mimicry. As Chapter 2 illustrates, the dominant patterns of representing sports celebrities that arose in connection with Hitachiyama were in no small part the product of domestic societal concerns, coupled with a number of preexisting representational practices and contemporary trends in biographical writing in Japan. That said, the similar methods simultaneously employed to depict sports stars in the United States almost certainly melded with, and reinforced, what was happening in Japan, especially because of transnational star systems, which eventually assumed a defining role in the production and consumption of sports-celebrity images in Japan and beyond.

BODY CULTURE

Aside from athletic achievements, details about bodies and bodily practices are among the most prominent elements of representations and comparisons of athletes. In other contexts, publication of such “personal” details might seem strange or even invasive. For sports stars, however, it is the norm. The examinations of sports stars in this study seek to draw attention to this generally taken-for-granted information, emphasizing the ways in which sports stars both reflect and shape body culture. The concept of body culture, as anthropologist Susan Brownell has observed, is a “broad term that includes daily practices of health,
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hygiene, fitness, beauty, dress, and decoration, as well as gestures, postures, manners, ways of speaking and eating, and so on. It also includes the way these practices are trained in the body, the way the body is publicly displayed, and the lifestyle that is expressed in that display." In short, body culture serves as a useful umbrella concept for describing the various ways in which people portray, understand, use, and shape bodies in particular socio-historical contexts.

The impact of sports celebrities on body culture comes in both direct and indirect forms. Sports stars often exert direct influences by using their fame to promote a particular sport or sports in general. In many cases, their techniques and training are deployed as models for other athletes, seeking to replicate their success. But sports celebrities also shape body culture in more subtle ways. As the following chapters demonstrate, the abundance of widely publicized, seemingly objective facts about athletes’ bodily measurements, habits, and experiences can have profound effects on popular perceptions and awareness of the human body and its expected role in society. In particular, the dominant images of sports stars tend to idealize them as models of the “strenuously disciplined and achieved healthy body.” Although such a model is certainly well suited to the needs of a Foucauldian modern state interested in promoting the health and self-discipline of its citizens, sports-celebrity images are open to alternate and far less ideal interpretations. Sports stars are, after all, human and as subject to flaws and failures as any other person might be. They also exemplify what sociologist Henning Eichberg has described as the “historical obstinacy” of sports; as Eichberg points out, sporting bodies not only illustrate values of industrial culture, such as achievement, discipline, and measurement, but can also serve as vehicles for “expressions of obscenity, violence, and laughter, other worlds of sensuality.” By giving due consideration to the varying and often contradictory bodily descriptions of sports stars, this book highlights the central and at times contentious role that athletes have played in the ongoing negotiations of body politics in Japanese society.

Positioning

Despite the significance of sports stars in societies worldwide, they have received surprisingly little attention from scholars. Most of the existing scholarship on sports stars dates from the 1990s onward and has been conceptualized, almost exclusively, in terms of European and American contexts. The majority of these works have also focused overwhelmingly on contemporary stars, giving little attention to historical changes
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The history of sports celebrity outside Europe and the United States has remained largely unexplored. Given the current state of the field, a few comments about the particular emphases, limits, and outlines of this book seem especially merited.

This study focuses on the historical emergence and evolution of sports stardom in Japan, but it also insists that the broader history of sports celebrity cannot be fully understood unless the transnational, co-constitutional processes involved in the production of sports-celebrity images are taken into account. The chapters that follow concentrate on developments within Japan, while situating them in international contexts and giving particular attention to star systems that include non-Japanese stars. Although I have sought to explore a variety of comparative international examples, the vast majority of those used here come from Western, and especially American, contexts. This imbalance reflects both historical Euro-American hegemony in the realm of modern sports and the relative lack of secondary works addressing non-Western sports stars. Consequently, this work provides only the most general observations about the use of sports celebrity in efforts to differentiate Japan from its Asian neighbors. The place of sports and sports stars in Japan’s own history of imperialism in Asia merits a serious examination in its own right, but in the end, limitations of space and resources, together with the overwhelming presence of European and American sports stars in Japanese source materials, led me to preclude such an examination in this book. Nevertheless, it is my belief and hope that future studies will not only explore these and other aspects of sports celebrity, but also find the concepts and ideas raised here useful in that process.

The emphasis on the transnational nature of sports celebrity in this work shares some similarities with recent scholarly examinations of sports and sports stars as both products and producers of globalization. It bears noting, however, that this project was never conceptualized solely, or even secondarily, in terms of globalization, and the focus on the history of sports celebrity distinguishes this work from much of that existing literature. Indeed, my attention to historical continuities and changes in the Japanese case reveals that the conceptual basis of modern sports celebrity and often the individual celebrities themselves were global far earlier than most accounts of globalization suggest. This book also highlights the fact that much of what we see in sports celebrity today draws upon significantly older patterns and practices. That is not to say that sports stardom has not changed. The stars examined here clearly show that it has—perhaps especially in more recent times—but
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in order to distinguish the new from the old in today’s global culture of sports celebrity, the history of that celebrity has to be taken seriously.

This examination of the history of sports celebrity specifically as it relates to Japan covers a period stretching roughly from the 1600s through the 1980s, with five main chapters arranged chronologically. Every chapter addresses a specific theme, and each centers on an individual sports star, whose life, career, and, especially, representations speak to the particular aspects of sports celebrity that the chapter thematically explores. Despite some overlaps, the stars examined here are associated with distinct time periods and come from different sports: sumo, track and field, baseball, and boxing. I focus on these stars precisely because of their fame; in their own times, all were—and in most cases, they still are—seen as representative and meaningful figures in both their particular sports and Japanese society more generally.

These sports stars and others like them are important elements of a much broader celebrity culture in Japan that would include individuals ranging from imperial household members and so-called idols to famous Western visitors and infamous Japanese criminals. Recent scholarship examining such non-sports celebrities suggests a number of significant parallels between sports stars and other celebrities, and in several instances the chapters here explore overlaps between athletes and other stars. Nevertheless, many famous and influential celebrities are necessarily absent from these pages, and a detailed comparative study of the various manifestations of celebrity culture falls beyond the intended focus of this book. I will be pleased, however, if my examinations of sports stars and their largely overlooked history can help provide a more complete picture of Japan’s diverse and fascinating celebrity culture.

Given this work’s subject, the concentration on individual sports stars would appear to be far from usual or distinctive. In other ways, it flies in the face of widely held assumptions about Japan’s group-oriented culture and the broader historical connections between individualism and sports celebrity. As the book’s chapters point out, individualism in sports is not as quintessentially Western as it has sometimes been portrayed. Attention to historical source materials clearly shows that athletes in Japan were being singled out before Western sports were introduced and that individual stars, even in team sports, have long been, and continue to be, at the forefront of media and popular attention. To be sure, self-sacrifice—for the sake of nation, family, team, or otherwise—has served as a key element of these athletes’ celebrity images, but to overemphasize that ideal as the sole defining feature of Japanese sports
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celebrity is both to deny the historical impact of individual stars and to miss an opportunity to draw international comparisons that go beyond simple stereotypes.

Outside Japan, and even within Japan among younger generations, the sports stars examined in the following chapters are relatively unknown, a circumstance that necessitates a certain degree of background information about them and their sports. That said, these chapters do not provide comprehensive histories of the sports in question, nor are they intended as biographies revealing the “true” stories about these athletes. Because of the nature of sports stardom, efforts to uncover the “true” stars behind the web of representations frequently prove frustrating, if not outright impossible. Even seemingly objective facts about stars—details about their bodies, statistics about their athletic achievements, or information about their family or class backgrounds—have been employed selectively to construct particular images of these stars, often in response to the needs of specific, and at times very different, agendas. The goal of this study, then, is not to document the “true” people behind the sports-celebrity images, but rather to examine how these images themselves have been constructed at different times and how they affect the production of future celebrity representations.

In my examinations of celebrity images, I have also sought to give particular attention to the ways in which varying representations both reflect and influence the concerns of those who produce and consume them. I must admit, however, that the production of these images receives greater attention here than their consumption, especially in relation to fans. In many instances, the chapters do address the influence and perceptions of various fans, and I would suggest that the historically widespread availability of personal details about sports stars described in this book offers new insights into the fanatical consumption and production of information associated with the “otaku culture” of Japan today. However, a full treatment of the complex and source-rich history of various forms of sports fandom in Japan is left for another study. At the same time, it is important to keep in mind that the process of producing sports-celebrity images itself necessarily involves some form of consumption. Even the earliest representations of sports stars addressing their initial competitions and achievements are inherently intertextual. Any person writing about or otherwise depicting sports stars does so by referencing, explicitly or not, earlier images, ideas, or events. This book explores how and why different people at different times have put these various pieces together in the ways that they did.
I would be remiss, at this point, if I failed to acknowledge my own participation in this interlocking process of consuming and producing sports-celebrity images. My in-depth research of the stars discussed here clearly constitutes a form of consumption that differs from that of the average person, and I am also well aware that my examinations are molding the images of these sports stars in new ways that undoubtedly bear the influence of my own twofold agenda. By raising and exploring the relationships between various sports stars and several key issues and themes in the history of Japan, I have sought to demonstrate that sports and sports stars are worthy of far more scholarly inquiry than they have received to date. As the popular response to Hitachiyama’s death suggests, sports stars have meant a great deal to many people in the past, and I would argue that it is time for academic interpretations of that past to recognize the sports stars who have been there all along. But I would also suggest that reintroducing sports stars into historical narratives is not enough; we need to see sports stars, both past and present, in new ways, for they are far more complex and meaningful than they often appear. I speak, to some extent, from personal experience. I originally came to this topic out of historical curiosity rather than a love of sports, but as I studied these stars and their images seeking to understand their role in Japanese society, I began to see something that I had largely overlooked: the richness, the appeal, and perhaps most importantly, the power of sports celebrity. In the end, my examination of the history of sports stars in Japan enriched my understandings of the past and simultaneously forced me to rethink my own assumptions about sports and sports stars. I hope this book will do the same for others.

Although the stars examined here constitute only a selective sampling of the many sports heroes who have arisen in Japan, the insights they provide into the multifaceted nature of sports celebrity are relevant, and to a certain extent generalizable, to a much broader spectrum of athletes. Sports-celebrity images are always open to multiple meanings and interpretations, but I have consciously limited the thematic focus of each chapter to allow for greater clarity and attention to detail. For the most part, my selections of central themes were determined by the dominant issues emerging from the sources about each star, but each of these athletes could have been examined in relation to several other issues, which would have produced different, yet no less insightful, observations about sports celebrity. These chapters, then, are perhaps best viewed as historical case studies; taken as a whole, they explain the emergence, operation, and influence of sports stars throughout much of Japan’s modern history.
Chapter 1 focuses on the key factors shaping the emergence of modern sports celebrity in Japan during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It begins, however, by looking back to the 1600s, the period when sumo emerged as a popular spectator sport. After highlighting important continuities with earlier aspects of celebrity, the chapter explores the impact of several changes, including new media forms, transnational star systems, and different understandings of sports and body culture. This liminal period in the history of sports celebrity in Japan is exemplified by the sumo star Hitachiyama, who benefited and capitalized on several of these developments, becoming known as the “saint” who, quite literally, re-presented sumo as Japan’s national sport both at home and abroad.

The second chapter concentrates on the central role of representations and narratives in the production and consumption of sports stars. Returning to Hitachiyama, it explains why he, in particular, stood out among his fellow wrestlers to emerge as one of Japan’s first modern sports stars. The chapter also interrogates the socio-historical factors that helped mold the story that came to define Hitachiyama’s life—a heroic tale of a self-made man. It concludes by considering how Hitachiyama and his image makers established important precedents, putting in place a sports-star paradigm that shaped how later sports stars in Japan have been depicted and interpreted.

Chapter 3 centers on interwar female track star Hitomi Kinue, whose career highlights an often contentious relationship between gender and nationalism. Despite her successes in international competitions, including Japan’s first Olympic medal in women’s sports, the chapter considers how Hitomi’s seemingly unfeminine appearance, her rejection of marriage, rumors about her sexual preferences, and her devotion to the promotion of women’s sports in Japan, placed this highly conspicuous athlete at the very center of gender anxieties wracking Japanese society at the time. Examinations of Hitomi’s complex sports-celebrity image provide insights into how she has continued to serve as both an idealized pioneer and an unsettling figure long after her death.

The fourth chapter focuses on baseball star Sawamura Eiji, whose celebrity image remains closely linked with such American celebrities as Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig, and Cy Young. While the chapter discusses the origins of these relationships, it also moves the inquiry forward chronologically into the era of Japanese militarism, arguing that the relationship between baseball and Japan’s wartime state was far less antagonistic than most accounts of the sport’s history suggest. Drawing comparisons
with laudatory wartime accounts of Sawamura’s military service, the chapter investigates how Sawamura’s story was recast in the postwar period as a tragic narrative of wartime loss, a retelling that obscured, or even willfully forgot, his—and by extension baseball’s—complicity in the project of militarism.

The final chapter explores the role of sports celebrity in forging understandings of ethnic difference in Japanese society. It examines popular attention to the ethnic identity of world-champion boxer Gushiken Yōkō in the context of Okinawa’s historically ambiguous status within Japan. Analyzing how Gushiken was used to “introduce” the culture and history of Okinawa, the chapter reveals that differences and tensions were often muted by the very circumstances of Gushiken’s story. The image of Gushiken that emerged from this story sustained a form of what I call “spectacular difference” that coexisted with, and in ways reinforced, views of Japan as a homogeneous society.

As the subsequent examinations of these athletes demonstrate, paradigmatic models and transnational, co-constitutional star systems have shaped Japanese sports stars, and Japanese society, for more than a century. Analyzing the ways in which the complex images of these sports stars have been constructed and deployed reveals much about the times and people who produced and consumed them. But examining how and why sports stars have been represented and mobilized in the past also provides new insights on sports celebrity in the present. In the early decades of a new millennium, sports stars continue to play a central role both at home and abroad. As societies worldwide have become increasingly interconnected and as access to a previously unimaginable degree of information has become available with little more than a few keystrokes, the influence and reach of sports stars have been noticeably enhanced. Attention to the past renders the present-day global obsession with sports celebrities more understandable. At the same time, it provides us with tools for appreciating—and perhaps questioning—the too-often unacknowledged power of media practices that mold sports stars’ stories in ways that make us believe that we “know them,” and that, through them, we also know ourselves.