

SPORTS

Promoting health for people

Long-distance running

Races over various distances are held nationwide. Some 15,000 runners are shown here at the start of the Ome Marathon, held in the town of Ome, metropolitan Tokyo every year. (Photo courtesy of Hochi Shimbun-sha)



Introduction

Japanese of all ages enjoy sports activities, both as participants and as spectators. In Japan, sports are regarded as a healthy pastime that develops good discipline, builds character, encourages fair play, and instills sportsmanship. Win, lose, or draw, Japanese will enthusiastically cheer the athlete who makes a determined and sincere effort. At sporting events, competitors are invariably urged on by shouts of *gambatte!* (do your best).

Before the introduction of Western sports, Japan had made progress in traditional sports called *budo*, which were born in the twelfth century and flourished mainly among the

warrior class. They include *kendo* (Japanese stick fencing), *jujutsu* (known today as *judo*), *kyudo* (archery), and others. In the Edo period (1600–1868), these sports, which put stress on their mental aspects, were established as martial arts. The *do* in *budo* means “way,” and it was required that practitioners master the profound way of the sport. The traditional *budo* have been handed down from generation to generation and are still flourishing. *Judo* and *karate* have come to be international sports.

Sumo is said to be Japan’s national sport and is very popular. It has a nearly 2,000 year history and could boast of professionals as farback as several hundred years ago. In each match, two wrestlers, who wear only colorful *mawashi* (belly bands), fight on a

School sports day

Most Japanese schools hold a sports day in the autumn, in which children compete in a variety of events. (Photo courtesy of Getty Images)



dohyo (an elevated straw ring), pushing, throwing, and so on. The ceremonies performed on the *dohyo* are also colorful.

After the Meiji Restoration (1868), various kinds of Western sports were introduced into Japan. Baseball arrived in 1872, thanks to an American. During the 1870s, track and field events, rugby, soccer, and ice skating were introduced. In 1911, an Austrian gave skiing instruction to the Japanese army. In those days Western sports were played by few people, but through the educational system they spread throughout the country. Western sports were also stressed as a form of mental discipline at first, but now Japanese have come to enjoy them as recreational activities.

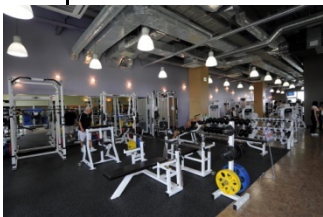
Each year, Japan observes 2nd Monday of October as a national holiday designated Sports Day.

Sports Today

Modern sports began in the early 1870s, when the school system was established. As education was systematized, schools added physical education to their curricula. The first sports to be introduced into universities and junior high schools were track and field events, rowing, baseball, and tennis.

Children are encouraged to take part in school club activities, which may include baseball, *judo*, archery, soccer, swimming, gymnastics, and field athletics, as well as others. Many pursue an interest in sports well into adulthood.

With a few exceptions, almost all of the sports presently played in Japan were already known to the public before the end of the nineteenth century. The Japan Amateur Sports Association (JASA) was organized in 1911, in preparation for the Fifth Olympic Games held the following year. Local chapters of JASA were subsequently set up, along with national governing bodies for each sport.



A fitness club
(Photo courtesy of Photo Kishimoto)

Spectator Sports

Baseball is one of the most popular spectator sports in Japan. During the season, night games of professional baseball are broadcast almost daily and gain high audience ratings. Since Nomo Hideo became a player for the Los Angeles Dodgers in the United States, many people have become interested in the Major Leagues. The All-Japan High School Baseball Championship Tournament is held each summer, and these games are watched by millions.

With the establishment of the J. League in 1991, soccer became more popular. Soccer has now become the second most widely practiced sport among boys in elementary school, after baseball. J. League games are well attended.

In professional sports, many foreign sportsmen are currently active in Japan. As of 2009, two of the most popular wrestlers in *sumo* are Mongolians Asashoryu and Hakuho, both of whom have achieved *sumo*'s highest rank of *yokozuna*. Many famous foreign soccer players take part in J. League soccer. "Zico," a star player from Brazil, made a great contribution to the development of professional soccer as a player for Kashima Antlers.

Japan's Largest Comprehensive Sports Event

To revive sports and raise the morale of dispirited people in the aftermath of World War II, the Japan Amateur Sports Association organized the first Kokumin Taiiku Taikai (National Sports Festival) in 1946. These summer and autumn meets became annual events. In 1947, The first Winter National Sports Festival was held, and this too became an annual event.

In the following years the Kokumin Taiiku

National Sports Festival

The opening ceremony of the National Sports Festival. This is the largest sporting event in Japan, with both youths and adults taking part. (Photo courtesy of the Japan Sports Association)



Taikai, commonly referred to as the Kokutai, were held three times each year—winter, summer, and fall—rotating through every prefecture in Japan. Since 2006, however, the summer and fall festivals have been held as a single large event. The winter Kokutai features skating, ice hockey, and skiing, while events at the main Kokutai include swimming, track and field, and various ball sports. The Emperor's Trophy is awarded to the prefecture with the highest total points. An Empress's Trophy is awarded to the prefecture whose female athletes achieve the highest overall score.

In addition to athletes with Japanese nationality, those with foreign nationality can participate in the Kokutai if they meet certain conditions. Many outstanding performers go on to appear in the Olympics and other international competitions.

International Events

Japan took part in the First Far Eastern Championship Games, held in Manila, in 1913. The Japanese government first subsidized the funding of an international sports event at the Fifth Far Eastern Championship Games, held in Shanghai, in 1921. Following World War II, these regional events became known as the Asian Games. In 1951, Japan participated in the First Asian Games, held in New Delhi. The strong showing by the 80 members of the national team quickly fed enthusiasm for international competition.

Tokyo hosted the Third Asian Games in 1958, and in 1994 the city of Hiroshima hosted the Twelfth Asian Games. The First Winter Asian Games were held in Sapporo in 1986 and the second in 1990.