

The Development of Japanese Elite Sports Policy: An Olympic Cycle-based Diachronic Analysis

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Aim

Our research focuses on elite sports policy from the Sydney Games—when Japan's elite sports began growing stronger for the first time since the 1964 Tokyo Games—to the recent Rio de Janeiro Games, and analyzes the development of policies that resulted in the increased government involvement in elite sports.

Literature Review

In recent times, many countries participating in international sporting events such as the Olympic Games have engaged in fierce competitions to acquire medals. These countries have begun investing a large amount of public funds for this purpose. This phenomenon has been described as a “global sporting arm race” (Oakley & Green, 2001). Leading sports countries have strategically introduced systems for providing robust training for elite athletes (Böhlke & Robinson, 2009).

In recent years, Japan’s Olympic record has been improving. At the Rio de Janeiro Games, the country won 16 gold medals. This is because, like other leading sports countries, Japan has also been investing considerable public funds to strategically train its elite athletes (Sasakawa Sports Foundation, 2017).

A considerable amount of research on elite sports has been carried out in Japan at the macro, meso, and micro levels (Kukidome, 2010; Funahashi, 2012,). However, there is little research focused on the elite sport policy evolution. Yamamoto (2008) has engaged in research on the policies that promoted the development of Japan’s elite sports up through the Athens Games, focusing on the country’s elite sports system and structure. While her findings are important, they cover only up through the 2004 Athens Games and examine a restricted set of policy measures.

Keeping the 2020 Tokyo Games and beyond in mind, Japan has declared that it will even more aggressively implement its elite sports policies . It is, therefore, important that past policy evolution be thoroughly understood in order to plan and implement such policies in the future.

Research Design and Data Analysis

This research was carried out by examining documents related to elite sports, including those from Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), Japan Sports Agency, Japanese Olympic Committee (JOC), and Japan Sports Council (JSC), as well as interviewing individuals affiliated with the Japanese government and sports institutions and groups. By doing so, we tried to shed light on and systematically grasp the country’s sports policies, measures, and projects. Then, we diachronically approached these policies, measures, and projects by examining each Olympic cycle from the Sydney Games to the Rio De Janeiro Games to understand the process that led to the construction of the current government-driven elite sports system.

Results, Discussion and Implications

This research has systematically assessed the diachronic developments in the Japanese sports policies that led to the construction of an institutionalized elite sports system in the country. This system was constructed via a process that can be characterized as follows:

- Before the Sydney cycle, JOC was financially supported by the national government. During this time, the implemented policy measures and projects for elite sporting success were limited.
- Since the Sydney cycle, the JOC has developed some government commissioned programme, such as Athlete Pathway, and some other policy measures were gradually implemented. At the same time, the government stopped financial support at the local municipality level and shifted their focus on athletic support geared toward international sporting events such as the Olympics.
- At the London cycle, JSC sports medicine support began as a national project. Since then, the policy actor for government-commissioned works in elite sport shifted from the JOC to JSC.

The above analysis indicates that there was a shift from a system where the JOC was supported by the government to one in which the JSC carried out projects based on aggressive governmental efforts. The current elite sports system thus developed while changing the roles of the related policy actors.

Another observation from the study is that while it was only in 2011 that the Basic Act on Sport's enactment officially specified the purpose and meaning of elite sports, in reality, it had already begun to be incorporated into the national policy.

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