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## Fields of Individuals and Neoliberal Logics: Japanese Soccer Ideals and the 1990s Economic Crisis

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# Fields of Individuals and Neoliberal Logics: Japanese Soccer Ideals and the 1990s Economic Crisis

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Elise Edwards<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

This article explores the relationship between popular representations of soccer and the rise of neoliberal discourse celebrating a new individualism in Japan at the turn of the millennium, a time when the country experienced sharp economic decline and consequent economic restructuring. Examining dominant vocabularies and practices present in coaching discourse, on soccer fields, and in media portrayals of Japanese men's and women's professional leagues, the author argues that rather than a coincidental, coeval mirroring between two seemingly unrelated realms—sports and economic transformations—these relationships point to the positioning of soccer over the past 20 years in Japan as a site to educate and physically train individualistic sensibilities and perspectives suitable to and reinforcing of a neoliberal labor market and governmental system.

## Keywords

soccer, Japan, Nadeshiko League, J-League, neoliberalism

In the end, what we call soccer is a pursuit in which individuals make decisions while holding on to a common image.

Ono Takeshi, JFA Technical Advisor and former Men's National Team Assistant Coach, at "The Football Conference Japan 2001."

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We are the first professional athletes [in Japan] permitted to display our personalities.

Katō Hisashi, former professional player, coach, and JFA Technical Committee Chairman in an interview following the League's spectacular inauguration (*Newsweek*, June 13, 1994).

"In this [neoliberal] vocabulary, it is not just that the personal is political. The personal is the only politics there is, the only politics with a tangible referent or emotional valence." (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2000, p. 305)

The final strains of Japan's historic economic growth in the second-half of the 20th century ended with what was commonly described as the "bursting of the bubble economy" in 1989-1990. The economic landslide and the social dis-ease it engendered were accompanied by another phenomenon, Japan's "soccer boom" (*sakkaa būmu*), which kicked off with the creation of a women's semiprofessional league and a men's professional soccer league in 1989 and 1993, respectively.<sup>1</sup> As a professional player in the women's L-League in the first half of the decade, and a researcher of soccer in Japan from there forward, it was readily clear to me that although the conjunction of "burst" and "boom" was pure happenstance, the faltering economy and the booming sport of soccer quickly intertwined in a range of permutations. Discussions of soccer's meteoric rise, star players, and the best ways to train competitive teams overlapped and echoed with debates about possible cures for struggling businesses and unemployed workers. Kawabuchi Saburo, the businessman behind the successful launch of the men's professional J-League, was celebrated by journalists and academics alike for his visionary business acumen and held up as a model for CEOs in industries far afield from soccer. Images of soccer stars appeared on the covers of business magazines as ideal embodiments of the qualities desired of new multinational workers. And elite coaches and journalists argued that soccer training, or at least a new "soccer orientation" to the world, would help Japanese citizens develop skills required to "compete" in the 21st century.

Persistent efforts by journalists, politicians, and others to draw connections between political-economic realms and soccer in Japan in the 1990s were in part due to timing: the coinciding of "burst" and "boom." However, soccer also provided a potent and pliant array of vocabularies, metaphors, and symbols that many found useful in their efforts to define and deconstruct Japan's troubles. In the world of soccer, team administrators and coaches found great utility in the rationales and practices informed by the politicoeconomic environment around them, including ideas about efficiency, competitiveness, personal responsibility, and success. This article will examine how a range of actors involved with soccer at the turn of the millennium in Japan appropriated and reproduced neoliberal ideas and ideals as they chronicled, coached, and imagined the future of their sport.

Numerous scholars have examined new forms of subjectivity compelled by the rise of neoliberal consumerism and labor practices. However, less attention has been given to the cultural formations generally distinct from direct economic flows that educate, reaffirm, and naturalize neoliberalism as an idea, and as a way of seeing the world and how one should be in it. There certainly have been voices of dissent in Japan over the

past two decades against neoliberal policies and practices, including corporate globalization, the destabilization of labor and labor unions, and privatization of government programs and services (Field, 2009; Guyonnet, 2011; Shinoda, 2009). However, as is true almost anywhere in the world, neoliberal policies and perspectives are often taken for granted; many do not protest or resist the shifting landscapes brought about by neoliberalism simply because they are perceived to be rational and “common sense.”<sup>2</sup> Much recent work in sport studies has explored the way fans engage and often embrace neoliberal practices and principles in spaces of sport—most prominently in the form of consumerism—whether by buying yet another redesigned NIKE jersey at the Manchester United soccer shop, exposing themselves to 40,000 corporate logos and intellectual properties over the course of a weekend at the NASCAR track, or rethinking the benefits of privatization due to the success of their favorite Boca Juniors (Andrews, 2006; Forment, 2007; Manzenreiter & Horne, 2007; Newman, 2007, 2011; Newman & Giardina, 2010). Far fewer have focused on those moments (possibly due to their rarity) when individuals and organizations actively oppose neoliberal restructuring within sport, in some cases because it has negatively affected their experiences as fans of their favorite team (Dubal, 2010). In contrast to these other worthy projects, here I want to ask what are the cultural forces and discursive sites a few steps removed from the commercialization most frequently associated with the neoliberalization of sport that reinforce, legitimize, and naturalize neoliberal logics. I will argue that soccer in Japan since the 1990s can be understood, in part, as a “technology of subjectivity,” a system that works to “induce self-animation and self-government” and serves the needs of the neoliberal economy (Ong, 2006, p. 6). In my conclusion, I will also argue, more radically, that we might consider the role of soccer in Japan as a “technology of subjection,” a mode of regulating and spatially redistributing the population in ways that maximize efficiency and privilege market forces and capital accumulation over the welfare of laborers.

The research for this project occurred over more than a decade of steady interactions starting in 1992 with various soccer entities in Japan but most consistently with Japan’s women’s professional soccer league, or “L-League,” which was renamed the Nadeshiko League in 2004.<sup>3</sup> I was employed as a player and coach (1992–1995) by one L-League team and then worked as a goalkeeping coach for a League rival several years later while conducting dissertation research. Between 1998 and 2001, I spent a total of 18 months with several different L-League teams, watching the flow of daily activities and carrying out interviews with administrators, coaches, and players. During those years, and over several subsequent summers (most recently in 2009), I have regularly recontacted still active and retired L-League players and coaches, conducted numerous interviews with Japan Football Association (JFA) officials and attended JFA-organized conferences, assisted with soccer clinics for young children to college students, and collected innumerable quantities of Japanese soccer magazines, books, and paraphernalia. While it may seem unconventional to many sports scholars, I tack back and forth between the worlds of men’s and women’s soccer, and although I focus predominantly on elite professional and semiprofessional levels of the sport, many of my findings are equally applicable in more amateur realms as well. Flows of

players, coaches, administrators, and knowledge across and between the various age-, gender-, and status-related divisions of the sport guarantee their mutual influence, co-constitution, and range of similarities. The interconnections between these worlds of soccer are true to my experience and that of the subjects I write about. Young girls aspiring to go “pro” one day, like their male compatriots, grow up trying their best to emulate the techniques—as well as fashions—of their favorite male European league players (they are less often serious fans of J-League or L-League stars), whose actions on and off the field are most visible due to the homogenizing effects and male bias of global media conglomerates. The coaches who train boys and young men aiming for J-League fame pass through the same licensing courses, attend the same coaching seminars, and read the same coaching literature as coaches who train female players. Put more succinctly, the experience of “becoming a footballer” is much more similar for young women and men in Japan than it is different. What is entailed and trained in the process of this “becoming” is my primary focus here.<sup>4</sup>

## **Neoliberalism and Japan in the 1990s**

While Japan’s economy is often associated with carefully devised protectionist and regulatory plans that contributed to its “miraculous” postwar recovery, the 1990s witnessed the precipitous rise of a neoliberal tide in both houses of the National Diet, which produced and was the product of criticisms of “interventionist” government practices and corporations anachronistically holding on to “irrational,” “inefficient,” and overly “Japanese” practices (e.g., lifetime employment, and privileging stability and institutional growth over shareholders’ interests). This period saw a notable increase in neoliberal policies, often enacted in the face of U.S. pressure for “market-driven reform,” including the deregulation of the Japanese financial system—commonly referred to as the “Big Bang”—that began in 1996.

Efforts to respond to the worldwide recession of the early 1970s and pressures from the U.S. government and global corporations to liberalize the economy throughout the 1980s were just some of the factors that led to increasing deregulation, the influx of numerous new overseas firms, the outsourcing of more production, significant decreases in full-time employment, and the death knell of Japan’s once-coveted system of “lifetime employment.” At the beginning of the 1990s, the speculative real estate bubble burst, inspiring a growing chorus of voices declaring an unprecedented state of national peril and decline. The tabloid press and policymakers identified various subgroups of young people, arguably those most hurt by the scarcity of new jobs and full-time employment opportunities, as largely responsible for what was perceived to be an imploding social order and system of ethics (Arai, 2005; Inui, 2005; Leheny, 2006; Slater & Galbraith, 2011; Yoda, 2006).<sup>5</sup>

When construed in the most general of terms, neoliberalism is a political and economic set of principles and practices that champion the efficiency of market forces, the preeminent importance of private property rights, and the necessity of maintaining both to guarantee individual rights, freedoms, and prosperity. According to a neoliberal ethos, human happiness and welfare are best served by markets free of state control

and regulations, unencumbered flows of labor and products, and a system governed by an ethic of individual initiative and responsibility (Bourdieu, 1998; Carrier, 1997; Graeber, 2010; Harvey, 2003, 2007). In most parts of the world, the contemporary conditions of late capitalism have been marked by a drastic diminishing of the position of organized labor, a dizzying increase in the speed of the flow of capital due to digital technologies, and the fading presence and power of nation-states in a global marketplace dominated by the actions—and political clout—of transnational corporations.<sup>6</sup> The effects of neoliberal restructuring include the privatization and commodification of public goods and what Harvey (2007) refers to as “state redistribution,” or state involvement in the upward redistribution of wealth and intensified social inequality. Across a diversity of cultural spaces and economies, neoliberal principles have produced fundamental shifts in relations between citizens and the state, labor and capital, and production and consumption.

Some of the classic socioeconomic symptoms of neoliberal reform, including increased economic inequality and rising insecurity in labor markets, are readily evidenced in Japanese labor and income statistics from the past 20 years. Between 1990 and 2005, the number of nonregular workers—those with temporary or fixed contract work and typically low pay and no benefits—increased dramatically from less than one fifth to nearly one third of the workforce, with young workers and women most severely hit (Inequality in Japan, 2006).<sup>7</sup> More than 90% of those nonregular workers earn less than US\$20,000 per year (Takanami, 2010, p. 39). According to the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare, between 1994 and 2007 the relative poverty rate almost doubled from 8.1% to 15.7%, raising Japan’s relative poverty rate to the fourth highest among Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries and well above the OECD average of 10.6% (Takanami, 2010, p. 39; OECD, 2008). The Gini coefficient, the standard measure of income inequality, also has increased significantly since the mid-1980s from well below to a bit above the OECD average (OECD, 2006). By the mid-2000s, the phrase *kakusa shakai* (gap-widening society) held great currency within popular discourse, capturing both citizens’ growing sense that the gulf between rich and poor was expanding and the increasing dualism in the labor market that economists say shows few signs of abating.

One of the hallmarks of capitalism is the necessary and incessant pursuit of new markets as old ones become saturated. In the era of late capitalism, corporations have had to manufacture new markets through the culture industries of advertising and marketing, industries designed at the outset to formulate new “appetites, desires, and purchasing ‘power’” (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2000, p. 293). While the largest growth has unquestionably occurred in the areas of financial services and speculative investment, global corporations have also been hard at work developing an ever-expanding array of goods and services for consumption, and soccer—in new places and new packages—has certainly been part of that growth. Scholars have convincingly argued that the rapid development of professional soccer Leagues across East Asia as well as FIFA’s awarding of the 2002 World Cup to Japan and South Korea were directly linked to the broader commercialization of the sport and the desperate desire of megacorporations—Euro-American and Asian alike—to capture soccer’s few

remaining untapped markets (Manzenreiter & Horne, 2007). In many ways the J-League epitomizes the neoliberalization of sport since it effectively did not exist prior to its inauguration in the early 1990s as a hyper-commercial entity, and a substantial amount of the profusion of consumer goods produced for anticipated fans made it to store shelves before most players ever stepped on the pitch for an official match.<sup>8</sup> In 1993, the League's inaugural year, the J-League amassed US\$1.6 billion in sales. Sony Creative Products, the League's official merchandiser, opened over 100 stores nationwide and sold over US\$300 million dollars worth of hats, jackets, flags, and other merchandise brightly stamped with J-League logos. Like a blockbuster children's movie, from its inception the J-League was cross-marketed with an array of consumer products, including children's fast food meals, beer, and Japanese "curry rice" (Morris, 1995, p. 82).

The J-League is just one example of the substantial shifts in the role and cultural positioning of sport that have occurred over the last quarter century. The J-League's growth was spurred by the rapid development and commodification of media technologies as well as innovations in licensing agreements and cross-marketing, sports teams, and leagues that now serve as consumer training grounds for fans, naturalizing market principles and promoting the consumptive practices necessary to maintain the balance sheets of businesses in late capitalism. For many scholars, rampant commercialism and consumerism have been some of the clearest signs of neoliberalism at work in sport, and, in some cases, the boldness and audacity of new team and league business plans have actually politicized fans as they inadvertently "gain a political awareness about neoliberalism" due to increasing ticket prices and other unfavorable experiences that unpleasantly reposition them as "consumers" rather than "club members" (Dubal, 2010, p. 33). As one would expect, cultures of neoliberalism have broader reach and exist in many other aspects of sport. In the world of Japanese soccer, as we move from the experiences of fans, consumers, and marketers of sport to those of coaches and players, we find that albeit through different modes and mechanisms, neoliberal principles are reproduced and reinforced.

A body of scholarly work steadily grows that underscores how neoliberal political and economic forces have radically changed how humans live and labor.<sup>9</sup> As this research expands in both breadth and depth, it becomes increasingly clear that despite the reality and significance of neoliberal political and economic powers with global reach (i.e., the IMF, World Bank, G9, WTO, and the world's largest global corporations), neoliberalism whether as policy or social ethic is produced from a much more diffuse, diverse, and often intimate range of sites, and it is not homogeneous in its effects (e.g., Collier, 2005; Dubal, 2010; Freeman, 2007; Hoffman, DeHart, & Collier, 2006). Despite the acknowledged diversity in the ways that neoliberal practices and discourses emerge, proliferate, and take hold in local contexts, there is a general set of concepts and principles that appear relatively consistent. In addition to the political and economic components already mentioned, there are distinct understandings of the relationships between and the responsibilities of the "self" and "the social" impelled by a neoliberal politicoeconomic environment. Common themes within cultures of



neoliberalism are the importance of entrepreneurship, individual initiative, self-realization, self-discipline, and self-responsibility.

In recent years, several scholars of contemporary Japan working in a diversity of cultural spheres, including education, sex work, marriage counseling, and corporate offices, have pointed to the ways that the neoliberal logics of market fundamentalism have extended into realms of the social and the individual, restructuring moral and ethical frames, understandings of self, notions of happiness, and even valuations of life (Alexy, 2011; Arai, 2005; Inoue, 2007; Takeyama, 2010). Whether it be Japanese male hosts peddling intimacy, female office workers striving for “equal opportunity” in their workplace, beleaguered housewives trying to define a “good” marriage, or school children and their parents negotiating an increasingly bifurcated and discriminatory school system, these authors show that ideals such as self-responsibility, self-discipline, independence, entrepreneurship, and self-strengthening have become key concepts influencing and animating the actions and understandings of those they study. Many of these authors have pointed to the growing prominence of the term “self-responsibility” (*jiko sekinin*) for guiding the decisions, actions, and moral judgments of those they study. As we will see, the concept of “self-responsibility” held similar centrality and currency in the world of soccer around the turn of the 21st century. Soccer was certainly not the only space witnessing the rise of neoliberal ideals and logics in millennial Japan; however, I would argue that it was a very influential and culturally formative one due to the pervasiveness of its popular cultural presence beginning in the 1990s.

There are those who might counter that the language and logics of neoliberalism—championing autonomy, self-discipline, self-responsibility, and the like—are nothing more than “common sense” in the world of sport, and thus their presence or significance in Japanese soccer should not be misread as historically contingent or ideologically tied to broader socioeconomic processes. Just as it is critical to understand that “*jiko sekinin* ‘self responsibility’ is not a key word in any imputable ‘Neo-Confucian’, ‘Imperial’, or other Japanese ‘culture’ of hierarchy, historical or contemporary” (Inoue, 2007, p. 86), but rather a concept growing out of and becoming prominent in the midst of a distinct set of historical, social, and economic forces, it is equally important to recognize that the language of sport is always historically contingent and culturally embedded—no matter how universal, natural, or commonsensical it might appear. While ideals of hard work, discipline, sacrifice, and personal responsibility have been present in modern sport since its earliest beginnings in the 19th century, the parameters and contents of those concepts have shifted radically over time and quite consistently reflected as well as actively shaped the cultural moments in which they emerged. In the world of Japanese baseball, Kelly (1998) shows that the ethos of “fighting spirit” (*konjō*), despite contemporary claims staking its position as the heart of Japanese baseball since its earliest beginnings, was “neither a natural, constant, or universal theme” in the history of the game (p. 104). Although the term, indeed, featured prominently in discourses of proper training and performance over the baseball’s first century, it went from being linked to an ethos of “rugged autonomy” in the last two decades of the 19th century to capturing the spirit of teamwork and efficiency that



effectively reproduced and thus explained the success of “Japanese-style management” in the 1960s and 1970s (pp. 104–106).

As I will show here, in their own narratives of the historical evolution of the strategies and philosophies of the game of soccer, Japanese coaches acknowledge distinct shifts in understandings of how the game should be played, and thus instructed and trained, over the past 50 years. They themselves have marked the 1990s as the era of “individuals” in which players are governed by their own “self-determined actions”—very different, in their minds, from the highly tuned “systems,” or the freewheeling superstars of earlier eras. My own research on the history of soccer (Edwards, 2003), and personal experience as a player and researcher witnessing the changing landscape of coaching reinforce that these concepts and logics are never static and that the ideals of self-discipline and individuality that dominate current understandings of technically, mentally, and morally superior players and teams are intimately connected to Japan’s current socioeconomic moment.

### Singling Out Individuality

During the first half of the 1990s, at the highpoint of Japan’s “soccer boom,” journalists and advertisers predominantly rendered the sport with images of male players with long dyed hair, pierced ears, flashy suits, and in a range of defiant poses. As the newest and most prominent challenger to the “national” sport of baseball, many commentators cast soccer as baseball’s rather flamboyant and rebellious cousin, and as something far afield from the more staid, reserved, and militaristic sports of baseball and sumo (e.g., Sterngold, 1994). Both supporters and critics marked soccer as foreign and decidedly “un-Japanese.” Baseball’s loyalists and more conservative social critics suggested that soccer’s foreignness, iconoclasm, and lack of regimentation reflected all that was wrong in the contemporary moment, including rampant consumerism and a youth culture gone astray. However, many others presented soccer in a much more positive light, arguing that in its various dimensions—as a business, a popular fan sport, and a locus of youth participation and education—soccer would help Japanese citizens develop a new, more global (read: less Japanese) orientation to the world.

Players and coaches I interviewed in the late 1990s consistently agreed that soccer’s image was hip, youthful, and unconventional—not “traditionally Japanese.” Many described soccer as more “free” (*jiyū*) in comparison to baseball and other more “traditional” Japanese sports that were “stiff” (*katai*) and “serious” (*majime*). Players expressed in a variety of ways that soccer was a sport in which they felt recognized and appreciated as individuals. One L-League I spoke with put it succinctly: “Although soccer is indeed a team sport, individuals (*kojin*) are also very important.” Indeed, one of the most popular descriptors attached to soccer in Japan in the 1990s was “individuality.” In coaching publications, journalists’ recaps of the weekend’s matches, and even locker room discussions, ideal players and model performances were most commonly infused with the words *kosei* (individuality), *koseiteki* (individualistic), and *kojin* (individuals). An article in a prominent J-League annual “year book” recommending the best high schools for boys aspiring to professional soccer careers noted

that one top school provided “coaching that lets [players’] individuality take off” and had a reputation for producing “individualistic” (*koseitekina*) players (“Teikyo Pawa,” 1994). My own survey of soccer coverage in Japan’s top two daily newspapers also revealed an exponential increase in the use of the word *kosei* as the 1990s progressed, with common headlines referencing coaches’ efforts to “strengthen the individuality of players” and the success of particularly strong teams attributed to the players being of a “different and more individualistic breed” (*koseiha*).

Several scholars studying professional and amateur soccer sites in Japan over the past two decades also have commented on the predominance of the rhetoric of *kosei* in Japanese soccer (see Kim, 2009; Takahashi, 1994). Turning their scholarly gazes to everything from training guidelines produced by the JFA, the business plan of the burgeoning J-League in the 1990s, to instructions uttered by youth coaches in local leagues, these researchers’ findings support and at times duplicate my own: They too find that descriptions and images abound of soccer as something new, different, untraditional, “un-Japanese,” and international, and, possibly most emphatically, they recognize the connections drawn between soccer and “individualism” (*kosei*). The major dividing line between these researchers is effectively the simple question of whether the sport of soccer *actually* promoted individuality among players and their fans or not. Those excited about the new forms of local activism and volunteerism that accompanied the creation of teams, or new business models employed by the booming J-League, typically argued that soccer was creating “new,” “different,” and often “individualistic” cultural practices and forms (Koiwai, 1994; Takahashi, 1994; Yamashita & Saka, 2002). More recently, however, in her analysis of specific training regimens of youth teams in the Shimizu area, Kim (2009) concludes that even though coaches and technical directors at the JFA emphasize individuality, “team harmony” (*shudan no wa*) is ultimately reinforced (p. 160). She also points out that there is nothing terribly unique or individualistic about an “individuality” designed and dictated by the JFA: Drills and coaching techniques devised to inculcate individuality are routines designed by the JFA and then executed with relative uniformity by coaches across Japan, and each practice routine is performed by players within teams—and even across teams—very uniformly (p. 161).

Rather than follow in the tracks of recent Japan soccer studies and ask whether or not *kosei* or individuality was effectively cultivated, I suggest we ask *why* “individuality” became such a prevalent discourse in the world of soccer in the 1990s and what the contours of what was called “individuality” actually were. Why, rather suddenly, was *kosei* so important, and what did it mean for those who played? In what ways was “individualism” deemed desirable, and what was the political and historical significance of this desired subjectivity in the midst of a national recession and an ever-strengthening neoliberal state system? A closer look at common coaching practices on L-League pitches as well as in the upper echelons of the JFA should underscore the degree to which soccer in Japan shared not only the vocabulary and rhetoric of the larger neoliberal economy of which it was a part but also promoted, idealized, and trained the sensibilities and ambitions of proper neoliberal subjects.

## Tales of Individuals and Organizations

Arguably the most prominent and persistent duality organizing descriptions of soccer in and outside of Japan is “the group” versus “the individual.” Group/organization versus individual/creativity, for instance, is a dichotomy often used by soccer writers to demarcate national “styles” of play, with the German national team often said to epitomize the first half of the dyad and the Brazilians the latter. In the 1990s, soccer analysts from the JFA used the group versus individual dichotomy as the analytical frame to explain the trajectory of soccer’s development over the past 50 years and to justify their vision for elite players and teams in the present. An evolutionary and neo-liberal narrative from the outset, its authors presented soccer as following a path toward ever-greater perfection that culminated with the individual as *the unit* of focus in the contemporary game. This tale of triumphant individuals *and* individualism was showcased at the JFA’s “Football Conference Japan 1998,” which quickly followed the Japanese Men’s National Team’s lackluster performance at that summer’s World Cup. The extravagant weekend conference was attended by hundreds of Japanese coaches, several dozen soccer administrators from across Asia, and a handful of VIPs from Europe and South America, including the newly appointed Japan Men’s National Team manager, Frenchman Philippe Troussier.

One of the star performers and eagerly anticipated speakers at the conference was Ono Takeshi, an assistant coach with the Men’s National Team. In a packed auditorium on the first day of the conference, he presented material from the JFA technical committee’s post-World Cup report, and with it a strong argument about soccer’s evolution.<sup>10</sup> The past 50 years of international soccer, he suggested, could be divided up into three distinct segments. The first period, from the 1950s through the early 1970s, was an era when there was “enough time, [and] enough space.” Individual superstars excelled, such as Brazil’s Pelé and England’s George Best. The greater time and space enjoyed by players extended to the experiences of whole teams, which also had the time and space to “focus on and play to their own strengths” (JFA, 1998, p. 40). According to Ono, the first fundamental shift began in the early 1970s with the advent of the tactically rigorous Dutch System of “Total Football” and similar systems that developed in Italy (notably at AC Milan) and elsewhere. In the second period, a new level of focus, energy, and research were put into developing total team strategies, and *organization* became of equal or greater importance than the abilities of individual players. Systems of play, and defensive schemes in particular, were developed to shut down the opponent’s strengths. This new level of defensive pressure and organization was an era of “less time, less space” (JFA, 1998, pp. 40-41). New approaches focused on teams as corporeally organized and strategically systematized units and created new expectations of individual players. Ono proposed that in this era players’ “all-around” abilities were critical, as was the ability *to work within systems*, which often required regular rotation and switching of positions. Individual players and their abilities become subordinated to the needs and goals of a tactical system. In fact, according to Ono, at the peak of this organizational trend in the late 1980s and early 1990s, “superstars” were not evaluated for their skills and abilities in and of themselves, but rather on the basis of their ability to fit within a specific tactical system (p. 41).

In the 1990s, according to Ono's timeline, things again changed. The most recent soccer environment was one of even "greater pressure and increased competition." Exemplified by the play in the 1994 and 1998 World Cups, he said, modern soccer involved more efficient and effective tactical systems that continued to "decrease time and space." With almost all teams well prepared and disciplined, there were few opportunities to attack and score. In this high pressure environment, he argued, teams had to keep risks to a minimum, and new qualities and abilities would be demanded from players (JFA, 1998, p. 42).

Recapping his evolutionary schema, Ono again noted the shift from "individual soccer" (*kojin no sakkaa*) to "organizational soccer" (*soshiki no sakkaa*) and then asserted that in the future "we will see *individual strengths on top of these perfected organizations*" (author's emphasis). The all-around players necessitated by the previous era's organizational demands would now have to be "players with all-around abilities who are also specialists." The most prized players, Ono added, would be "soloists," who could "quickly and with little trouble" break through the efficient and seemingly flawless organizational systems of opponents. Unlike superstars of previous eras, who shone because opponents' systems were disorganized, they would be a new breed of individualistic players able to unseat the most finely tuned and perfectly integrated organizational systems (JFA, 1998, pp. 42-43).

In Ono's new "modern soccer" paradigm, organizational skills are still critical; however, organizations themselves are now particularized and presented as a conglomeration of "individuals" (*kojin*), directed not by coaches or a previously devised master plan, but instead by "self-determined actions" (*jibun no handan*). Ono presented successful organizations (teams) as hyper-rationalized and supremely effective systems that triumph not due to direction from without, but rather thanks to the self-directed yet coordinated actions of their autonomous units (players). Individuals, rather than groups and their organizational strategies, are the crucial element of strong teams, and hierarchically supreme: not only "on top" of organizations but also capable as "soloists" to break through and topple even the best organizational systems.

Ono's characterizations of the arc of soccer history and the soccer environment of the 1990s are intriguing, particularly as they echo and overlap with neoliberal discourse that prevailed at the same time. First, his narrative of soccer's development mirrored regularly invoked portrayals of Japan's economic recovery in the postwar period. Ono's first phase of "enough time, [and] enough space," mapped chronologically—from the 1950s to the early 1970s—onto the country's "high-growth" period, marked by seemingly unending double-digit GNP growth thanks to successful reindustrialization and export-led expansion due in great part to the benefits of cheap labor. Ono pointed to the early 1970s as the advent of "organizational soccer," the same moment when increased international competition and volatility in the global economy forced Japanese corporations to turn to new technologies and management practices to control costs and maintain their positions in an intensifying global market. This period is also commonly depicted as the beginning of Japan's "enterprise society" (*kigyō shakai*), which entailed even greater coordination between corporations and the state, the reorganization of the business landscape into vast corporate networks with large

conglomerates controlling a pyramidal scheme of subcontractors below them, and the intensification and homogenization of labor management practices (Yoda, 2006, p. 31; see also Watanabe, 1996, pp. 237-241). It is impossible to ignore the symmetries between Ono's era of highly coordinated "total team strategies" that favored organizations over individuals with characterizations of the coterminous economic environment with its expanding corporate hegemony, diminishing power of organized labor, more tightly integrated top-down business system, and emerging discourse of "Japan Inc." that imagined Japan's economy as a unitary and totalizing system engaged in cut-throat competition with other world powers. Through the end of the 1980s, in boardrooms—and according to Ono, on soccer fields as well—systems were privileged over individuals as the elements critical to success.

In the final stage of his periodization, Ono described a space where individuals and teams must assiduously manage and limit their own risks (leaving no gaps or opportunities for attack) while opportunistically capitalizing on the errors and small weaknesses of opponents. Systems of play in the global game of soccer have become more uniform, almost universalized, due to increasing flows of information, coaching education, and labor—with elite managers and players from Europe and South America circulating freely through their own continents as well as Africa and Asia. According to Ono, in this ever-universalizing field, it is not unique approaches to organization or management that are going to separate the good teams from the great; instead, successful teams are beholden to the creative, individualistic talents of a handful of superior performers. Again, Ono's narrative of soccer in the 1990s resonates with popular as well as scholarly representations of the dramatic economic shifts that began at the same time. His attention to the role of increasingly effective tactical systems in reducing the "time and space" available to respond either offensively or defensively resonates directly with various commentators' recognition that the pursuit of ever-more efficient information technologies have created what David Harvey (2007) has called "time-space compression" in economic markets, with profits and corporate success hinging on the ability to identify and capitalize on the slimmest of margins (p. 4). Ono's new breed of individualistic "soloists" who sit atop organizations and are the key to their teams' victories are athletic shadows of the CEOs, board members, and other key financial operators in the business world who depart from any existing game plan and creatively design strategies (in the form of new financial instruments and investment schemes) to beat out their opponents. As is true in the world of professional soccer, in this ultracompetitive environment of almost equally matched companies, individual brilliance is deemed the most critical element for success, thus justifying unprecedented levels of compensation for these prized soloists.

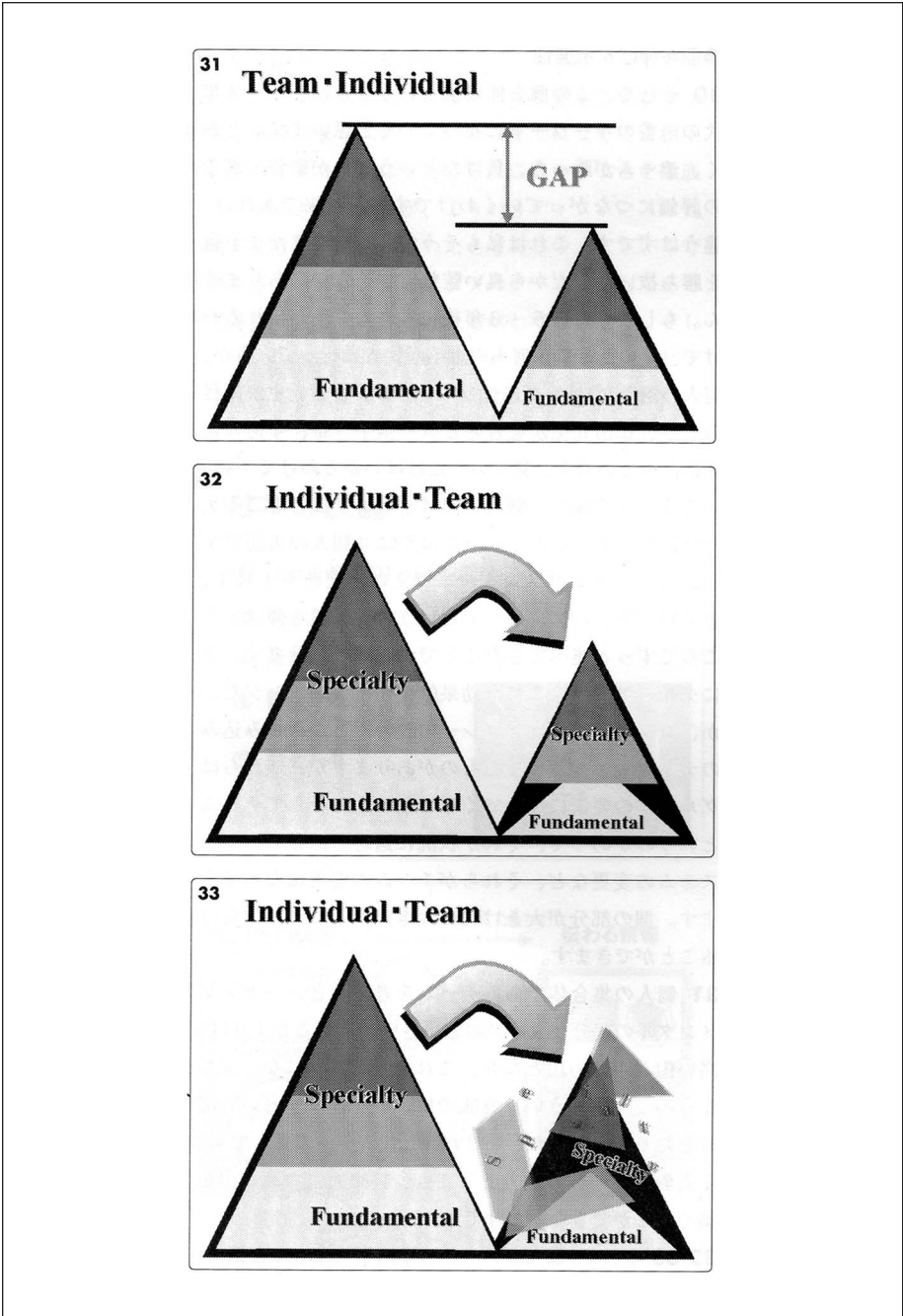
Soccer's popular trope of individuals and organizations was the prominent topic again, 3 years later, at the JFA's next international soccer conference held in 2001. Speaking in front of an even larger audience, Ono's colleague, Tashima Kōzō, a JFA Technical Committee member and the former director of professional coaching licensing, once again emphasized the fundamental importance of individuals in soccer.<sup>11</sup> Standing at a lectern placed on a large, darkened stage, the title of his presentation glowed on the auditorium's large screen: "The Gap with the World—The Importance

of Cultivating the Individual.” For Tashima and other members of the JFA, the “world,” of course, referenced the most elite international teams with whom Japan strived to compete. The JFA’s explanation for the “gap” (*gyappu*) and the Federation’s plans for its eradication were—and still are—embedded in a grander logic about the relationships between individuals and teams, which Tashima adapted into a pictorial scheme (Figure 1). Pyramids represented the linkages between the abilities of individual players and the strength of a team. The width of a pyramid’s base represented the aggregate of players’ “fundamental skills” and determined the degree to which more specialized skills—and a stronger team—could be developed. The size of the base determined the height of the pyramid, which in turn indicated the overall strength of the team.

Tashima’s pyramids asserted an explanation for the failures in Japanese soccer and prescribed solutions. Although the specifics of his presentation were slightly different, Tashima’s conclusion echoed that of his colleague Ono: Individuals were the key. Both men’s narratives of the current soccer moment were devoid of discussions of strategy, tactics, or team organization. Rather, they suggested that the deficiencies of individuals were the primary factor standing in the way of greater team success. Correspondingly, they presented a world in which there was only so much that organizations, no matter how well crafted, could do; without exceptional “soloists” team victory was likely out of reach. While many a soccer aficionado might agree with these conclusions, it is important to acknowledge the historical specificity of this coaching philosophy (as Ono himself noted, past eras had produced very different philosophies about the necessary elements of winning teams) and the fact that it clearly mirrored discourses circulating in the larger global economy at the turn of the millennium that emphasized the responsibilities of individual laborers and celebrated the individuality of corporate superstars.<sup>12</sup>

In Japan in the early 2000s, a young Internet business upstart by the name of Takafumi Horie garnered notable media attention as his company Livedoor Corporation rapidly rose on the Tokyo Stock Exchange and engaged in a range of aggressive mergers and acquisitions. Many marked the ascension of this entrepreneur, who had started his venture capital company while still in college, as a harbinger of more monumental change. Journalists and numerous young fans of Horie proclaimed that future economic growth and wealth would be more often produced by charismatic individualists—or, “star soloists”—like Horie, rather than the bureaucratically overloaded business establishment.<sup>13</sup> The narratives of Horie’s ascent and the mythos of the riches awaiting motivated free market subjects occurred at a time when record numbers of workers were finding themselves in a rapidly changing job market, with full-time employment opportunities falling precipitously. Of course, the multimillion dollar successes of Horie and the disintegration of full-time employment were simply two different manifestations of the same ideal that held individuals supremely responsible for their successes and failures and imagined the labor market as a “level-playing field,” which by embracing competition would breed “star soloists” and train the rest to see their more modest outcomes as the result of their “self-determined” actions. Turning to invocations of “individuality” in day-to-day training routines of Japanese soccer teams, we





**Figure 1.** The JFA’s pictorial representation of the factors creating the “gap” between “the rest of the world” (left) and Japan (right) Japanese Football Association [JFA], 2001, p. 24).



will see not only the different ways the economy and soccer were intertwined in contemporary Japan but also the drastically different human outcomes that neoliberal ideology can support.

### *Japaneseness, Soccer, and Cultivating “Individuals”*

Expressing and embodying individuality was a crucial theme in the “practice” of soccer on and off the field in the L-League, and concomitant with the “freedom” perceived to be central to the sport was a newfound level of responsibility. Coaches regularly cast individuality—as well as creativity—as qualities intricately bound up with players’ abilities to engage in independent thoughts and actions. For instance, at one L-League team meeting I attended, the head coach chastised the players for not thinking for themselves and acting more independently on the field. “We [the coaches] can’t be giving you all of the necessary directions from the bench,” he said to the attentive group of players sitting in the room, “please create in your own way, and make judgments on your own.” He and the rest of his coaching staff, he reiterated, were not always going to tell them “what to do, and how to do it”—a coaching style, which as he shared with me later, he believed was much more pervasive in more “traditional” women’s sports such as basketball and volleyball.

In addition to the expectation that one would rely less on the instructions of coaches, acting independently or as an “individual” necessitated a great deal of self-observation and maintenance. Bringing to life Foucault’s discussion of the panoptic technologies of visualization and the unwitting self-surveillance and self-monitoring they engender, L-League players quickly learned that proper “self-management” (*jiko kanri*) necessitated that they record their weight daily (and at some teams also body fat and blood pressure) on clipboards hung publicly in the clubhouse; keep copious journal notes (commonly referred to as *hansei* or “self-reflection”) about practices, games, as well as mundane details of their lives (what they ate for breakfast, what time they went to bed, and even who they went shopping with over the weekend!); and participate in various other forms of self-monitoring. The ability to monitor and manage all aspects of one’s life on and off the soccer pitch—a quality that many coaches characterized as “self-control” (*serufu kontororu*)—was, in fact, further celebrated and reaffirmed in a regular feature in the L-League’s monthly newsletter.

Ostensibly written as a “get to know your fellow L-Leaguers” piece, the monthly “Sticking Close to an L-Leaguer: A Player’s Story,” was also a careful record of the regimented day of an average player. Each month’s “featured” player would carefully detail the processes of preparing for and getting to work and practices. She would also document—often in half-hour segments—evening routines such as relaxation exercises, dinner preparation, a massage from the team therapist, and so on. Always erring on the side of completeness and attention to minutiae, players also recorded their final activities prior to bedtime, which might include the time and duration of a final bath and phone conversations with friends, as well as a record of the time they fell asleep. The required nature of these journals and the self-reflection and evaluation that they necessitated reinforced the notion that the individual player was responsible for

policing her own behavior and preparation and that everything down to seemingly banal details of everyday life were essential elements to guarantee future success. The skills required to be a top soccer player were posed as encompassing minute daily routines, as well as personal decisions that occurred far from the soccer pitch. The disciplining of L-League players was both individualized and individuating; rather than emphasizing the collective training and performance of the team, practice and living routines required of athletes on and off the field parsed them into discrete and measurable units predisposed to comparison, declared them responsible for the maintenance (and often even the recording) of the criteria of comparison, and tied not only individual but team (corporate) success to effective self-maintenance and self-monitoring (rather than team chemistry, coaching strategies, etc.).

It should be emphasized that the lessons presented by the L-League coach at that morning meeting—about being creative, making decisions independently, and doing things “in your own way”—as well as the acts of self-regimentation and maintenance were equally present on many fields outside the L-League, including high school and other amateur teams populated by girls and women and boys and men. Much of the homogenization of coaching practices and soccer sensibilities was due to their dissemination and popularization—to coaches, fans, and players—through an impressive array of weekly and monthly soccer magazines, many of which regularly solicited interviews, articles, and columns from top coaches at the JFA and J-League players. Parallels with L-League soccer practices become evident, for instance, in a regular feature in one of Japan’s longest-running soccer publications, *Soccer Magazine*. “A Life in the Match Day” [sic] closely resembled the “up close and personal” feature in the L-League newsletter discussed earlier. Detailing the routines of male J-Leaguers on match days, the feature’s narrative consistently emphasized the necessity of regulation (hotel confinement in the 24 hours before game time), routine (standardized eating, sleeping, training, and preparation habits), and constant attention to one’s personal condition (monitoring weight, food intake, and limiting late nights and drinking). Like the L-League piece, the exposition is presented in the player’s voice furthering the image of the primacy of individual initiative and responsibility. Just as the off-the-field expectations of L-League and J-League players were quite similar, coaches of female and male players made very similar demands when it came to on-the-field behavior as well. L-League coaching practices were drawn from and directly connected to a broader vision of *the* ideal player produced by the JFA, which while male-focused in its exposition was certainly not gender exclusive in its implementation. That vision also appeared to draw inspiration from characteristics that popular commentators claimed were required of workers aspiring to be competitive in the broader, shifting neoliberal economy.

Many government leaders and social commentators, whether they welcomed or bemoaned the deregulation and liberalization of Japan’s economy in the 1980s and 1990s, often referred to it as the “internationalization,” “globalization,” or even “Americanization” of the country; however, when they discussed what needed to happen for Japan to stay competitive, the process they identified might be best described as “de-Japanization.” Business leaders were often quoted as saying that successful

Japanese workers of the future would need to be independent, self-motivated, self-directed, and *not* Japanese, with “Japanese” serving as an overdetermined placeholder to denote a range of stereotypical qualities associated with pre-bust “Japan Inc.” (e.g., Hamawaki & Ōtake, 1998; Kiriya, 1998). Characteristics once lauded, such as “group-mindedness” and loyalty to company, were now coded as deficits and liabilities that impeded innovation and rapid response business planning in an ever-faster-moving marketplace. In the L-League, coaches I worked with made clear that displaying appropriate *kosei* on the field also required a good amount of de-Japanization. For instance, *senpai-kōhai* (senior-junior) relationships, staple hierarchical interconnections structuring most Japanese high school sports teams—not to mention a good proportion of workplaces—were to have no hold on soccer fields or soccer players’ relationships. According to L-League coaches I worked with, showing deference to ones superiors, or feeling and exerting superiority simply because of one’s seniority were perfect examples of Japanese social codes interfering with player development and undermining the atmosphere of competition. Similarly, being overly concerned about one’s peers and desiring of their approval was seen as a dangerous sign of “Japanese groupism” and anathema to the creation of a successful team. When discussing this subject with one L-Leaguer, for example, she argued that the oldest and most “traditional” soccer teams in Japan—and those that were most successful—had “no *senpai-kōhai* relations whatsoever!” Yet, despite the reported success of some teams in eradicating *senpai-kōhai* inequalities, star coaches from the JFA as well as their less known peers in the L-League regularly complained that disabusing players of these hierarchical modes of interacting required thorough training and that they still could be stubbornly persistent.

Similar discussions problematizing Japaneseness echoed in the elite ranks of men’s soccer in the late 1990s. In addition to reproducing the argument about *senpai-kōhai* relations present in the L-League discussions described above, former men’s national team coach Katō Hisashi (1997) argued in his book, *Compound “Individuality” and Win: The Group Composed of Individuals*, that young Japanese elite players were poorly prepared to deal with the pressure of high-level competition, such as the extended tension of the World Cup. The culprit was a Japanese society that demanded people be “absorbed into the group” and prevented them from discovering their “individual (or unique) strength” (pp. 44, 149). For Katō, *wa* (harmony) was at the root of the “Japanese weakness of not being able to decide anything individually” (p. 72). Like many of his coach-author peers, Katō uncritically appropriated overdetermined cultural stereotypes, such as *wa*, which due to indiscriminate use in nationalist and Orientalizing discourses alike have become shorthand for a stereotypical image of Japanese groupism as a mystical and immutable aspect of Japanese social sensibilities.<sup>14</sup> While sacrificing precision and nuance in the analysis of his soccer players, Katō’s use of these stereotypes undoubtedly increased the saliency of his work to a broader popular audience and effectively connected his critique to an anti-Japaneseness discourse that already existed beyond the world of soccer.

Couched in these rallying calls against Japanese-ness, it is easy to see the neoliberal ethos permeating this independent, self-managed, and always-competitive individual envisioned in coaching treatises and on L-League and other practice fields. Coaches' desires to reach a "global standard" and shed the debilitating weaknesses of "unique" Japanese behavior echoed the calls of businessmen and social critics who envisioned similar cultural changes in workplaces far from soccer fields. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the neoliberal undercurrent, however, did not end there. One of the buzzwords in the men and women's leagues was "pro consciousness" (*puro ishiki*), which attached to already existing practices of neoliberal self-responsibilization—including "self-management" and "self-control"—the added need for single-minded dedication to one's athletic pursuits. In his book, *Make the Most of the "Individual" and Win* (1998), famous Brazilian star turned Japanese soccer hero, Zico, wrote that being a "pro" required being a "soccer specialist twenty-four hours a day" (p. 36). His coaching colleague, Katō Hisashi (1997), similarly argued that for professionals work responsibilities not only pervade the private but also take precedence over it.

Professional consciousness means that you will do whatever is required to win. If you are having difficulty in your private life, you will make changes in your personal affairs in order to win. In addition, *you treat all of these things as your own personal responsibility.* (emphasis added, p. 60)

Expanding the conversation beyond soccer, he added that in all spheres of life "people who work to be in the best condition for their jobs are pros. If you let your personal life get in the way, you are not a pro" (p. 166).

As is true with many so-called soccer "skills," "pro consciousness" had its own gender dimensions, and female players were perceived as even less likely than their male counterparts to perfect being a "pro."<sup>14</sup> For instance, the head of the personnel division at a large multinational construction firm that sponsored both an L-League and a J-League team argued adamantly about his frustrations with the female squad: "The problem is that we treat our players like professionals, but these girls have no professional consciousness." When I asked him what he meant by "professional consciousness," he seemed rather befuddled and simply replied, "I guess I mean that women don't think or act like pros." His assistant tried to help his boss, interjecting, "The players have no clear goals. Have you ever asked any of them about their plans after retiring from soccer? Seriously, when you ask Japanese female players the most common answer is 'I don't know.'" Imitating the players, he parodied an exaggerated dumbfounded expression before exclaiming, "It's true!" So, for some, "pro consciousness" meant having clear career and personal goals and taking clear steps to achieve those goals. (It should be noted that this same team provided no professional opportunities for female players to work as coaches in their youth development system, even though this was a common job option for retirees from the men's J-League team.) Many others I spoke with echoed Katō's sentiments: "pro consciousness" required a single-minded dedication, the desire to continually improve one's performance, and prioritizing what "provided one's livelihood" (Kato, 1998, p. 166)

Interesting contradictions arose when young L-Leaguers were accused of not displaying “pro consciousness” for choosing paths away from soccer out of concern for their livelihoods. For instance, in 1999, team administrators for an L-League team I worked with for almost a full year announced they were no longer going to be able to sponsor their players as “professionals.” In a meeting at the company’s headquarters, the players were told they would have to go out and find flexible part-time work that would cover living expenses and part of their travel costs yet still provide them the freedom to train in the early evening and play matches on weekends. Several of the players balked and said they would quit under the new conditions.<sup>15</sup> As one veteran put it, “After playing for eight seasons in this League, I’m not going to return to playing for a club team!” Prior to and after the company announcement, several other players mentioned to me that they too were considering quitting so they could attend college full-time or get more secure forms of employment. The male head coaches vociferously criticized those players for lacking true dedication and being “unprofessional.” “They don’t seem to understand that soccer is how they eat,” exclaimed one irate member of the coaching staff on the ride home from a weekend League match. “When I played, I understood that soccer was how I made my living!” This coach, a man who had struggled through several seasons on the reserve squad of a J-League club, presented himself and other male J-Leaguers as paragons of true professional consciousness. He said that if the women on his team were really dedicated to soccer, and honestly loved the sport, they would be willing to make any sacrifice and undergo great hardships to continue to play. The radical structural differences between the life of an L-League player and a much-better paid male J-Leaguer were so dramatic that his comparison was ludicrous. Many of the high school- and college-age players on the team still lived with their parents, who often subsidized their soccer pursuits by covering equipment and travel expenses.

The coaches believed, and stated numerous times, that contemplating leaving the team reflected a lack of “professional consciousness.” No longer solely referring to whether one was paid to play, professionalism became first and foremost a mandate of individual dedication and a willingness to take on personal risk. Of course, promises of great personal gain were always positioned as the ultimate reward of a dedicated “pro,” thereby justifying personal sacrifice and the possibility of (hopefully) short-term hardship. Needless to say, “professional consciousness” is critical in a neoliberal laborspace: a business model that ideally positions workers as “free agents,” who conceive of success and failure as of their own making, see risk as opportunity, and are prepared to push on even as compensation and future prospects diminish. While this “professional” attitude was eagerly promoted by coaches and willingly accepted by many players, there were others whose “pro training” led them to different conclusions. Rather than showing immaturity and a lack of professionalism as the coaches asserted, the handful of players who chose to leave when the team’s situation looked dire arguably were being goal-oriented, focused, forward-thinking, risk-taking, and serious about their status as “professionals.” Their actions remind us that the products of neoliberal logics are never foregone conclusions and that neoliberal ideals can be appropriated for divergent and even contradictory purposes. However, this instance

also underscores the hegemonic power of neoliberalism: It frequently animates the logics of those who enforce as well as those who rebel.

## **Flexible Footballers, Model Workers**

For many JFA officials and celebrity coach-authors, soccer revealed the source of Japan's problems and pointed the way toward their solution. Katō Hisashi (1997), for example, presented soccer training as a progressive pathway to personal emancipation, with the individual no longer "absorbed by the group," or willing to "kill the 'self' for the team" (p. 149). At the same time, however, in the model of soccer as a microcosm of society championed by Katō and his colleagues at the JFA, societal change and responsibility for bringing about that change were focused on the individual, and, correspondingly, success in securing employment, food, shelter, and other aspects of livelihood squarely rested on individuals' shoulders. Japan's competitiveness in the age of globalization, according to Katō, depended on stronger and more independent individuals. Katō did not look to team tactics or organizational strategies for his solutions. Similar to Ono, who pointed to the importance of individual skills and talents in the current moment of "less time, and less space," Katō also called for the training of individuals prepared to act singularly (recalling Ono's "soloists" and "specialists"). The future prosperity of the nation, not just on soccer fields but in factories and offices as well, he argued, depended on the cultivation of individuality. This individuality, as we have seen, is quite specific and typically well defined by its interlocutors. It is an ideal that contains notions of self-assertion and self-focus bordering on selfishness. Social relationships and the desires of others should never impede one's focus or progress towards a goal. A properly "competitive" approach necessitates the disavowal of interdependence, a denial of social networks, and a separation from possible forms of political community. Individuals must be creative; however, even creativity has very specific parameters. Katō and his peers defined it as the ability to make the necessary judgments and decisions in a given situation (rather than, for instance, questioning, resisting, or reshaping that situation). Individualistic players, according to this paradigm, are also single-minded "pros" in their pursuits, and assiduously monitor and regulate all aspects of their lives, both public and private, in order to maximize their performances and opportunities to achieve their goals.

So, what kind of future will these "pros" face? And what are the real benefits of this "freer" neoliberal marketscape? In the idealistic visions of coaches such as Katō and Zico, sensibilities cultivated on soccer fields will prepare workers to be more competitive than their peers and, thus, provide a greater amount of job security. In his book focused on the cultivation of individuality, Katō (1997) writes that soccer improves "young people's judgment and decision making abilities," and arms them with skills that test taking and classroom instruction fail to teach (p. 80). He even suggests that his elite youth players are better equipped for the vicissitudes of the increasingly competitive job market and the fluctuating stresses of the workplace than graduates from Japan's top universities. However, when we contemplate the job market for which these new "soccer-trained" workers are reportedly more prepared, we must remember



in Japan's current economy, as is true in so many parts of today's world, employment security much less frequently means holding the same job at the same company for an extended period of time; rather, it references the ability to move quickly and successfully from one job to another (much like professional footballers who will easily play for a half-a-dozen teams or more over the course of their careers). The insecure and rapidly mutating labor market of modern neoliberal economies is arguably the rather dystopian reality for which Japan's idealized footballers are perfectly suited—at least in theory. As I followed the actual employment paths of several L-Leaguers and other elite athletes, it became clear that soccer—as well as other similarly demanding sports—did, in fact, prepare young athletes to serve the needs of the shifting postindustrial job market, but not frequently in the new white-collar positions for which Katō, Ono, and others suggested they were perfectly prepared. The realities of young players' lives point to soccer's role as a technology of subjection that has fundamentally reshaped individuals' priorities, career goals, and life trajectories, thus facilitating the redistribution of labor in ways that maximize efficiency and privilege market forces over the welfare of workers.

When the L-League was launched in 1989, several large multinational corporations signed on as sponsors. Executives hoped that connecting their brands to the “new” and “global” sport of soccer—not to mention the modern and progressive associations attached to the women's side of the sport—would help them cast themselves domestically and internationally as forward-thinking and technologically path-breaking 21st-century organizations. On the cusp of the new century, however, the L-League was in turmoil, due in great part to the unexpected departures of some of its most successful and richly financed teams. In an effort to cut expenses, L-League officials divided the League into East and West divisions, and individual teams drastically cut budgets—often by eliminating “professional” salaries, such as at the team mentioned earlier. Although the pay had never been very good, now long gone were the days of free housing in team dorms, living allowances, and games scheduled throughout Japan, thanks to the promotional interests and generous pocketbooks of team sponsors. Instead, many teams were struggling to stay competitive with volunteer coaches and staff and subpar training facilities. Many players resorted to unsatisfying and low-paying part-time jobs at restaurants, shipping warehouses, pachinko parlors, grocery store stockrooms, and the like, so they could purchase their own shoes, pay team dues, and maintain flexible schedules that allowed them to play soccer every evening and weekend. While their compatriots in the top division of the men's J-League never faced such dire circumstances, lower-division men's teams dealt with similar instability. The rapidly expanding lower divisions of the J-League and their amateur feeder teams are filled with athletes working part-time jobs flexible enough to coordinate around practice and match schedules as they diligently (and typically futilely) pursue their dreams of becoming full-time professionals.<sup>16</sup>

Inside and outside the world of soccer, Japanese women have resorted to nonregular and part-time employment more than their male counterparts. Throughout Japan's “high-growth” period of the 1960s and 1970s, the majority of women workers were relegated to part-time, short-term, and other nonregular work, and it was the flexibility



(and low pay) of this portion of the labor force that in great part fueled Japan's rapid economic expansion. Now in Japan, as is true elsewhere, greater flexibility (and insecurity) is demanded from a larger proportion of the work force, on both sides of the gender divide, although women continue to suffer more than their male peers in the tight job market (Ishiguro, 2008; Macnaughtan, 2006).<sup>17</sup> In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Ono, Tashima, Katō, and many others championed soccer players as ideally suited to the demands and challenges of the contemporary workplace, suggesting that their work ethic, along with their trained ability to make independent decisions, would make them supremely employable and competitive workers. Although not quite in keeping with their vision, possibly soccer's greatest contribution to the new needs of the 21st-century neoliberal economy was its production of a workforce of 20- to 30-year-old individuals actively seeking part-time and nonregular work, who at the same time had little time and few resources to challenge the justice or fairness of that work. As "professionals" fully focused on maximizing their careers as athletes, they had been trained to give primacy and their greatest commitment to non- or under-paid sports labor; they had also been trained to see insecure part-time employment as a legitimate, or at least reasonable, option that would allow them to keep focused on their more "professional" goals.

The daily routines and environment of L-Leaguers' lives discourage any overly simplistic interpretations of the ideas of "individuality" and "creativity" that journalists and coaches argue are necessitated and cultivated by soccer. Despite the rhetoric of free will and creative independence that dominated so much of soccer discourse in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the actual experience of soccer for those who played at elite levels was in many ways overwhelmed by regimentation, spatial circumscription, surveillance, and few opportunities to make individual decisions. On L-League practice fields, individuals were certainly conceptualized as critical units of action and production, but rather than pressed to make independent decisions or unleash their creative potentials, players were pushed to think of themselves as individuals in various routines of self-monitoring—the majority of which occurred off of the field. Players were trained to understand that top performance necessitated individual self-policing and almost hyper-self-consciousness. As Kim (2009) and other scholars have argued, the conformity and obedience inculcated through this training defy common understandings of "individuality" or "creativity." However, the very fact that forms of physical routinization and self-monitoring are pursued in the service of ideals such as individuality, creativity, and personal expression is what gives them potent disciplinary power and salience in the contemporary moment. Soccer players—in their daily routines and as they were discursively idealized—embodied the neoliberal ethos: They were competitive individual agents who understood the success of their team (company) as dependent on their singular efforts, and, they were "pros" who believed in the necessity of total dedication to vocation and competed in an insecure labor market where it was common sense that you would be let go if you were not contributing to "winning."

According to Ong (1999), for those participating and benefiting from flows of global capitalism, flexibility, in the form of transnational migrations and global

mobility, is embraced as more desirable than stability (p. 19). In the United States, the bustling technology boom of the 1990s brought with it demands for a young and mobile white-collar workforce willing to accept job insecurity and demands to “retool” their skills, as well as a revolving door of employment for the fleeting promise of an IPO windfall. As Martin (1994) has noted, the “ideal of flexibility” dramatized in ads exclaiming the new freedoms created by inch-thin laptops, home offices, and a range of wireless gadgets, which allow work to occur anytime and anywhere and often colonize all spaces of leisure, underscore the Janus-faced character of this discourse dominating American business culture and governmental labor policies. Of course, disrupting these popular images of managerial-class flexibility are the lives of the working class and the job-seeking unemployed, who are required to be the most flexible.

In Japan over the past three decades, the same neoliberal logics that necessitated an increasingly “flexible” (read: nonregular, part-time, partially-, or under-employed) work force have facilitated the rise of a discourse of individuality very much in keeping with the ideal of flexibility that champions identities and affect that work in the service of forms of transnational capitalism favoring shareholders and profit margins over employee welfare.<sup>18</sup> Unlike other sports scholars who have alternately either celebrated or questioned the authenticity of a very clear rise of a discourse of individuality/*kosei* in Japan, I would suggest that affective investments and faith in the reality of individuality, uniqueness, or “soloist” qualities are central to new forms of discipline critically intertwined with the current politicoeconomic moment. Conceptualizations of freedom, self-determination, and the promise of individuality are critical to the regimes of responsibility and self-reliance that they help enforce.

The rise of the ideal of *kosei* and related themes of “de-Japanization” and “professional consciousness” marked a meaningful shift in Japanese discussions of national identity, proper subjectivity, and the relationship between labor and leisure. While others have pointed to the encroachment of work into spaces of leisure via technologies such as smart phones and laptops, what we see here might more aptly be described as pervasive professionalization—in the spirit of “professional consciousness”—of a sporting realm that most youth originally join as a world of play and leisure and which most will only participate in as amateurs. This professionalization—the demand for more focus, commitment, and sacrifice from players—recasts soccer “play” as “work,” thus further complicating linkages between labor and compensation—possibly not surprising in an economy that is asking workers to be better educated and do more “retooling” for less pay. As more young women and men pursue their soccer dreams beyond their high school years at one of the continuously growing numbers of amateur and semiprofessional clubs in Japan, they are entering training grounds where concomitant with the pursuit of better soccer skills and success on the pitch is the inculcation of ideals of self-responsibility and self-discipline and the normalization of insecure employment (as a player, and in the part-time work that supports that “play”). Also, as team sponsors justify subpar wages and insecure futures by pointing to the “opportunities to play” they benevolently provide passionate young people, they further naturalize a rationale of nonregular employment that already holds currency in Japan, which suggests that temporary work is preferable for many younger workers who are more



**Figure 2.** The Nadeshiko Japan team celebrates winning the 2011 World Cup in Germany (Courtesy of Noriko Hayakusa).

interested in pursuing hobbies and other nonpaying past times. The only problem is that in Japan's current labor economy nonregular employment in one's youth quite frequently leads to nonregular employment for the rest of one's life.

## Postscript

Since their fourth-place-finish in the 2008 Beijing Olympics, the Japan's women's national team, "Nadeshiko Japan," has experienced a meteoric rise in their international success and popularity with fans, an ascension that climaxed with their unexpected victory in the World Cup Championship in 2011. Their clinching of the silver medal at the 2012 London Olympics made clear that the previous year's success had not been a fluke and guaranteed the continuation, for at least a little while longer, of "Nadeshiko fever."

In the year that spanned the World Cup and the Olympics, record-setting attendances at domestic Nadeshiko League matches increased by thousands upon thousands of fans, often rivaling or even surpassing attendances at men's J-League matches. The celebrity status of several players increased rapidly, with a good number serving as spokespeople for a range of products, and some becoming familiar faces on popular game and variety shows. Japanese journalists estimate that the former captain and veteran star of the team, Homare Sawa, grossed over US\$400,000 in the first half of 2012 for appearances in television commercials for 10 different companies ("Yumeijin 'CM gyara,'" 2012). This was just part of what was undoubtedly a huge windfall for a young woman who had been one of the best paid players in the Nadeshiko League with an income of approximately US\$45,000 per annum in 2009—a relatively modest

sum for a professional female athlete playing the “global game” (Brasor & Tsubuku, 2011). Needless to say, other national team players—let alone other Nadeshiko League players who are not internationals—have not profited like Sawa and a few other stars. One-time bonuses for World Cup and Olympic successes and coveted contracts with European teams will continue to motivate hundreds of young female footballers but only be realized by a select few. Despite the National team’s successes, the Nadeshiko League looks like it will continue relatively unchanged: The vast majority of players will not be paid by their team sponsors; most will work nonregular or temp-type jobs that will provide the flexibility required by demanding training and match schedules. They will be urged to display “pro consciousness” toward their sport while not reaping the rewards typically associated with top-level professionalism.

In the opening days of the London Summer Olympics a story circulated widely in the press about an inequity suffered by the Japanese women’s soccer team on their flight from Tokyo to the United Kingdom. While their male compatriots flew in business class, the Nadeshiko players were relegated to economy (Ryall, 2012). According to press reports, a representative of the JFA stated that the men’s upgrade “was in recognition of their professional status” (“Japan’s Women Footballers Irked,” 2012). Sawa argued “it should have been the other way around,” since the women were clearly medal contenders and the men were not. However, because the women did not garner professional wages anywhere equal to the men, they were deemed unworthy of the same treatment.<sup>19</sup> Despite the public outrage over the incident, the class difference in this one international flight was simply a microcosm of treatment the women have long experienced. Total dedication to their careers and globally recognized mastery of their craft—arguably the pinnacle of “professional consciousness”—was not going to garner sustained and meaningful increases in recognition or income. The evaluation that they were “not as professional” as their male counterparts, which meant poorer seats on the plane, but more importantly, less income over the course of their careers, mirrored a broader national bias against female workers, who make 72% of the salaries of their Japanese male counterparts (“Women’s Earnings and Income,” 2012).<sup>20</sup> The small proportion of 20- to 30-year-old women in the Nadeshiko League currently compensated by their teams earn an average of 2.4 million yen per year; the national average for the general population is 4.7 million (Nadeshiko riigu no senshu, 2012).<sup>21</sup> With most Nadeshiko players—and many more aspiring to join the League—serving in menial service industry jobs, they are ideal laborers for Japan’s postindustrial economy, providing an athletically talented but otherwise relatively underskilled workforce willing to work in unguaranteed, nonregular employment. On the field, they are also model laborers, exuding discipline and an ethic of hard work, readily taking orders from superiors, and furthering the notion that failure is the result of inferior effort and/or ability.

While workforce flexibility may be a neoliberal ideal, it is a treacherous and unavoidable reality for women of the Nadeshiko League, and even more so for an unshrinking cadre of young people, immigrants, and day laborers in Japan, who cannot secure full-time employment no matter how talented or hardworking. The ideal of flexibility certainly has imposed new demands and responsibilities on Japanese

workers; however, the discourse and practice of soccer in Japan since the 1990s make clear that other ideals, such as individuality, self-control, and pro consciousness, are tightly intertwined with flexibility and have been deployed to induce new mindsets and modes of being fit for a neoliberal terrain.

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### Notes

1. The magnitude of Japan's soccer boom is reflected in the numbers. Between 1990 and 1995, the number of female players registered with the Japanese Football Association (JFA) doubled from 10,000 to 20,000 athletes. In 1989, the original Japan Ladies Soccer League (JLSL) was inaugurated as the premier women's league in the country and consisted of six teams from the Kanto and Kansai areas. The majority of the founding league teams were club teams, although within the following few years most became corporate (*kigyō*) teams and players received financial support. The JLSL expanded to 10 teams in 1991, and 3 years later its name was changed to the "L-League" (the "L" standing for "Ladies") in an effort to promote a new image and establish a closer relationship with the popular men's J-League. On top of the successful launch of a professional men's soccer league in 1993, male participation rates increased by over 30% in the first half of the 1990s, and reached over 900,000 in 1996. The number of licensing programs and, by extension, licensed coaches also grew dramatically through most of the decade.
2. I use "common sense" here as it was famously framed by Pierre Bourdieu as an "objectivity secured by consensus on the meaning of practices and the world" (1977, p. 80).
3. The official nickname "Nadeshiko Japan" purportedly was created by the JFA in an effort to increase the visibility and appeal of the women's national team. The name "Nadeshiko Japan" was selected through a contest and was chosen from over 2,700 entries submitted by fans across the nation. *Nadeshiko* invokes the nostalgic ideal of a Japanese woman who dutifully serves family and state (Endō, 2006, p. 139; Pincus, 2002, pp. 180-181). Despite these overtly nationalist and conservatively gendered connotations that were presumably attractive to the male-dominated leadership of the JFA, *nadeshiko* has accrued several additional associations—graceful, cute, delicate, persistent, and strong—due to its connection with the women's team and its rather free and uninformed use by both Japanese and international journalists (Ōtsuka, 2011). It is ironic to note that the term *Yamato nadeshiko* was used during World War II as a euphemism for prostitutes ("comfort women" [*ianfu*] being the most common) who worked in military brothels (Watanabe, 1997, p. 310).

4. Elsewhere, I argue at length that criticisms of female and male soccer players—present in coaching texts and witnessed on soccer fields—are actually quite similar, although inadequacies of each gender are attributed to different origins. While Japanese men are posed as inadequate compared to an agreed-upon international standard of excellence, women players are described simply as inferior to their male peers. Dominant cultural notions of sex and gender undoubtedly shape L-League coaches' visions and descriptions of their female players, which reciprocally inform popular images of femininity and womanhood. However, as we can see, discourses about national character—specifically the qualities of Japaneseness—and its influence on the potentials and behaviors of bodies also inflect coaches' concerns with L-Leaguers. Defined as more emotional and more enmeshed in webs of social obligation, less competitive, and less independently creative, female L-Leaguers stand as superlative examples of all that is undesirable for not just them but their male peers in the J-League as well. When connected to male bodies, these undesirable qualities are posed as reflections or products of Japanese character, which is sometimes imagined as an immutable essence, and other times as the outgrowth of modern historical processes. When connected to female players, these qualities are linked with femininity, or as inherent aspects of the female sex and its difference from the male sex. In combination, these discourses often mark females as the most exemplary embodiments of the least desired qualities for soccer players, and at the same time, more Japanese than their male counterparts.
5. Tomiko Yoda and others have underscored that Japan's economic crisis as well as its associated sociocultural malaise in the 1990s were a rational culmination of the "broader historical trends of globalization and postmodernization that followed the completion of Japan's postwar modernization" rather than a sudden "malfunction," an "abrupt breakdown," or the result of the moral decline of Japanese youth (Yoda, 2006, pp. 16-17). Two of the best resources documenting the neoliberal economic and governmental changes that occurred in Japan beginning in the 1980s and their social effects are Harootunian and Yoda (2006) and McCormack (2007).
6. Drawing clear and categorical distinctions between late capitalism and neoliberalism is no easy task. I find affinity with Ortner's (2011) suggestion that "neoliberalism is simply late capitalism made conscious, carried to extremes, and having more visible effects." She writes that the "terminological shift" is a "change in the story or narrative in which the changes in question are embedded." Late capitalism has been connected intimately with the concept of "globalization" in both its positive and negative guises, while neoliberalism "is embedded in a much darker narrative, a story of a crusade powered by ideology and/or greed, to tilt the world political economy even more in favor of the dominant classes and nations." The other critical distinction is that neoliberalism, more so than late capitalism, is understood by those who study its elements and effects as a practical and ideological force that restructures not only markets and economies but also human subjectivities. As Wendy Brown writes, "Neo-liberal rationality, while foregrounding the market, is not only or even primarily focused on the economy; rather it involves *extending and disseminating market values to all institutions and social action*, even as the market itself remains a distinctive player" (2003, p. 7).
7. For a brief yet detailed account of changing labor laws and employment practices that have greatly contributed to the growing proportion of nonregular work in Japan from the mid-1980s to the present see McCormack (2007, pp. 39-47).
8. Prior to the J-League, the top men's soccer league in Japan was the Japan Soccer League (JLS), which was composed of corporate-subsidized nonprofit teams, with rosters of



players who worked part- to full-time for the parent company and received regular “salary-man” wages rather than professional contracts.

9. There are too many excellent edited volumes and monographs than can be listed here; however, a handful of representative works include Ehrenreich (2001), Greenhouse (2010), Grewal (2005), Gusterson and Besteman (2010), Lichtenstein (2006), Lyon-Callo (2008), Ong (1999, 2003, 2006), Pollin (2003), Rofel (2007), and Wacquant (2009). Recent work on the sociocultural manifestations of neoliberalism in Japan include Arai (2003, 2005), Alexy (2011), Inoue (2007), Slater and Galbraith (2011), and Takeyama (2010).
10. Ono, a top member of the technical committee and the head coach of Japan’s Under-20 Men’s National Team, also wrote regular pieces for the *JFA News*, a monthly magazine sent to the tens of thousands of coaches registered with the JFA as well as many other soccer enthusiasts who are subscribers. In 1998, he published a book entitled *Creative Soccer Coaching*, which again holds the individual versus organization dichotomy as central to its purpose. In the case of Ono’s presentation and other conference events mentioned in this article, I have used my own notes taken during the talks as well as conference transcripts compiled by JFA staff to guarantee the most accurate recounting of the various events.
11. Tashima later became the technical director of the JFA and served in that position through the Men’s National Team’s participation in the 2006 World Cup in Germany. He is now the managing director at the JFA, as well as the “School Master” at the “JFA Academy,” a residential training center for elite middle- and high school-age boy and girl soccer players. The school was the brainchild of Tashima, who cultivated an interest in pedagogical theory while studying physical education in Kern, Germany, in the 1980s. One of the central aims of the program according to Tashima is to develop individuals who “are able to face all challenges with a positive attitude, and carry themselves with an overflowing sense of confidence.” And, for Tashima, these aims apply to not simply developing soccer players but are critical for educating Japanese who “on and off the field” are able to perform and compete at the “global standard” (*sekai kijun*) level.
12. Beyond Tashima and Ono’s allusions to neoliberal logics, particularly in their focus on individuals as the critical and continuously critiqued unit of production, the two coaches also invoke neoliberal language more explicitly. References to the talents of the best international teams as the “global standard” and frequent mention of “gaps” (which bring to mind the “North-South gap,” “development gaps,” “technology gaps,” “income gaps,” etc.) by both coaches were empirical testimony to the degree that economic language salient in the moment had seeped into the world of soccer.
13. In her research with young male hosts in Tokyo, Takeyama (2010) found that many of them saw Horie as a “role model” and perceived their own careers in host clubs as similar kinds of entrepreneurial pursuits and a “suitable means to achieve the success that Horie has achieved” (Takeyama, 2010, p. 235).
14. The word *wa* is arguably as overdetermined in Japan as it is in the West and faithfully appropriated to explain a range of phenomena in the country. Journalist Robert Whiting’s 1989 book, *You Gotta Have Wa*, which explains the “unique” (read: non-American) qualities of Japanese baseball as emanating from a “samurai spirit” and ethos of *wa*, was arguably as widely read in Japan as it was in the United States. In the hands of foreign writers (Whiting) and Japanese (Katō) alike, *wa* is presented as an ahistorical and even somewhat mystical aspect of Japanese social sensibilities that is the basis of an equally immutable form of group orientation.
15. In 1998, when I was working with this team as an assistant coach, the players were receiving free apartment accommodations, including utilities, payment for all soccer-related travel, and approximately US\$1,000 a month as a living stipend. While their pay was not



- the highest in the L-League among “professional” players at the time, it was probably close to the League average.
16. The J-League faltered severely in the late 1990s, with over half its 18 teams recording financial losses and several threatening to fold. A significant boost came from a new NPO Law passed in 1998 that allowed teams to form as not-for-profit entities. Since that time the league has split into two divisions and more than doubled in size. The top J1 division hosts 18 teams, and the lower J2 has 22. The Japan Football League (JFL)—comprised of corporate teams, amateur squads, and J-League-aspiring organizations—also has 17 teams. Each of these organizations not only hosts a top team and a “satellite team” (of reserve, nonstarting players) but typically also sponsors youth development teams for boys from elementary through high school ages.
  17. In 2002, just over 50% of all employed females were in nonregular employment, compared to 14% of men (Ishiguro, 2008, pp. 3-4). These rates have only worsened in the past decade.
  18. Japanese labor statistics show that since the 1980s the percentage of nonregular employees in the workforce across genders and age groups has steadily increased and that the percentage of those workers laboring more than 35 hr per week (and over 40 hr in many cases) has similarly increased (Ishiguro, 2008). It is important to note that even if a nonregular worker consistently puts in 40 or more hours per week, because of their nonregular status they will not receive the same benefits as “full-time” salaried employees.
  19. In less than 24 hours after the news broke about the plane flight fiasco, more than 17,000 people had signed an online petition at Change.org to protest the JFA’s actions. As the news went viral, the JFA chairman responded that a return flight in business class “would be considered for the women’s team if they bring a medal home.” Similar stipulations, of course, were not set out for the men’s team (Topping, 2012).
  20. Of advanced industrialized nations, only South Korea has a more severe pay gap, with women earning only 61% of the pay of their male counterparts (“Women’s Earnings and Income,” 2012).
  21. In 2012, 2.4 million yen was roughly equivalent to US\$30,000. When considering this equivalency, one must take into account the marked weakness of the dollar vis-a-vis the yen at that time, and the fact that Japan is one of the most expensive countries in the world in which to live.

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