When Athletes Are Diplomats: Competing for World Opinion at the Tokyo Olympiads

Jessamyn R. Abel

From the time of Japan’s earliest participation in the Olympics, athletes sent abroad for the Games were prized for more than their athletic abilities. Their capacity to create a positive impression of Japan among the people they met during their travels was equally important, in the eyes of the Japanese Olympic Committee members. From Japan’s first Olympic appearance, in 1912 at the Fifth Olympiad in Stockholm, through the recent bid for a second Tokyo Games in 2016, Japan’s Olympians—young, strong, and always good sports—have been seen as ambassadors in a “people’s diplomacy” that could augment the more formal activities of foreign policy professionals—mostly older, probably weaker, and not always seen as fair players.

One of the originators in Japan of this kind of sports diplomacy was Kanō Jigorō, an educator and athlete who pioneered the Japanese Olympic movement and was a member of the International Olympic Committee from 1909 until his death in 1938. Kanō described the careful process of selecting athletes for Japan’s Olympic debut, in which the committee considered not only an individual’s athletic prowess, but also his social status, level of education, and community standing. “If we are going to send athletes to foreign countries at all,” he wrote, “then it is not enough that they be strong in sports competitions. Because it would be a problem to send people who did not have a suitable upbringing, we specified that they should live up to the status of student or gentleman, should have had schooling beyond middle school, or otherwise should be a military man or a member of a youth group with the recommendation of their mayor, town manager, or village head.” In keeping with the notion of the Olympics as a kind of “people’s diplomacy” (kokumin gaikō), officials sought to ensure that athletes would show off the best aspects of their country. Only youth
with the proper upbringing and education were considered capable of performing the role of the people’s diplomat. At the time of the 1936 Berlin Olympics, the head of the Japan Amateur Sports Association (which Kanô had founded in 1911) expressed similar concerns about the manners and cultivation of athletes being sent to Germany for the Games. Even individuals concerned primarily with athletics were well aware of the diplomatic impact of participation in the Olympic Games.

In the 1930s, Japan’s withdrawal from the League of Nations and Western criticism of its escalating aggression in China heightened anxiety about Japan’s international position and reinforced the need to explore various methods for improving relations with the Western powers. The failure of regular diplomatic channels inspired a turn from the political to the cultural. Participation in the Olympic Games, especially the drive to host the 1940 Games in Tokyo, was one avenue through which political leaders sought to influence Japan’s international relations and global status. As Sandra Collins has shown, diplomats were closely involved in the bid for a Tokyo Olympiad. And once the bid was won, the Olympics themselves were made to serve Japan’s diplomatic goals. Politicians, diplomats, and leaders in the sporting world viewed the Olympics as a venue for people’s diplomacy, which would build international understanding, trust, and respect for Japan at a time when military aggression in China and the increasing militarization of domestic politics was damaging the image of Japan among the world powers. Japanese leaders hoped that greater “understanding” of Japan, especially in the West, would translate into support for Japanese actions in Asia. In this sense, the campaign and planning for the Tokyo Olympics can be called imperialist internationalism.

Two factors gave the Olympics such ripe potential for people’s diplomacy: their supposedly apolitical nature and their increasing popularity around the world. Although it has become commonplace for scholars to note that the Olympics have always been political, the perception that sports could (or should) transcend politics made them particularly attractive for this purpose. Because the Olympics were theoretically separated from politics, they were an ideal venue for international cooperation for Japan, whose aggression on the continent had been condemned by the other powers. In addition, the fact that the Olympics were seen as being apolitical actually opened them up to political use by a broad range of interests, from internationalists promoting peaceful cooperation to ultranationalists trying to clear the way for Japanese expansion. The myth of the absence of politics creates an empty signifier. Because the powerful symbol of the Olympics has no set political meaning, it can be used for almost any political purpose. In addition, the growing worldwide popularity of sport in general and the Olympic Games in particular meant that the world’s attention would focus on the host. There was a sense among Japanese internationalists that the ultimate source of Japan’s diplomatic problems was a lack of familiarity with Japan in the Western powers. The Olympics were seen as an ideal