

# Failure in Sport

## Accepting Disappointment in Japanese Professional Baseball

Asian sports, like Asian economies, Asian families, Asian schools, Asian agriculture, and other areas of life, have often been considered as an exercise in exceptionalism. 'Why is Japanese baseball so radically different from US baseball?' is a similar false question as, 'Why is the Japanese company so different from Western companies?' These are misguided frames of inquiry, generally producing misleading, essentialized claims. Any proper analysis must appreciate how conditioning factors operate at multiple levels, both above and below that of national societies.

Research >  
Japan

By William W. Kelly

Japanese baseball is configured by - and must be analysed in terms of - qualities shared by all modern sports, those particular to baseball, and those distinctive to the historical shaping of the sport in Japan throughout the twentieth century. I want to illustrate this with some thoughts about a particular, but perplexing, problem in sports analysis, which I call the irony of failure. This is drawn from a longer presentation that I recently gave to the annual meetings of the Japan Sport Sociology Society in March 2001.

### The Irony of Failure

There is a profound irony at the heart of modern sport. For over 150 years, a wide range of casual leisure pursuits, occasional ritual events, physical training exercises, and recreational activities have been turned into 'sports'. And these sports—from skate-boarding to ultra-marathoning to bowling to Premier League football—have now been rationalized, nationalized, professionalized, commercialized, and globalized, turning them into rule-governed competitions to determine a winner, a champion. The attention of huge audiences, the precise record-keeping to calibrate and compare the minute details of performance, the vast sums of money invested in and returned from the production of sports, the elaborate

radical failure, or terminal failure. This is failure so complete that it causes dismissal, release, resignation - the end of a contract, the end of a career, the end of a team, the end of a league, the end of a sport. This is far less frequent than routine failure, but equally inevitable. Somewhere between the routine and the radical are those perduring losses that constitute endemic failure, or repetitive failure. This third kind of failure is the hardest to accept and to explain.

How do we adjust to failure, especially when endemic? How do we justify it, as athletes and spectators? What are the structures of fortune, misfortune, blame, and accountability in modern spectator sports? I have been faced with this question over several years of ethnographic research with a professional baseball team in Japan. The Hanshin Tigers, the focus of my research, present a paradox as the best-loved, worst performing sports team in Japan. Why does media attention and fan support remain so ardent in spite of, or perhaps because of, the team's continued lack of success - not just a failure to win a championship but even a failure to win regularly (only one Japan Series title in 52 years, and thirteen last-place finishes in 15 years)? I have come to think we must identify sets of structural patterns and culturally tinged rationalizations that keep the team playing and the fans watching, despite the per-

both proliferate and mitigate failure and failure-talk. The first feature is baseball's polyrhythmic nature. A single play, an at-bat, an inning, a game, a series, a season, a career all have different rhythms. The second feature is the cyclical and repetitive nature of these different levels of rhythmic units. There is always the next at-bat, the next game, the next season to draw our attention.

A third factor, distinctive to Japanese baseball, is the rhetoric of effort and self-criticism. Japanese baseball draws on broader cultural rhetoric to highlight and valorize certain behavioural dispositions. In particular, it promotes effort and spirit (*gambaru, doryoku, seishin, konjō*), and emphasizes retrospection and guided reflection (*hansei*). Thus, loss is treated more as a failure of effort than a lack of raw talent and opens the possibility that greater application of effort can reverse one's fortunes. Failure is remedial, not fatal. Finally, there are certain rationalizations which are peculiar to the Hanshin Tigers. Players, media, and fans in the Osaka region have developed several distinctive ways of accounting for the Tigers' difficulties, including the ball club's dysfunctional 'home-grown' insularity, local fans' indulgence of the team as its 'wayward son', and Osaka's 'second-city complex' vis-à-vis the national capital, Tokyo. Failure is inevitable, and thus mitigated, by the team's structural position.

### Irrationality in Sports

Though particular to the Hanshin case, the analytical lessons to be drawn from the irrationality that is at the heart of sports' rationality are broader. Most generally, a focus on failure reminds us that the rationalization of physical contests, which that Allen Guttmann has shown us to be the hallmark of modern sports, may bring formalization and quantification, but it does not bring certainty - neither prospective certainty in predicting future outcomes nor retrospective certainty in evaluating past outcomes. It is no surprise that we remain unable to predict what will happen from moment to moment in a sporting event. But it is surprising to realize that the high rationalism of modern sports does not bring more certainty to analyzing that which has already occurred - which is success for a few and failure for most.

Outcomes - an at-bat over, an inning over, a game over, a season over, a career over - resolve the suspense of the moment, but they only heighten the conditions of suspense for the next moment and deepen our perplexity about the allocation of responsibility for the outcome just produced. This perpetual uncertainty is, I believe, the Weberian irrationality at the heart of sports rationality. <

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*'...sport, for almost all of us almost all of the time, is about losing, not winning; it is about facing failure, not savouring success.'*

organizations for staging sporting events - these and other factors raise the competitive stakes of the contest, the importance of winning, the demand for success, and the embarrassment of losing.

And this is the irony: that despite all of this, sport, for almost all of us almost all of the time, is about losing, not winning; it is about facing failure, not savouring success. The disappointment of defeat, not the satisfaction of victory, is the common condition. Failure may be pervasive, but it is not uniform. Most of us fall short of expectations or requirements much of the time, but not all failures are equal. I suggest that we can distinguish at least three broad types of losing. First, there is routine failure, the continual necessary production of losers. At the heart of sport is competition, so it is a truism that sport produces losers in order to produce winners. At the opposite end is

sistent outcomes of defeat. It is a composite model rather than a single 'logic of failure' that explains this and other such cases.

For the Hanshin Tigers, we can identify several different levels of contributing factors. One contributing factor, common to many sports, is the league structure of competition. Modern competitive sport is organized in one of three ways: one-off matches, tournaments, or leagues. Professional baseball is based on a league structure of competition. Importantly, league play offers ever-shifting definitions of success and failure; it provides multiple points of reference for competition (e.g., games, series, cards, and seasons) and thus many ways to find something to cheer about and aim towards.

Another factor is an element distinctive to baseball as a sport: its temporality. A league structure combines with two features of baseball's temporality to