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## Not a Cinderella Story: The Long Road to a Japanese World Cup Victory

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## **Not a Cinderella Story: The Long Road to a Japanese World Cup Victory**

When Japan's Women's National soccer team—or “Nadeshiko Japan”—bested the greatly-favored United States team in the World Cup Final on July 17th in Frankfurt, Germany, it was one of several “firsts” achieved by the skillful and inspiring team. In truly timely fashion, it was the first time Japan had ever beaten the Americans in a total of twenty-six meetings stretching back over two decades. Even more historically significant, however, was that this World Cup Championship was the first for an Asian soccer team, women's or men's. The level of interest in the match—and, admittedly, Japanese social media habits—were uniquely gauged by a new Twitter record set by fans within seconds of Saki Kumagai's decisive final kick in the penalty shoot-out—a shot heard 'round the world in the wee hours of the morning in Tokyo: a flurry of 7,196 Tweets per second easily overwhelmed the previous Twitter record (and exceeded the pace of Twittering at the conclusion of the Brazilian men's shocking loss to Paraguay in the Copa America just a quarter-of-an-hour later).

Two-weeks after the Japanese women's historic victory, “Nadeshiko fever” shows little sign of subsiding. The last two weekends have witnessed record setting attendances at the domestic Nadeshiko League matches, with the latest record this past Sunday of over 21,000, outdistancing earlier records by thousands upon thousands of fans. Many of the players—the majority of them veritable unknowns prior to the quarter-final round of the World Cup three weeks ago—are now being courted to serve as the spokespeople and public faces of a range of products. The economic windfall the team has already produced—a reported 1 trillion yen (\$15 billion)—looks like it may continue to grow, an unexpected positive boost for Japan's still stumbling economy.

As someone who used to play and coach professionally in Japan's women's league in the mid-1990s, and since then dedicated a bulk of her research energies to the study of the intersections between soccer, discourses of national identity, education, and political-economy, I could not be more thrilled for the National Team and the much larger contingent of soccer-loving girls and women in Japan who are the essential driving force behind this team's success. I would, however, like to reframe one of the more prominent portrayals of the team since their momentous win.

Journalists from both within and outside of Japan have treated this championship as more of a Cinderella story than is warranted, and, at times, women's soccer as an anomaly (in a “traditional country like Japan”) that reflects little understanding of the history of the women's game in that country. When the Japan Ladies' Soccer League (JLSL) was launched in 1989, wealthy multinational corporations supported the majority of its ten teams; most players were employed part-time by their corporate sponsors, provided with housing and living stipends, and given excellent training facilities and ample time to train. Throughout the 1990s, the League was the destination for top female internationals from the U.S., Europe and East Asia—the only place on the planet where the best in the game could make a living from their soccer talents alone. While the League has experienced many name changes, reorganizations, and the exit and entrance of many corporate sponsors in step with the vicissitudes of the economy, it has stayed afloat. Far fewer players are financially supported like they were in the early days of the League; most struggle to find decent part-time employment that provides the flexibility necessary to practice and attend weekend games, and enough money to cover living expenses—and in the case of several teams, travel expenses too! Despite the financial stresses (and embarrassingly meager support when compared with the men's game), the League continues to be incredibly well organized, and teams very well coached. It is this foundation—the efforts of hundreds of under- and un-paid players and coaches, and countless loyal volunteers—and an infectious enthusiasm for the game that I've witnessed in female players of all ages that proved the bedrock and fertile turf for Nadeshiko Japan. As too few have noted, the Japanese team finished fourth in the Beijing Olympics just three years ago, and they were ranked fourth in the FIFA world rankings prior to the World Cup in Germany. Rather than a wonderful yet anomalous outcome, Japan's ability to capture a World Cup trophy in just the sixth tournament in the history of the women's game is more accurately attributable to over two-decades of hard work on the part of dedicated players and their supporters, fits and spurts of corporate funding, and a bit belatedly, significant commitment from the Japan Football Association.

As the tragedies of Japan's March 11th disaster continue to unfold, and recovery proves an overwhelmingly daunting task, some commentators have boldly claimed that Nadeshiko Japan's victory has the power to "heal a nation." Needless to say, these assertions are unrealistic; exclamations uttered in the immediate glow of victory that, as often happens, attribute a humanitarian power to sport that exaggerates its actual potential. More modest claims that the team has provided a much needed psychological "boost" to its citizens seem more on target but certainly not negligible. Much like Japan's famed women's volleyball team that clinched the gold medal in the 1964 Tokyo Olympics and brought great pride and energy to a country still working its way out of the psychological and physical ravages of war, this group of young women have captured the hearts of many in their nation, and re-energized countless individuals who so desperately needed a boost as they fight to forge new lives out of an unthinkable disaster.

We are thrilled to feature this guest post by Elise Edwards, Associate Professor of Anthropology and Director of the Anthropology Department at Butler University. Elise played professional soccer for three seasons in Japan's L-League and currently serves as the goalkeeping coach for Butler's women's soccer team. She is a contributor to *Modern Girls on the Go: Gender, Mobility, and Labor in Japan* (under contract with Stanford University Press) and is working on her own book, tentatively titled *Fields for the Future: Soccer, Nation, and Citizens in Japan at the Turn of the 21st Century*.

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