

A Reexamination of
Physical Education and Sports in Japan (IV) :
Physical Education, Sports, and the Ideology of "Winning Is Everything"

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The present study examines the attitude toward sports as a form of foreign culture that was adopted by the newly established modern state of Japan as it pursued the militaristic ideals of "a rich nation and strong army," together with the effects of that attitude on physical education and sports in Japan today.

Many forms of foreign culture were introduced to Japan during the Meiji Period (1868-1912) as the nation followed a course of modernization. At first glance, sports appear to have been treated similarly to other forms of foreign culture. However, closer examination shows that as Japan – which was a centralized state under an imperial system – developed military power that would be directed against continental Asia, various foreign sports served merely as a means of building military strength based on an imperialist view of history.

Japan imported many foreign sports, beginning in the 1870s. The sports that form part of the physical education curriculum today were largely imported during the Meiji years, mainly from Britain and America. Many nationwide sports competitions were also instituted at that time, and today's national high school tournaments have their origins in sports meetings at the old "middle school" level. However, in the process of importing foreign sports and introducing them nationwide, a number of serious errors were made:

1. The Japanese tradition of physical exercise integrated into daily life (*budo*) was based on the spirit of *bushido* ("the Way of the warrior"). However, the essence of *bushido* in a distorted form was injected into physical exercise that was not integrated into daily life, i.e., into sports.

2. Physical education (i.e., physical training) was regarded as synonymous with sports (i.e., physical recreation).

3. The ideological emphasis placed on winning meant that sports could be understood only in competitive terms, rather than in terms of personal recreation.

4. An absolutist ideology of winning became established, linking world-class achievements in competitive sports to the restoration and display of national prestige.

5. Participation in sports instilled a spirit or ideology of absolute obedience in male middle school students, who were being prepared for military service.

All of these developments can be traced to an attitude of rivalry with other countries that had begun to form in the nation as a whole through repeated experiences of war. They can also be attributed to an effort to boost national morale using nationalistic ideals such as *yamato damashii* ("the Japanese spirit") in order to offset a deficit in physical size and strength relative to other nations. This study focuses on the current (postwar) situation of physical education and sports in Japan, which have continued, in almost every respect, to follow the ideology that was established in this historical context.