

The Shaping of Athletic Performances: Cultural Differences and Historical Context in American and Japanese Sports Pre and Post World War II

Max Feng

In various world-level sports competitions, such as Olympic Games or World Championships, we often witness American athletes dominating and securing the most gold medals, which leads to our interest in how do they achieve it. Such remarkable prowess can be seen in Japanese athletes' sports performances as well, who showcase their distinctive resilience and persevering spirit in the international sports fields. As a sports enthusiast born in Japan but raised in the United States, I aspire to draw upon my observations and academic research to compare the sporting characteristics of Japan and the United States. This marks the initial step in a series of studies, as I intend to delve deeper into specific sporting disciplines in my future research.

Introduction

As a universal language that connects different parts of the world, sports often reveal a lot about a society's values, history, and people's way of living. It is a dynamic stage where cultural ideologies and historical narratives go hand in hand. This is as true in Japan as in the United States. In Japan, sports are an essential part of both its traditional and modern culture. Whereas Western sports such as football and basketball are well-accepted in Japan, this country also features its traditional sports activities, including judo, sumo, and other martial arts. Japan's sports culture also stands out due to its religious and historical involvement: things such as the native religion of Shintoism and the Buddhist mixture significantly drive the development of its sports landscape (Guttman & Thompson, 2001). The sports domains of the United States are strikingly different, yet equally important: this country has a reputation for vast and diverse sports dynamics, from American football, baseball, and soccer to niche sports like skateboarding and surfing.

However, what intrigues us is how these two countries - one being an Asian country and another being a typical Western country - can relate to each other in terms of the shaping of athletic performances. Both countries have unique cultural, historical, and ideological backgrounds that have significantly influenced how they approach and excel in sports, but we will primarily focus on their athletic development before and after World War II.

To understand their distinctive sporting development, it is important to peek into the differences in their cultures, history, and ideology. All these elements, put together, can play a huge role in how they perceive, engage with, and celebrate sports. Most importantly, we need to explore the historical relationship between the two countries, with World War II being a significant watershed. This way, we can fathom how Japan is influenced by American ideologies. Furthermore, this study compares

athlete characteristics in detail. This is in that the way American and Japanese athletes approach various sports gives us a clear picture of how their cultures and histories show up in their athletic abilities. We'll look at team dynamics, personal strategies, resilience, agility, and more to grasp what makes each unique.

Cultural and Historical Differences between the United States and Japan

Culture is all about what people believe in and how they act as a result of their belief system. There is no wonder that Japanese and American cultures, in two different parts of the world, are different in many ways. According to Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory, there are four dimensions along which cultural values of countries can be analyzed and compared, including individualism-collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, power distance, as well as masculinity-femininity (Blodgett et al., 2008). Within this framework, research shows that Japan scores 54 in power distance whereas the United States has a relatively lower score of 40 (Hofstede Insights, 2023). This contrast suggests that Japan is a borderline hierarchical society that stresses individual awareness of their hierarchical position in this social setting and acts accordingly; on the other hand, 'power' has a different meaning in US culture, where it is determined by the degree to which one person can influence others' ideas and behavior. Another striking contrast lies in their index of Individualism versus Collectivism. Japan scores 46 on the Individualism dimension, showing many of the characteristics of a collectivistic society: such as placing harmony of group above the expression of individual opinions and people having a strong sense of shame for losing face. In stark contrast, the United States proves to be one of the most individualistic (91) cultures in the world, with its premise of "liberty and justice for all". This is well supported by the fact that they have always emphasized equal rights in many aspects of American society and government. For example, compared with countries having low scores on the Individualism dimension, American organizations highly value the expertise and experience of individual employees (Hoover & Nash, 2016).

Uncertainty avoidance is another factor that makes the U.S.-Japan gap pronounced. At 92 Japan is one of the most uncertainty-avoiding countries in the world, which is often attributed to the fact that it is constantly more threatened by natural disasters such as tsunamis and earthquakes than other countries. In this case, it is understandable that the Japanese tend to prepare themselves for any uncertain situation (Funk & Bruun, 2007). As far as Americans are concerned, they score lower than average in terms of uncertainty avoidance. This suggests that they live in a culture where there is a fair degree of acceptance of novel ideas, bold initiatives, and certain levels of risks. Furthermore, Japan turns out to be one of the most Masculine societies, and this indicates that there is severe competition between groups in this country. From a young age at kindergartens, kids are taught to compete on sports day for their groups; as they grow older and enter the workforce, they are most motivated when they are fighting as a team against their competitors. For Americans, the score on Masculinity is not low (62) either. However, combined with the most

Individualist drive exhibited in American culture, what can be concluded is that Americans tend to show their Masculine drive individually.

The historical differences between the United States and Japan, on the other hand, are deeply rooted in different phases of their societal development. During the 17th to 19th centuries, Japan followed a policy of isolation called "sakoku," restricting contact with the outside world. In this period, this country sought to be isolated from the rest of the world in case of negative foreign influence (Kazui & Videen, 1982). In the meanwhile, the United States experienced European colonization and later gained independence through the American Revolutionary War, during which period Americans' passion was kindled to the peak (Eustace, 2012). Moving on to the mid-19th century, the United States adopted a policy of opening Japan to the West, which marked the end of Japan's isolation and initiated a period of modernization and industrialization influenced by Western models. Over this period, the United States began to maneuver the societal and cultural development in many ways. This trend can be seen when both of the two countries pursued imperialistic policies and expanded power over other countries. While the United States extended its influence scope to territories like Hawaii, the Philippines, and Guam, Japan also endeavored to expand its empire in Asia, notably in Korea and parts of China.

Relations between the United States and Japan pre- and Post World War II

The Relations between the U.S. and Japan before and after World War II are quite tangled and intricate, but it is still possible to work out some major patterns in their international relations. During the Pre-WWII period, U.S.-Japan relations were marked by economic competition and political tensions, and this was exacerbated by Japan's expansionist policies employed in Asia. To be specific, ignoring America's strong opposition, Japan still decided to invade China in 1937. As a beatback, the U.S. imposed increasingly stringent economic sanctions against Japan, in the hope of depriving this country of the finance and material support that it needed to continue its war in China's territory. What made things worse was Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, where the American navy was based back then, followed by Japan's allies - Nazi Germany - declaring war on the United States only a few days after this notorious attack. This move officially brought the United States into World War II.

As the Second World War was approaching its end, the international relations between the U.S. and Japan shifted from hostility to a close alliance and, in some way, partnership. This was largely driven by U.S. occupation, security agreements, and shared economic interests. For the sake of its national interests, US leaders began to see Japan as less of a threat and more of an industrial and military harbor against growing communism in Asia (Revere, 2013). Despite a series of issues emerging from the 1970s to 1990s, such as trade tensions, these two countries cooperated on security, particularly in the context of a rising China. The presidency of George W. Bush strengthened the alliance, evident in joint military efforts and close personal ties between leaders (Green, 2008). Subsequent shifts in Japan's political landscape

did not significantly alter the strong U.S.-Japan relationship. However, during Donald Trump's presidency, there were tensions when Trump critiqued Japan on trade and security arrangements. Nevertheless, Japan managed to negotiate bilateral trade deals. Afterward, under President Biden, the joint statement between the two nations reflected a renewed focus on regional stability, particularly regarding Taiwan.

History, Characteristics, and International Presence of Sports in Japan

As has been briefly mentioned before, sports in Japan have deep historical and cultural roots, with traditional sports activities (i.e. sumo and martial arts) dating back centuries. Modern sports, influenced by Western cultures, were introduced into Japan during the Meiji period and began to gain ground thereafter. Since 1868, Japan went through the Meiji Restoration, a significant transformation that aimed to modernize the country by following Western ideologies and technologies. As a byproduct of this revolution, Japan's modern sports landscape was formed and developed (Matsunami, 2017).

Japan has had a strong international presence in a variety of sports, and this country has a reputation for its passionate fans and competitive sports spirits. Its commitment can be well exemplified by the fact that Japan has hosted the Olympic Games, the leading international sporting event, four times since 1964. In terms of the particular sports activities in Japan, this country is famous for the J-League, Japan's nationwide football league. This league has gained widespread international recognition because of its outstanding performance in FIFA World Cup tournaments, reaching the Round of 16 multiple times. Another sport that makes Japan worldwide known is Sumo Wrestling (Ichirō et al., 2004). As a traditional Japanese sport that was once enjoyed only by the rich and powerful, it has gained international popularity quickly in modern times. This activity is popular for multiple reasons. One of the reasons is that it offers a unique glimpse into appealing Japanese culture, with centuries of tradition and ritualistic elements. Japan has also made internationalization efforts to promote sumo in recent years, holding various sumo wrestling tournaments and exhibitions outside Japan. In this way, people from other countries get access to witness the sport live and learn more about its intricacies.

Comparative Analysis of Athlete Characteristics and the Influence of Historical and Cultural Differences

Being influenced by different courses of historical and cultural development, athletes in Japan and the US possess different characteristics in many ways. In Japan, for example, its sports culture favors unyielding determination, where athletes are taught and trained to be resilient and persistent in their efforts. This goes to explain why the Japanese women's volleyball team managed to win the gold medal in the 2021 Tokyo Olympics Women's Volleyball tournament (Giatsis, 2023). Faced with stiff competitions each round, these athletes showcased their 'never-give-up' attitude, which was an inherent element of their gold medal. In comparison, U.S. athletes are trained to bring about the best version of themselves. This allows for exceptional

performances of Usain Bolt (world record holder in 100m and 200m sprints), Michael Phelps (most decorated Olympian of all time), and Michael Jordan (one of the greatest basketball players with numerous NBA championships).

These comparative differences lie in the distinctive historical and cultural landscapes of the two countries. As has been mentioned earlier, Japan scores 46 on the Individualism dimension within Hofstede's theoretical framework, and this suggests that its athletes might share many of the characteristics of a collectivistic society, such as placing groups above individuals. In line with this aspect of its culture, Japanese athletes value team unity and group harmony, striving to build strong team spirits and fostering cooperation for the benefit of the team rather than individual achievement. While the U.S. also favors team spirits, its athletes tend to focus on achieving excellence at the individual levels when they are committed to a competition.

The ways that athletes are trained for sports competitions are largely different from one another. While Japanese coaches prioritize technical proficiency and mastery of fundamental skills, their U.S. counterparts seem to focus on specialization and early intensive training in specific sports (Chiba et al., 2001). Put another way, U.S. athletes are expected to start specializing in a single sport at a relatively young age and then undergo concentrated training regimens; however, these coaching strategies differ from those in Japan, where a well-rounded skill set is prioritized.

The two countries' varying scores in Uncertainty Avoidance (according to Hofstede's framework) indicate that Japanese athletes prefer to avoid uncertainty and prioritize stability as much as possible. For example, in sports like judo, Japanese athletes adhere to specific, well-defined techniques and responses for various opponent movements. However, U.S. athletes highlight entrepreneurial and marketing skills for personal brand development. A prime example of this is what often happens when U.S. athletes take part in basketball competitions: they proactively interact with fans, build a strong social media presence, and manage personal sponsorship (Ratten, 2011). In a word, compared with Japanese athletes, they are more inclined to embrace uncertainties.

What is more, Japanese athletes give importance to exhibiting humility and respect for their opponents, influenced by their belief in Confucianism. Confucianism has significantly shaped Japanese society and ethics, including the sports landscapes. Confucianism teaches the virtue of "Ren" (仁爱), which is about being kind, benevolent, as well as considerate towards others. This goes to explain why Japanese athletes, such as their tennis player Kei Nishikori, always display respectful conduct both on and off the court to maintain a harmonious sports environment (Zhang, 2005). When it comes to U.S. athletes, however, they seem to follow different philosophies while they are engaged in their fields of competition. Instead of trying to show etiquette and proper conduct, Americans tend to display confidence,

ambition, and a drive to win. In line with the high Masculinity score that U.S. culture gets in Hofstede's framework, its athletes grow up in an environment where assertiveness and the drive to succeed are highly valued. It is this 'winning mentality' that drives Swimmer Michael Phelps to get the confidence and ambition to keep breaking records.

Another major distinction between the two countries is the career longevity of their athletes. As far as Japanese athletes are concerned, they often prioritize a longer athletic career and seek to maintain their performance over an extended period. This extended career span allows them to focus on consistent training methods and injury prevention, thereby prolonging their competitiveness and maximizing their contributions to their teams. On the other hand, this is a different story in U.S. sports landscapes, where their athletes often undertake pressure to peak at a young age because of their collegiate and professional sports systems. For example, in the U.S. college basketball league, young players who are considered talented often face immense pressure to perform at their best during the first years of their college years, otherwise they will not have a prospect for the NBA and lucrative professional contracts. Players like Kobe Bryant and Keven Durant were highly targeted during their college years because of their exceptional sports potential.

In addition to what has been discussed, the difference between the ethnicity of Japanese and U.S. athletes affects their sports performance as well. It is common knowledge that different ethnic groups tend to have genetic predispositions that have to do with various aspects of sports performance, such as their muscle composition, bone density, lung capacity, and so on. In the case of Japan versus the U.S., studies suggest that Japanese populations tend to have a higher proportion of slow-twitch muscle fibers, which might influence endurance in sports competitions. On the other hand, since the U.S. is famous for its diverse population, it is more likely to see a broad range of genetic variations affecting athletes in different fields of sports (Kontos & Breland-Noble, 2002).

For the U.S., another result of having a diverse ethnicity is that its diets can vary widely and include an extensive diversity of foods; as far as Japan is concerned, being a homogeneous nation means this country tends to follow its traditional Japanese diets, which are often rich in fish, rice, and vegetables. The way that their diets differ from one another remarkably affects their sports performance. Rich in fish, for example, the traditional Japanese diet is abundant in omega-3 fatty acids, and this kind of acid has anti-inflammatory properties (Ishizu et al., 2022). The way that the Japanese diet is structured can help support joint health, which is important for athletes who are involved in high-impact sports. What is more, Japanese diets are low in fat and high in carbohydrates, allowing athletes to perform better in endurance-based sports. In slight contrast, U.S. diets often include higher levels of protein and fat, which is beneficial for athletes to engage in strength and power-based sports. Additionally, research find about the use of superstitious

behavior by major athletes in both the United States and Japan, which involves the consumption of certain types of foods (Burger & Lynn, 2005).

Another way Japanese culture influences its sports landscape is through its strong emphasis on hierarchical relationships and showing respect to seniors. What they refer to as "senpai" (senior) and "kouhai" (junior) dynamics has extended to the realm of sports, where young or junior athletes are expected to demonstrate deference to their seniors based on their experience and achievements (Miller, 2013). Such conformity is evident in training, competition, and team building, where juniors tend to listen to and follow the guidance of those who are senior to them. For example, in traditional Judo training, newer or junior athletes are expected to bow to their seniors. In contrast, such conformity can rarely be seen in the United States, a country that favors equality and meritocracy in its sports culture. This means that athletes are often evaluated based on their performance, skills, and contribution to the team, rather than strictly based on their seniority or past achievements.

While it does not seem apparent, the fact that Japanese is a less commonly spoken language poses challenges for athletes from Japan compared to those from the United States in international events. It is, however, explainable in that athletes whose primary language is Japanese may face barriers in terms of effective communication during international events, where English is primarily used (Brown et al., 2019). Such a language barrier can somewhat limit their ability to interact with a diverse global audience, such as fans, sponsors, and media agencies. What makes matters worse is when Japanese athletes engage in multi-national competitions because they cannot effectively form international partnerships due to language barriers. On the contrary, this is not so much of an issue for the U.S. athletes, whose mother tongue is English, and this allows them to communicate with a broader international audience, deal with international interviews and media coverage, as well as having greater access to international sponsorship and endorsements.

As much as the differences between athletes from Japan and the U.S. because of distinct cultural and historical reasons, they share some sports-related traits. One of the most prominent traits is that they both demonstrate determination and grit while they are committed to the competition. Failures is not uncommon in competitive sports, but these athletes often face adversity with a resilient and determined mindset, which makes them great sportsmen in the world of sports.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research investigates the intricate interplay of cultural and historical developments of Japan and the U.S., particularly pre and post-World War II. It finds that there are distinct athlete traits as a result of different cultural and historical backgrounds, and this finding is further confirmed by Hofstede's Cultural Dimensional Framework.

We have discovered how distinct societal values have influenced athlete development, training approaches, team dynamics, and sports philosophies in both nations. Generally, from the Meiji Restoration in Japan to European colonization and following independence in the U.S., the historical development have left a lasting impact on sports, resulting in diverse approaches and achievements. To be specific, Japanese athletes embody resilience, humility, and team unity, which is reflective of their collectivistic culture; on the other hand, U.S. athletes tend to value individualism, entrepreneurial spirit, and a drive for personal success, and that is aligned with their cultural emphasis on individual achievements and ambition.

As this study lays the foundation for a deeper exploration of specific sports disciplines, it underscores the need to understand the intricate relationship between culture, history, and sports for global sporting dynamics. Subsequent studies in this series will reveal how cultural adaptations and evolving historical contexts continue to shape athletes and the broader sporting landscapes in Japan and the United States.

References

- Blodgett, J. G., Bakir, A., & Rose, G. M. (2008). A test of the validity of Hofstede's cultural framework. *Journal of consumer marketing*, 25(6), 339-349.
- Brown, C. L., Ward, N., & Nam, B. H. (2019). "Only English Counts": the impact of English hegemony on South-Korean athletes. *International Journal of Comparative Education and Development*, 21(3), 222-235.
- Burger, J. M., & Lynn, A. L. (2005). Superstitious behavior among American and Japanese professional baseball players. *Basic and applied social psychology*, 27(1), 71-76.
- Chiba, N., Ebihara, O., & Morino, S. (2001). Globalization, naturalization and identity: The case of borderless elite athletes in Japan. *International review for the sociology of sport*, 36(2), 203-221.
- Eustace, N. (2012). *Passion is the gale: Emotion, power, and the coming of the American Revolution*. UNC Press Books.
- Funk, D. C., & Bruun, T. J. (2007). The role of socio-psychological and culture-education motives in marketing international sport tourism: A cross-cultural perspective. *Tourism management*, 28(3), 806-819.
- Giatsis, G. (2023). Performance indicators in women's volleyball Olympics and World Championships (2014–2021). *International Journal of Sports Science & Coaching*, 18(4), 1266-1276.
- Green, M. J. (2008). The United States and Asia after Bush. *The Pacific Review*, 21(5), 583-594.
- Guttmann, A., & Thompson, L. (2001). *Japanese sports: a history*. University of Hawaii Press.
- Hofstede Insights. (2023, September 29). "Country Comparison Tool". <https://www.hofstede-insights.com/country-comparison-tool?countries=japan%2Cunited+states>

- Hoover, H., & Nash, G. H. (2016). *American individualism*. Hoover Press.
- Ichirō, H., Manzenreiter, W., & Horne, J. (2004). The making of a professional football league: The design of the J. league system. *Football goes east. Business, culture and the people's game in East Asia*. London: Routledge, 38-53.
- Ishizu, T., Torii, S., & Taguchi, M. (2022). Habitual dietary status and stress fracture risk among Japanese female collegiate athletes. *Journal of the American Nutrition Association*, 41(5), 481-488.
- Kazui, T., & Videen, S. D. (1982). Foreign relations during the Edo period: Sakoku reexamined. *Journal of Japanese Studies*, 8(2), 283-306.
- Kontos, A. P., & Breland-Noble, A. M. (2002). Racial/ethnic diversity in applied sport psychology: A multicultural introduction to working with athletes of color. *The Sport Psychologist*, 16(3), 296-315.
- Matsunami, M. (2017). Traditional sport in Japan. *The Palgrave Handbook of Leisure Theory*, 169-186.
- Miller, A. L. (2013). For basketball court and company cubicle: New expectations for university athletes and corporate employees in Japan. *Japanese Studies*, 33(1), 63-81.
- Ratten, V. (2011). A social perspective of sports-based entrepreneurship. *International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Small Business*, 12(3), 314-326.
- Revere, E. J. (2013). The United States and Japan in East Asia: challenges and prospects for the alliance. *American Foreign Policy Interests*, 35(4), 188-197.
- Zhang, Y. B., Lin, M. C., Nonaka, A., & Beom, K. (2005). Harmony, hierarchy and conservatism: A cross-cultural comparison of Confucian values in China, Korea, Japan, and Taiwan. *Communication research reports*, 22(2), 107-115.