

## THE END OF AMATEUR HEGEMONY IN JAPANESE SPORT, 1971-2003\*

YASUHIRO SAKAUE\*\*

'You earn money by doing what you are good at. That is what everyone does every day. That is exactly what I want to do.'

Yuko Arimori, 'Until the day I was able to say "I am an athlete by profession"',  
*Number*, 421, 3 July 1997, p.97

There are two main questions which I would like to examine in this paper. Firstly, when did amateurism in top sport end in Japan, and how can it be explained? Secondly, why did amateurism last so long?

### I. *When Did Amateurism in Top Sport End in Japan?*

Unlike the United Kingdom, in Japan there exists an umbrella amateur sport organization known as the Japan Sports Association (JSA). However, until 2003 it was known as the Japan Amateur Sports Association (JASA). Adhering to its own amateur code of conduct, the JASA exerted ideological control over its member associations and athletes.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, in order to clarify what amateurism is in Japan, one needs to carefully trace the history of the JASA amateur code.

The post-war JASA amateur code was first drawn up in 1947, and was revised in 1957 when it became more stringent.<sup>2</sup> It was not until after 1970 that the code began to become more relaxed. In 1971, professional coaches were admitted, and the restrictions that had prohibited member clubs from playing against their professional counterparts were removed.<sup>3</sup>

#### 1. Revision of the Code in 1986

However, a more substantial revision was conducted in 1986, in which the regulatory power over membership requirements was transferred from the JASA to its member associations (40 associations with 8 million players in 1986). Member associations were now able to register professional players, as well as permit their own players to participate in prize-money competitions, in accordance with International Sports Federations (IFs) guidelines.<sup>4</sup>

---

\* Material for this paper, except for the following references was largely obtained from the Newspaper Clippings File of the Sport Studies Institute, Hitotsubashi University. I wish to thank Mike Molasky for helping to correct the draft.

\*\* Graduate School of Social Sciences, Hitotsubashi University, Tokyo, Japan, Email: y.sakaue@r.hit-t.ac.jp

<sup>1</sup> In Japan, professional sport has existed in sumo, baseball (1936-), boxing, wrestling, golf and tennis.

<sup>2</sup> Nihon Taiiku Kyokai(ed), *Nihon Taiiku Kyokai Gozyunenshi*, 1963, pp.90-99

<sup>3</sup> Nobumasa Kawamoto, *Spotsu no Gendaishi*, Taisyukan Shoten, 1976, p.203

<sup>4</sup> Thus it is important to examine this 1986 revision and its legacy. We have some journalistic reviews on amateurism

However, even after the 1986 revised code, only a limited number of the member associations acknowledged the fact that they had registered professional athletes. Although the associations for soccer, wrestling, table tennis and basketball changed their membership regulations and allowed professional athletes to register, others such as those for track and field and rugby were slow to respond. To the present day, the Judo Association continues to prohibit professionals from participating.

The Japan Football (Soccer) Association revised their member registration rules on May 22nd, 1986 — only fifteen days after the JASA relaxed their amateur regulation — but this was done expressly to register Yasuhiko Okudera, who had been playing professionally in West Germany for the previous nine years and who was returning to Japan<sup>5</sup>. Thus, Okudera became the first professional footballer in Japan. Shortly after this, Kazushi Kimura of the Nissan Football Club joined Okudera, becoming the nation's second professional footballer. Okudera and Kimura were known as 'Special Licensed Players,' and it is these two players, rather than the rules themselves, that remain special. However, it was the J-League, which began in 1993, that altered the entire sporting landscape.

The J-League was the second professional sports league established in Japan, the baseball league having been the first. Its impact was felt all over the Japanese sporting world, and in some sports such as volleyball and basketball efforts were made to establish their own professional leagues. Due to the collapse of the bubble economy in the early 1990s and the long recession that followed, it was not until 2005—11 years after the J-League began—that Japan's third professional sport league, the bj-league (Basketball Japan League), came into existence.

At the same time, the number of prize-winning competitions began to increase, and more amateurs began to receive prize money. Before 1986, competitors were only allowed to participate in prize-winning competitions held overseas. Now, domestic prize-winning competitions sprang up in sports such as track and field, badminton and table tennis. Prize money spread to many other sports, and cash rewards began to be given to Olympic medallists as well.<sup>6</sup>

However, even after the 1986 revision, amateurs continued to be prohibited from appearing on television or in commercials since such actions were deemed to be taking advantage of [one's] fame. In addition, from 1979, the Japan Olympic Committee (JOC) started to control the publicity rights of all registered athletes and JASA board members. Amateurs were only able to appear in the JOC 'Ganbare Nippon' sanctioned commercials for the Olympic campaign (this provision was not applied to professional JASA members). Thus the campaign commercials served as a business for controlling publicity rights and thereby earned the JOC extra money which was distributed to member associations to offset the cost of special training. Amateurs who appeared in these campaign commercials were only partially reimbursed for their appearance, and payments were postponed until after they retired (the upper payment limit was set at 3 million yen). From the outset, amateurs were dissatisfied with such restrictions, but as I

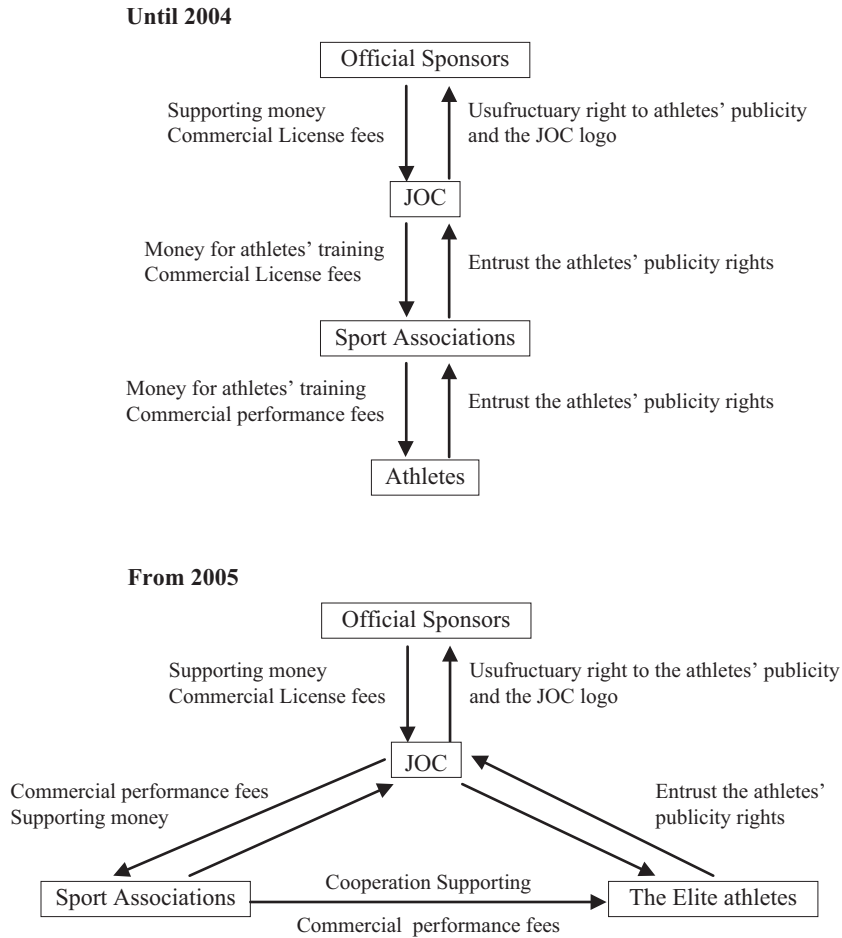
---

for this period, but there have been no serious academic studies so far.

<sup>5</sup> Sokichiro Ushiki, 'Top Sportsman ga Okane o Moratte ii wake', *Sport Critique*, No.1, February 1987, p.34

<sup>6</sup> In January 1992, the Japan Olympic Committee (JOC) decided to pay a special bonus to medallists. In conjunction with this, each member association established its own bonus payment system. In the 2000 Sydney Olympics, 17 of the 25 participant associations made preparations for such payments.

FIG.1 THE CHANGE OF THE 'GANBARE NIPPON' CAMPAIGN RULE BY THE JOC



Source: Asahi Shimbun (Asahi Newspaper), 10 July 2004.

examine in the following section, it was a courageous action by a female marathon athlete that finally led to a breakthrough.

## 2. 1996-2003

Yuko Arimori, a woman marathon silver medallist at the Barcelona Olympics and a bronze medallist at the Atlanta Olympics, turned professional in December 1996, after the Atlanta Olympics, and became a contract employee of Recruit Co., a well-known corporation in Japan. She signed a contract with her sponsor and publicly stated that she wanted to appear in television commercials without any restrictions. This generated enormous interest in Japan.

The Japan Association of Athletics Federations (JAAF) tried to persuade the JOC that the case of Arimori should be recognised as an exceptional one. But the negotiations dragged on, and Arimori began to appear in television commercials after April 1997, when her membership expired. Then, in May of that year, the JAAF and the JOC agreed that Arimori's application to renew her membership should be delayed. What this meant was that she could not participate in any official competitions in the interim, although she might be allowed to return to competition in the future.

The JAAF took Arimori's side. A year later, in June 1998, the JAAF revised its membership requirements, allowing its member athletes to take part in commercial activities. In July of the same year they reinstated Arimori as a fully qualified competitor. She made her presence felt in April 1999 when she set a new personal best of 2 hours 26 minutes and 39 seconds in the Boston marathon. This achievement led to her regaining her special athlete status within the JAAF, followed later by Naoko Takahashi, a gold medallist at the Sydney Olympics. One month later, however, the JOC decided to exclude Arimori from its own publicity rights business. In April 2002, the JOC finally revised its 'Ganbare Nippon' Olympic campaign rule. Allowing for certain conditions, the JOC allowed individual athletes to make use of their publicity rights. These particular athletes were placed in a new category, that of elite athletes.<sup>7</sup>

In December 2003, the JOC launched its new 'Ganbare Nippon' campaign. In this, the JOC made it clear that publicity rights belonged to individual athletes, and that commercial contracts should be signed by the JOC but had to be commissioned by individual athletes (Fig.1).

2003 was also a turning point for the JASA: beginning in April that year, the word 'amateur' was removed from its articles; the JASA changed its name to the Japan Sports Association (JSA); and the board members became paid staff.

### 3. The Turning Point

1986 was clearly a turning in the history of Japanese amateur sports, yet it was far from the end. Amateurism remains influential, exercising restrictive power over amateur athletes.

For example, it should be noted that the 1986 revision of the JASA code merely followed the move of the IOC and IFs which had publicly accepted the introduction of professional athletes.<sup>8</sup>

In addition, the 1986 revision was agreed and adopted by the JASA as a practical compromise in response to the poor performance by Japanese athletes at international sporting events. It was never intended that the notion of amateurism be relinquished, and it was not an

---

<sup>7</sup> 'Specially Appointed Athletes' can appear in commercials so long as they are not financed by the same sponsors as the JOC. In a report published in September 1997, the Health and Physical Education Committee of the Ministry of Education recommended that 'activities other than those conducted with their athletic capacity should be recognised as a result of their own ability, thus shall not be under the control [of the JOC].' With regard to publicity rights, the report recommended that these should be reconsidered when reviewing the JOC campaign, and that 'the rewards received by the athletes should be properly decided based on individual [commercial importance].' Thus, four and half years before its revision, the JOC was pressed by its supervisory authority to relax and modernise its regulations.

<sup>8</sup> The IOC amended its constitution in 1981, transferring its power over membership qualification and registration to the hands of each of the IFs. The 1986 revision of the JASA amateur code followed the move, anticipating that the unqualified acceptance of professional status would be resolved at the IOC General assembly in October 1986 (this did not materialise).

ideological turning point.<sup>9</sup>

Compared with this revision of 1986, the process by which some Japanese athletes obtained their publicity rights between 1997 and 2003 is quite impressive: firstly, they were achieved by the actions of the athletes themselves, and secondly, this achievement implied that professionalism was finally accepted as an acceptable way for the athletes to earn money. I therefore suggest that in 2003, when the Japanese athletes reclaimed their publicity rights, amateurism in Japanese sport effectively died.

## II. *Why Did Amateurism Survive for So Long in Japan?*

### 1. Explanation

There are four main reasons for this.

First, the JASA was established as a National Olympic Committee (NOC), a branch organisation of the IOC, in order to participate in the Olympics. In Japan, the Olympics have always been regarded as the ultimate sporting event and they command widespread interest.<sup>10</sup>

Second, until the 1960s, the majority of Japan's top athletes were university students. After graduation, they still controlled the Japanese sporting world, and the amateur student athletes maintained a cozy relationship with their predecessors, the Old Boys.<sup>11</sup>

Third, even after the 1960s when the 'Kigyo-sportsmen (corporate sportsmen)'—those Japanese athletes employed and supported by corporations—began to establish themselves among the world's top athletes, they continued to be categorised as amateurs, not professionals.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Japanese success at the Olympics declined after the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, when it was at its peak. Japanese athletes had a particularly poor showing in the 1976 Montreal Olympics, and during the 1980s Japanese athletes repeatedly lost at the Asian regional competitions to athletes from China and Korea. The JASA revision of 1986 was therefore prompted by their belief that the limited introduction of professionals would improve the situation. Sokichiro Ushiki accurately described this move as follows: 'Be it the idea of the coexistence of professionals and amateurs, or that of giving bonus money to amateurs, in either case they are clearly regarded as an instrument in order to increase the number of Japanese gold medals'; 'Top Sportsman ga Okane o Moratte ii wake', p.39.

<sup>10</sup> In Japan, the JASA, which was established prior to Olympics in 1911, became the JOC, which is the umbrella organisation of amateur sport associations. The JOC was to control all the member associations which were to be established for Olympic competitions. By 1986 all the associations affiliated with the JOC abided by the amateur codes sanctioned by the JASA. The Japan Soccer Association was no exception. The JASA's authority to control its member associations and athletes firstly came from the fact that the JASA and the JOC were virtually the same organisation (In 1991, however, they went their separate ways.) The JASA has also received financial support from the grants-in-aid began in the 1920s. During the early post-war period it was suspended, but from 1958 this grant-in-aid system became permanent and legally protected.

<sup>11</sup> The percentage of students, including secondary school pupils and others, participating in Japan's Olympic teams peaked in 1932 at 70.2%. Then, it gradually declined and in 1960 it dropped below to 45.5%. However, it has remained at 20-40% since then; Atsushi Nakazawa, 'An investigation of documents Japanese academic Olympics: from the 1912 Stockholm Olympics to the 1996 Atlanta Olympics', in *Hitotsubashi Annual of Sport Studies*, Vol.29, 2010, p.38.

<sup>12</sup> The 'Kigyo-sportsman' are those who are employed by private corporations but have special status at their companies which entitles them to continue their athletic activities. They are often critically referred to as 'Shamateurs'; Nobumasa Kawamoto, *Spotsu no Gendaishi*, pp.188-234. At the Seoul Olympics of 1988, there were 188 'Kigyo-sportsmen' (45.5%) on the Japanese national team.

Fourth, in Japan, the moral notion of 'sportsmanship' had been considered an important element of amateurism. While this may have been the case in Britain as well<sup>13</sup>, in Japan there had been undue emphasis on this from an educational point of view.<sup>14</sup>

## 2. Reason for the Demise of Amateurism

The characteristics of the personnel, organisation and ideology described thus far were the essential factors supporting Japanese amateurism. This structure, however, began to change drastically in the 1990s.

After the collapse of the bubble economy in the early 1990s, and during the subsequent prolonged recession, the corporate sponsorship of sport which had been the main benefactor of Japan's elite athletes started to be curtailed to an unprecedented degree. In these new circumstances, two alternatives to the 'Kigyo-sport' model emerged: the J-League, which aimed to establish itself as an independent professional league free from 'Kigyo-sport', and the professionalization of Japanese athletes. Thus, professionalism pointed to a new way forward, not only for the athletes who were worried about their future because of the withdrawal of 'Kigyo-sport', but also for the JOC, the JASA, and their member associations who wished for the 'resurrection of an indomitable Japan.'<sup>15</sup>

The crucial factor to be noted is that professionalization developed along with the athletes' increasing consciousness of their own rights. As can be observed in the struggle for publicity rights, publicity rights themselves became socially accepted as one of the inherent rights of athletes. 2003 was the year when the Japan Sports Arbitration Agency (JSAA) was established. The JSAA enabled athletes to make appeals against the sporting associations to which they were affiliated. From this, we can observe the demise of amateurism in the Japanese sporting world. Amateurism finally died not just because of the desire for a better position in international sporting rankings and the international trend towards professionalization, but also because of the growth of human rights awareness

From an ideological point of view, the demise of amateurism in Japan is significant in two ways. First, it came to be understood that making money through sport (professionalism) would not necessarily impair the idea of sportsmanship. Secondly, professionalism in itself came to be accepted without prejudice. Thus, we can conclude that the years between 1997 and 2003 were when amateurism ended in Japan.

---

<sup>13</sup> Richard Holt, 'Amateurism and the English Gentleman: the anatomy of a sporting culture', *Japan Journal of the History of Physical Education and Sport*, Vol.27, 2010, p.79

<sup>14</sup> In the discussion of the 1986 revision of the JASA articles, there were strong objections to the following wording, as it was deemed it to be out of touch with the latest trends of the IOC and IFs: 'Those who practice sport shall not seek material gains. And those who have attained their reputation through sport shall not take advantage of it.' But the JASA opted to retain this wording, believing that its removal would exert a negative influence on young people's views of sport. For the JASA, it reflected a spiritual value.

<sup>15</sup> Between 1991 and 2008, 324 sport clubs sponsored by 'Kigyo-sport' were either disbanded or had to suspend their activities: among them, 83 for baseball, 39 for track and field, 38 for volleyball, 26 for basketball, 25 for table tennis, 18 for soccer, 13 for handball, 12 for skiing, 10 for rugby union, 9 each for tennis, softball and badminton, 8 for American football and 6 for ice hockey. The most severe change occurred within the five years between 1997 and 2002, in which 236 clubs disappeared or suspended their activities; Gentaro Taniguchi, 'Darega Spotsu o Koroshitanoka? (12)', 5 January 2009, at <http://diamond.jp/articles/-/4920>; see also Kazuo Uekaki, 'Kigyo Spotsu Kyubu Haibu no Hensen', *Sports Advantage Booklet* 3, Sobun Kikaku, 2009, p.77.

### 3. The Will and the Words of Arimori

It is worth recalling that when Arimori first declared that she was a professional, not an amateur, and began to appear in television commercials, some weekly magazines denounced her, saying that she had succumbed to 'an unashamed pursuit of money by taking advantage of the reputation she had made through the Olympics'; and her behaviour was claimed to 'damage the image of sport.' These comments remind us of the ongoing glorification of amateurism in Japan, against which Arimori launched a direct attack, claiming that 'I am an athlete by profession.' Arimori commented that she had long wished to be in a position to make this claim. 'When the J-League was established I became conscious of this wish. Kazuyoshi Miura was the same age as me, and I felt that he had made a great effort, the type of effort that would change the world.' For Arimori, the J-League had made a huge impression. She also said:

'For runners, the marathon is a way of expressing themselves, but we cannot live on this kind of self-expression alone ... You earn money by doing what you are good at. That is what everyone does every day. And that is exactly what I want to do ... In the past, I wanted our sports associations in Japan to encourage professional activities among their affiliated athletes. Up to now, the bargaining position of athletes has been far too weak.'<sup>16</sup>  
'My declaration about becoming a professional was born out of my wish to make use of my publicity rights, which are my own property. I just wanted to show there was a way forward. ... I did not want to be a special case, but I wanted to set a precedent.'<sup>17</sup>

It would be simplistic to conclude that making a living through commercial sponsorship and the media by selling yourself as a product represents progress in sport. But it is undeniable that Arimori pioneered this new era, and she continues to retain a special position among Japanese athletes.

---

<sup>16</sup> Yuko Arimori, 'Syokugyo wa athlete to ieru hi made', *Number*, 420-421, 19 June and 3 July, 1997

<sup>17</sup> *Mainichi Shinbun*, 11 January 2010