

THE ESSENTIAL CHARACTERISTICS OF SPORT

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I. Introduction

What is the aim of school physical education? Is it to foster physical fitness or to master sport skills? Is there any relation between the two? If there is, what is it?

This problem, which has confused many physical education teachers, has recently become an important issue in Japan. Both the course of study issued by the Ministry of Education and a tentative plan of curriculum reform drawn up by the Japan Teachers Union mention these two issues in parallel, without attempting to provide any inter-relationship.

In order to deal with this problem, the author proposes three steps: 1) an analysis of the many practices in school physical education programs; 2) research into the ways in which the aims of school physical education have changed after World War II; 3) research into the essential characteristics of sport, which have influenced the previous two items.

According to educational theory, a subject exists only under the presupposition of the existence of its cultural basis. School physical education, for example, exists because sports and gymnastics have already existed; the aim and character of school physical education, moreover, reflects the characteristics of sports and gymnastics. Therefore, the key problem is to explain the essential characteristics of sports and gymnastics.

Much research on this issue has been done, but many mistakes have been committed. These errors have unfortunately dampened the morale of many school physical education teachers. This paper will reconsider previous research on the essence of sport, and propose a hypothesis which may solve the above-mentioned problems.

II. Previous Research on the Nature of Sport

No previous study, as far as the author can tell, has presented a research method of sport. Therefore, let us first present such a method here.

1. Sport as "Play"

According to Carl Diem's book, *Wesen und Lehre Des Sports*,¹ "animals play only in their childhood, then their instincts disappear, but in the case of man, he plays forever," because "man not only has a physical existence but also a mental one."² Man "plays music, goes to the theater and solves riddles from crossword-puzzles to philosophical prob-

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¹ Diem, Carl. *Wesen und Lehre Des Sports (Essence and Theory of Sport)*: 1949.

² *Ibid.*, p. 10

lems.”³ It follows Schiller’s dictum that “man would become true man when he plays.”⁴

Diem asserts that “modern sport is phenomenon born from the wide range of play.”⁵ However the reason he offers why man has isolated sport from play is that “he has an aesthetic idea” (Schiller),⁶ and that all play and all sports of play have their own beauty.”⁷ Diem did not develop his theory further; instead he turned to other problems.

He, however, is confused in the discussion of man’s demand for sport. He says that “we should treat man as a being whose physical movement is restricted by urbanization and mechanization, and who lives without effective stimulation from light, air and sun. Such a life has many bad influences and should be compensated by physical activities.”⁸ Therefore, “sport in the narrow sense of the term has emerged in the process of urbanization and industrialization.”⁹ Diem could not ignore the fact that the demand to participate in sport has been enhanced by urbanization and mechanization. Nonetheless he is mistaken in saying that urbanization and mechanization inevitably brought on bad influences, that man is defined only from the point of view of play not including labour.

Thus an inconsistency appears in Diem’s definition of sport; “the play we call sport” is “play considered earnest, regularized and steadily developing.”¹⁰ In another place he defined sport as having “two essences, regularization and refinement.”¹¹ Finally he said that “sport as physical movement is an endeavour which lacks purpose . . .”¹² Here, one must note that he defined sport in the context of the *demand* for beauty and accomplishment. The demand for physical movement, however, was excluded. This inconsistency, I think, is a weak point in his research method.

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Bernard Gillet’s point of view is similar to that of Diem. In his book, *Histoire du Sport*, sport not only should be put in a different category than labour, but it is precisely the kind of activity that is opposite to labour.”¹³ He quotes Jose Ortega y Gasset; “a typical example of the reluctant effort that must be satisfied under the pressure of necessity is what people usually call labour. As to superfluous effort, the clearest example is sport. Here we must reverse the levels of secular values and consider sporting activity as primordial and creative, the highest, the most serious and the most important activity of the life.”¹⁴ Thus, sport which is one of the activities of leisure contains elements of play because leisure is essentially play.”¹⁵ He concludes that sport has three elements; “play, battle and intense physical activity.”¹⁶

³ *Ibid.*, p. 11

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 11

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 10

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 11

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 12

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 52

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 10

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 14

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 17

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 20

¹³ Gillet Bernard. *Histoire du Sport* (History of Sport). “QUE Sais-JE?” No. 337 1952. pp. 7-8

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 8

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 10

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 12

He defined physical activity as an element of sport (Diem did not contain it), but he just enumerates those elements and does not develop further.

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According to Peter C McIntosh's book, *Physical Education in England Since 1800*, "during the 19th century there grew up in England two distinct traditions of physical education"¹⁷ and "at the beginning of the 20th century there were, therefore, two systems of physical education in vogue in England, the Public School system of organized games and the elementary school system of physical training. The one concentrated on character training and the other on discipline and the physiological effects of systematised exercise."¹⁸ The former was for the children of the rich and the latter was for the poor, and "the Government was pushing physical training on the masses because it was easier and cheaper than providing the facilities and the playing fields which the upper and middle classes already enjoyed."¹⁹

He continued to note that "the extension of middle-class sport to the working classes took place for the most part during the two decades from 1870 to 1890 and coincided with the successful campaign fought by clerks and artisans for a reduction in working hours."²⁰ This situation influenced school physical education, so "in the country at large the two tradition of physical education, drill and games, which had been much a marked feature of life in the 19th century, were fast losing their identity in a truly national physical culture."²¹

What is their identity at present? He described the development of games (sports) in his *Sport in Society*. "Play is an essential element in all sport if it is to retain its intrinsic value, and that play implies a defined area of unreality in which the rules of ordinary life are superseded for the time being."²² He went on to note that "the essential feature of sport, as distinct from other realms in which the element of play is to be found—games of chance and dramatic or mimetic play—is the striving for superiority."²³ Moreover "the desire for superiority in play is itself subdivisible,"²⁴ that is "competitive sport," "combat sport," "conquest sport," and "a fourth category of physical activity." However, "the classification of sport here given depends on the motive and the nature of the satisfaction which the sport gives, not upon the activity itself."²⁵

In this way, McIntosh treats sport as something concerning play which aims at itself and the demand for sport. He indicates first that "sport, despite its many ramifications, is so intimately associated with the human body and with bodily function and activity that different attitudes towards the body and the physical have inevitably affected, or been reflected in, attitudes to sport,"²⁶ and began to treat sport on the premise of "a category of physical activity." He does not imply, however, the physical aspect to the essential element. He treats "the motive and the nature of the satisfaction" as the subjective object,

¹⁷ McIntosh, Peter C. *Physical Education in England Since 1800*. 1952. p. 9

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 10

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 231

²⁰ Ditto, *Sport in Society*. 1968. p. 73

²¹ Ditto, *op. cit.* p. 243

²² Ditto, *op. cit.* p. 199

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 126

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 126

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 128

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 13

and leaves the objective research on "their identity" and "activity itself" aside.

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The theories mentioned above have influenced many Japanese researchers. But they often only quote them and do not develop their own interpretations. For example, according to Kyuzo Takenoshita, the question, "what is sport?", "needs to be re-examined in connection with play."²⁷ Toshio Saeki says that "the research of sport includes play because sport emerges from that demand."²⁸ These scholars have introduced Huizinga, Caillois, Diem, Gillet, McIntosh and others into Japan's sport literature. But there have been no description of the foundation of their ideas. Furthermore, the problem left by McIntosh, the research of the objective characteristics of sport, has not been explored.

After all, sport is "multivocal"²⁹ and "a word which is hard to define."³⁰

Most all Japanese researchers have reached similar conclusions that the demand for sport of the present age derives from the demand for physical movement which emerged from the various changes in modern society. They do not, however, include the element of physical activity into their definition of sport.

2. Marxist Interpretations of Sport

According to Andrej Wohl, the leisure time generated by the development of productive forces has crucially influenced the demand for sport; the progress of technology and that of sport skills, moreover, have influenced each other.³¹ In his paper "The Influence of The Scientific-Technical Revolution on The Shape of Sport and The Perspectives of Its Development," Wohl notes that "present-day sport differs fundamentally from the agnosticism practiced in ancient times as well as from feudal physical culture, because of its all-round and mass character, but above all because of the role it plays and its social usefulness, adapted to the conditions of our contemporary civilization." Wohl drew "special attention to the following separate spheres of spreading of present day sports and at the same time to its specific functions," that is, "entertainment," "contest," "the specific tie and social structures shaped by sport," and "efficiency."³²

Wohl stressed that the productive process induces the increase of leisure time and sport. The author thinks that this point of view is better than the rationale based on "play." But all of the four features he isolated are not specifically sport related. The second, "contest," is a feature of sport, while the others are a premise or result of playing sports, not of sport itself. Moreover Wohl has not included the physical element in the concept of sport. If he wants to understand the result, he must delve into "sport itself," which McIntosh left aside.

²⁷ Takenoshita, Kyuzo. *Purei-Supōtsu-Taiiku (Play-Sport-Physical Education)*. 1972. p. 157

²⁸ Saeki, Toshio. "Taiiku to Bunka" (Physical Education and Culture): *Taiiku Shakaigaku Nyumon (Introduction to Sociology of Physical Education)*. 1975.

²⁹ Takenoshita, Kyuzo. *Supōtsu Shakaigaku (Sports Sociology)*. 1965. p. 9

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 156

³¹ Wohl, Andrzej. "The Influence of The Scientific-Technical Revolution on The Shape of Sport and The Perspectives of Its Development." *Sport in Modern Society*. Warsaw. 1974

³² *Ibid.*, "Conception and Range of Sport Sociology", *International Review of Sport Sociology*. Vol. 1, Warsaw. 1966. p. 12

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A.A. Frenkin asserts that play originates from labour and that the rationale of "play" is the bourgeois sport sociology based on idealism. In his paper "Спорт и общество" (Sport and Society), he presents a fusion of the ideas of such thinkers as Jaspers, Unamuno, Nietzsche, Spengler, Huizinga and Ortega. Frenkin criticizes the view that the fundamental source of pleasure derives from sport and not labour. Finally he asserts that sport is not a fundamental element of society; instead it is organically a supplementary element of labour in socialist and communist societies.³³ Although he makes many crucial points, Frenkin's is unclear on many points concerning sport itself and what he means by "organic."

III. *Ways to Understand Sport*

Section II presented the outline of the theories of two different interpretations of sport. This section will attempt to set out some points which will help us understand sport.

1. Points Helpful in Understanding Sport

The first point is that most of the previous research has approached the problem from the *demand* for sport. Diem considered the demand for sport as an element of the demand for "beauty." The demand for "competition" was common to all writers. The demand for "physical movement" was also common to both rationales, although the Marxist position placed particular stress on this point.

The second point is the method of conceptualization. In Diem's point of view, "beauty," and "competition" were included in the concept of sport, but "physical movement" was treated only as a premise. McIntosh and Wohl also had similar views.

The third point pertains to the source of the demand for sport. The theorists of "play" discuss sport only from the viewpoint of subjective demand. However, McIntosh's "activity itself" is a bud to understand sport objectively. This is because subjectivity or in other words, "the motive and the nature of the satisfaction," can be seen as a reflection of "activity itself." Sport is created on these bases. On the contrary, if sport were not so created, it is impossible to expect any subjective satisfactions in sport. Thus, the final point is how sport is to be understood objectively.

Here, the author must admit that since previous writers have conceptualized sport from the viewpoint of "the demand for sport," and as no other viewpoint presents itself now, this paper will approach the essence of sport from the same viewpoint.

2. Ways to Understand Sport

The first method derives from the fact that the increase of the productive forces has enabled leisure time to increase. Historically, sport branched out from labour. After becoming separate, sport has not been a direct element of labour, but a form of leisure time.

³³ A.A. Frenkin "Спорт и общество" (Sport and Society) Вопросы философии. (*The Problems of Philosophy*). No. 2, 1960

The second method argues that the demand for physical activity, the primary source of the demand for sport, is created by the increase of leisure time. The more leisure time a man has, the less he works with manual labour and the more he works with mental labour. The sum of his physical activities decreases, deteriorating his physical condition. This compels him to exercise. Marxism stresses the relationship between labour and sport, while the "play" theorists do not. The latter argues that sport is the free play of emancipated man, liberating him from compulsory labour. Although they see labour as compulsory they inadvertently show that sport is regulated by man's relation to labour when they speak about the "emancipation of man from labour."

The third method relates to the possessors of leisure time, that is, the possessors of sport. Historically, the rulers of society have amused themselves through sport. Modern Sport was developed by the bourgeoisie from the sport of the Middle Ages, but the proletariat have gradually become the possessors of sport along with their acquisition of leisure time. Eventually, the conditions which form the demand for physical activity, and in turn the demand for sport, emerge as follows; the increase of productive forces→the increase of leisure time→the formation of the demand for physical activity by the possessors of leisure time (because of the decrease of working hours and the transition from manual labour to mental labour).

The fourth method derives from the view that the demand for physical activity, which is formed by the historical and social conditions mentioned above, has taken shape in response to changes in the competitive modes, rules and instruments of sport, and at the same time reflects changes in social conditions. The demand for physical activity does not function by itself, it must accompany the competitive modes, rules and instruments. (Details will be given in the next section). The element of competition by Diem, Gillet, McIntosh and Wohl is in fact the component of the competitive mode.

The fifth method is the way to understand sport objectively and grasp the structure of its essential characteristics. Much research on the essence and features of sport has been done. The author has presented the ideas of Gillet and McIntosh. In Japan, Yasuo Tange has seen sport as something which has five elements; the satisfaction of the demand for physical activity, the acquisition of sport skills, competition, physical and ethical training.³⁴ Toshio Nakamura indicates that modern sport contains the following eight characteristics; physical training, victory or defeat, mental training, pleasure, sport rules, world wide organization, fiction and modern rationalism.³⁵ These elements should not be criticized easily, even if they are enumerated simply and not structurally. They can be grasped structurally because they reflect the characteristics of sport.

IV. *The Structure and Characteristics of Sport*

An explanation of the characteristics of sport and its structure has not appeared in the literature on sport. It can be seen to some extent only in the works related to school physical education. Nakamura indicates the outline of the structure as follows; "sport has two functions, one which aims to build up man physically, and the other to train him to be a

³⁴ Tange, Yasuo. *Taikugenri (Principle of Physical Education)* The second volume. 1961. p. 25

³⁵ Nakamura, Toshio. *Supōtsu to wa Nanika (What is Sport?)* 1973. p. 66

historical, social or intellectual man.”³⁶ “These two combined functions form sport skills.”³⁷ Naomi Kusafuka also reached the same conclusion; “the relationship of the cultural and the physical side of sport forms the essential feature of sport.”³⁸ Here, if we consult the preceding research, we can make a step forward. It may be said that sport has three levels; essence, substance and manifestation.

1. The Essence of Sport

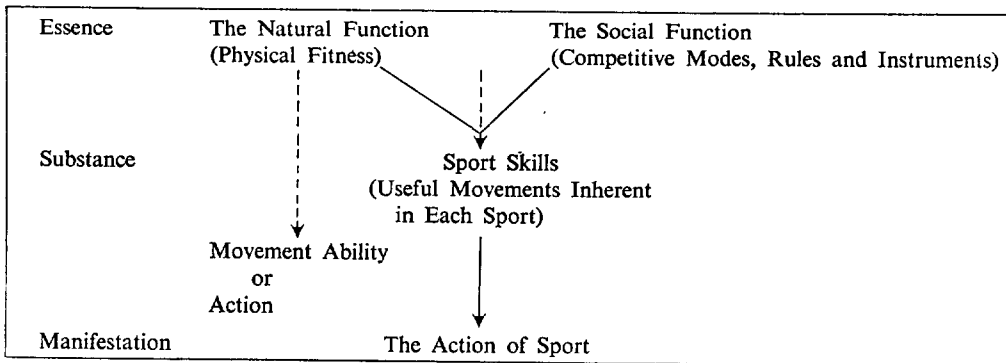
Fumio Shiromaru stated as early as 1957 the following:

- a) the specific character of physical education can be found where the demand for a child’s physical activity is satisfied through such cultural forms as gymnastics and sports;
- b) in order to excel in physical culture, it is necessary to exercise one’s body and to train earnestly in sport skills;
- c) physical culture corresponds to physical activity in the form of sports and gymnastics.³⁹

In items a) and b), Shiromaru stated the same thing from a different perspective; that is, sport has two functions: physical and cultural development. In the last item he united the two functions of sport at an essential level.

The two functions of sport, the natural and the social, can be shown as follows (Fig. 1).

FIG. 1 THE STRUCTURE OF SPORT



Sport has two functions, the natural which develops us physically and the social which trains us mentally, socially and is composed of the competitive modes, rules and instruments. United, these two features make up the essence of sport.

Chess, cards, Japanese chess, Japanese checkers and other games, all have their own

³⁶ *Ibid.*, *Kindai Supōtsu Hihan (Criticism of Modern Sport)*, 1968, p. 170

³⁷ *Ibid.*, *Bizinesman no Tairyoku (The Physical Fitness of Businessman)* 1970, p. 163

³⁸ Kusafuka, Naomi. “Undobunkaron ni okeru Shintaikeisei—Kenkyuhōhōron ni kansuru Oboegaki—” (Physical Formation of Movement Culture—A Note on Its Research Method—). *Undobunka (Movement Culture)*, 1975

³⁹ Shiromaru, Fumio. “Taiikuka wa dou arubekika?” (What should Physical Education be?) *Kyoiku (Education)* 1975, Aug. No. 76

competitive modes, rules and instruments. Moreover we cannot play them without moving our bodies. But they are not included in the category of sport, because they do not have the function of physical development. Sport not only has a social function but also a natural function which originates from the primary demand for physical activity. An activity is not sport unless it has the natural function.

2. The Substance of Sport

How does the essence of sport appear? As mentioned above, the answer is through the sport skills. Learning sport skills means the simultaneous learning of both the social and natural functions of sport. Sport skills are the substance of sport.

Referring to the beginning of Marx's *Capital*, we can understand the relationship between essence and substance. This will help us understand why sport branched out from labour. According to Marx;

"Use-values like coats, linen, etc., in short, the physical bodies of commodities, are combination of two elements, the material provided by nature, and labour."⁴⁰

"The coat is a use-value that satisfies a particular need. A specific kind of productive activity is required to bring it into existence. This activity is determined by its aim, mode of operation, object, means and result. We use the abbreviated expression "useful labour" for labour whose utility is represented by the use-value of its product, or by the fact that its product is a use-value."⁴¹

"On the other hand, all labour is an expenditure of human labour-power, in the physiological sense, and it is in this quality of being equal of abstract, human labour that it forms the value of commodities. On the other hand, all labour is an expenditure of human labour-power in a particular form and with a definite aim, and it is in this quality of being concrete useful labour that it produces use-values."⁴²

The concept of useful labour is suggestive for the understanding of the relationship between the essence and the substance of sport. Every sport has its own competitive modes, rules and skills, requiring specific physical abilities. For example, volleyball has its own competitive mode, rules and its own physical requirements. However, this differs from sport to sport, i.e., tennis, baseball, handball. According to the natural function, a good volleyball player is not necessarily a good tennis player. There exist specific skills for every sport. We can call these specific skills "Useful Movement." In the case of volleyball and basketball, for example, both exhibit elements of the concept of "Transfer of Action" indicating the existence of similar useful movements.

Let us add some other lessons concerning the substance of sport skills. According to Takahiro Ito, sport is a "controlled—expression of physical movement."⁴³ The expression is the formal, phenomenal aspect of control. On the contrary, control is the substantive aspect of the expression; that is, the level of performed play is adjusted to the level of physical energy and control ability. In this way we can grasp psychological and physiological changes in our bodies through the level of performed play.

⁴⁰ Marx, Karl. *Capital*. Vol. 1. The Pelican Marx Library. New Left Review. 1976. p. 133

⁴¹ Ditto. p. 132

⁴² Ditto. p. 137

⁴³ Itō, Takahiro. "Supōtsu to Gendai" (Sport and Modern Society). *Geizyutsu-Supōtsu to Ningen* (Art-Sport and Human Being) 1974. p. 167

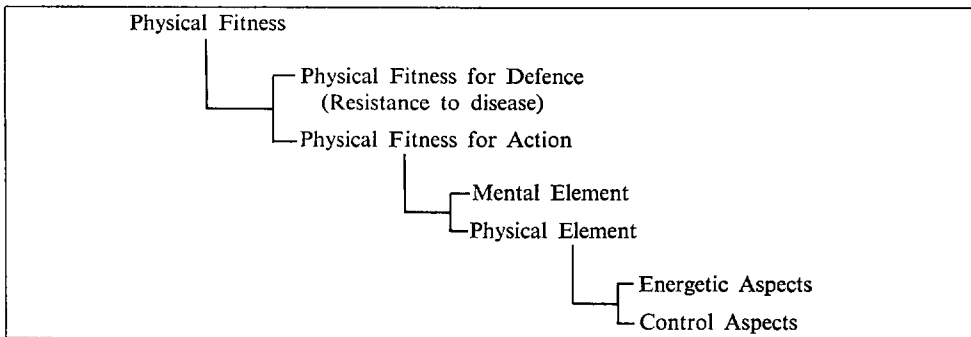
Takeo Masaki has examined the relationship between physical fitness and movement ability. Masaki writes;

“We may think that physical resources (substance) is a basis for physical performance and that the kinds of physical resources will be changed by the different aims of the performances”

“The sum of these physical resources is generally called “physical fitness,” and if we can define movement ability as the concept of manifestation, physical fitness is the concept of substance.”⁴⁴

He demonstrated the structure of physical fitness (Fig. 2), but did not describe the relationship between physical fitness for defence and that for action, nor between the mental and physical elements. Here we will examine only the physical element.

FIG. 2 THE STRUCTURE OF PHYSICAL FITNESS



It is possible to say that physical fitness is composed of two aspects, energy and control. Those two aspects exist as a unity of opposites. Energy does not have form and cannot express itself. Energy is content, control is form. They appear as movement.

In order to explain the essence and characteristics of sport, it is best to return to the author's categories of “essence” and “substance.” Physical fitness is the essence of the natural function, and energy and control are the elements of physical fitness which express themselves as movement abilities (substance of sport). Control, therefore, expresses the specific skills of sport (Useful Movement). In other words, the difference of useful movements in different sports transforms the physical resources at the essential level in accordance with the sport.

3. The Manifestation of Sport

We can say that the manifestation of sport is the condition in which sport, formed by various skills (substance), takes place. For example, when we say “volleyball” or “to play volleyball,” what do we mean? What do we indicate by volleyball? Volleyball is one aspect of physical culture and cannot be seen concretely, but it nonetheless exists objec-

⁴⁴ Masaki, Takeo. “Tairyoku to Kyoiku—Jakkan no mondaiseri to teian” (Physical Fitness and Education—Arrangement of problems and some proposals). *Kikan Kokuminkyoiku (Quarterly Education of Nations)* 1973. No. 15

tively. In conclusion, volleyball can be thought as the total of phenomena which is expressed by essence and substance, as a sport which is not only abstract but also objective existence.

V. *Problems to be Developed in the Future*

The author has examined the various research methods of sport and proposed his own point of view. He stressed that sport should be grasped objectively and that its features should be structured. But our work is not completed. Many problems are still left unsolved. How have the functions and their structure developed in historical and social conditions? How should they develop in the future? A historical analysis of these problems has not yet been presented. It is an urgent issue.

Let the author state his hypothesis here. As mentioned above sport has two essential functions, the natural and the social. The former is the primary characteristic of sport and the latter is secondary. But the historical development of sport has not necessarily presented the pattern of the former to the latter or vice versa. Looking at the history of sport, in many cases the former played a chief role of the development of sport; in other cases the latter was in charge; in some cases both features have regulated and developed each other. Thus, a historical view which stresses one side only is incorrect.

The increase of the demand for sport since the 1960's in Japan has been led by the Japanese working class. This demand has been ascribed not only to increasing "sport rights" but also to increasing ill health caused by the poor working conditions. Therefore the popularization of sport has been based on the natural function (the primary feature) of sport. In the near future, sport will develop in the direction of the social function.

While sport has the natural function as a primary characteristic, it can be seen in the other way. The latter stands independently. Hitherto research did not notice this and has lacked conscious research methods. The author is confident that if sport can be understood on the basis of his hypothesis, sport history will be established more and more abundantly.