

CHAPTER 3

Japan

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Introduction

Success in the 2004 Athens Olympic Games (5th in the medal table) was a significant moment for the Japanese government and national elite sport policy actors insofar as it validated their investment in the development of infrastructure for elite use and legitimated a continued structured approach to the development of elite athletes. The recent re-emergence of Japan as a strong sporting nation in international sport is the outcome of a refocusing by the government on elite sport policy and a number of initiatives including the establishment of the Japan Institute of Sports Sciences (JISS) and the encouragement of its collaboration with the Japanese Olympic Committee (JOC). While the four dimensions identified by Green and Houlihan (2005) are also evident in Japan, the country possesses some distinctive features including the effective way in which information is gathered from other successful elite sport countries such as Australia and the ample evidence of policy learning and policy transfer. This chapter describes the increasing emphasis on elite sport in public policy which emerged in the late 1990s. The analysis is based on the examination of a range of policy documents and over 30 interviews with senior policy actors conducted in 2005 and 2006.

Current structure of the elite sport system

The establishment of a Physical Education (PE) Division in 1928 within the Ministry of Education, which took responsibility for the emerging government interest in sport, coincided with the increasing militarism and authoritarianism within the Japanese government. After Japan withdrew from hosting the Olympic Games scheduled for 1940, the PE Division was restructured as the PE Bureau which took a central role in preparing young males for military services through physical fitness training at school (Nakamura, 1992). The PE Bureau was regarded as one of the major advocates of militarism within the government and was abolished at the start of the Allied occupation in 1945. Prior to the Allied occupation, between 1940 and 1945, the government had established a centralised system of sport administration within the Ministry of Education, elements of which are still evident today. Currently, the Sports and Youth Bureau (renamed from the PE Bureau in 2001) within the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (hereafter MEXT, previously the Ministry of Education, Science, Sports and Culture, MESSC, until 2001, see Figure 3.1) is the lead administrative unit for the promotion and development of sport.

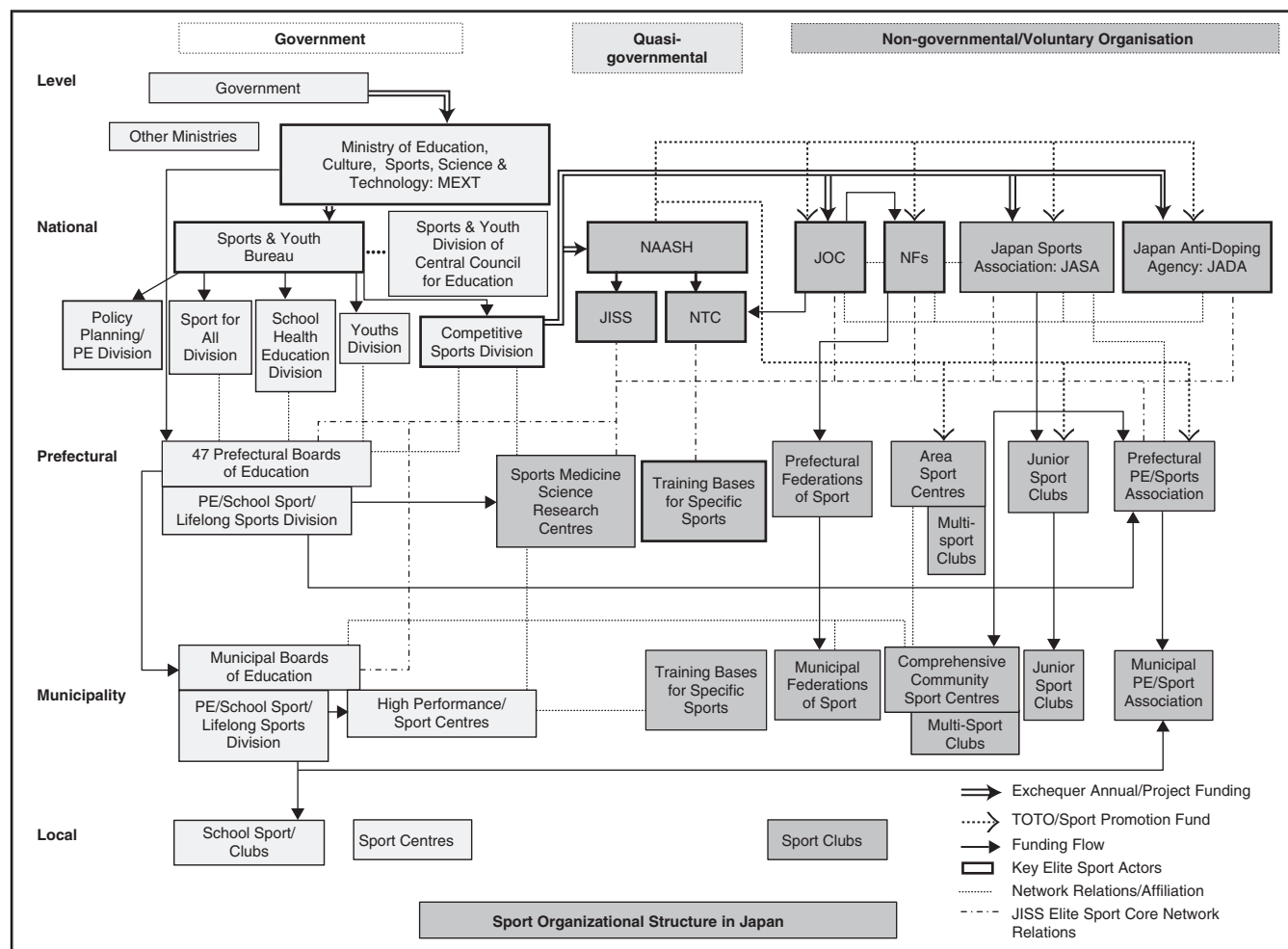


Figure 3.1 Organisational structure of elite sport in Japan

The distinctive features of governmental sport administration and policy-making for sport in Japan are: first, the stronger influence of bureaucrats by comparison with politicians; second, a broad consensus on sport policy among the political parties; and third, that policy on 'sport' is dominated by a concern with 'PE' or 'social PE' which reflects the historic emphasis on the latter within the (social) educational policy agenda. However, this historic priority accorded to PE was challenged, if only modestly, by the creation of separate Divisions for Sport for All and Competitive Sports in 1988 which indicated the growing government interest in separating out the issue of improvement of international medal-winning success from the broader concern with lifelong sporting participation.

Responsibility for elite sport policy is centralised within the Competitive Sports Division of the Sports and Youth Bureau within MEXT (see Figure 3.1). This Division is the primary national policy actor for conceptualising, defining and implementing elite sport policy, and it is from this Division that most of the high-performance-related public subsidies are distributed to sport agencies and to specific programmes and projects. The Exchequer's annual budget allocation to the Competitive Sports Division is divided between: (i) the national sport organisations as direct subsidies and (ii) the research projects or programmes which the Division commissions. One of the distinctive features of the sport policy-making process is the consultative role of the Sports and Youth Division of the Central Council for Education (previously known as the Ministry of Education's Advisory Council of Health and Physical Education, ACHPE) which is influential in developing and overseeing the delivery of sport policy.

The National Agency for the Advancement of Sports and Health¹ (NAASH) is a non-departmental public agency which, in 2001, had its management responsibility expanded to cover: (1) the National Stadium, (2) the activities of JISS, and (3) disaster relief and promotion of school lunch (*sic*). It is also the distributing body for three major funding streams: (a) the Sports Promotion Fund introduced in 1990 to which the government provided a one-off payment of ¥2.5 billion (as in US billion) principally for the development of elite athletes; (b) *toto* (the national lottery), which has been allocated for the development of Sport for All since 2001; and (c) the Support for the Development of Sport Project introduced in 2003 with the central aim of winning medals. The influence of MEXT, and its Sports and Youth Bureau, is exercised by means of its budgetary control and its influence over the distribution of subsidies through NAASH which it closely monitors and evaluates.

The inauguration of JISS in 2001 as one of the operational divisions of NAASH can be seen as a landmark insofar as it was the first centralised specialist elite-focused institute. JISS has since become the primary support service provider in sports science, medicine and technical information, and also operates a 'mini-national training centre' located within its facility. Its fundamental aim, as defined in the government document the *Basic Plan for the Promotion of Sport*,² 2000–2010 (hereafter *Basic Plan*) is to play a substantive 'supportive role' in relation to potential medal-winning athletes (MEXT, 2000). This quasi-governmental specialised institution is dependent on public money not only for the development of its training centre facility, but also for meeting the cost of human resources and its programme and projects. JISS' scope for innovation in programmes and projects is tightly constrained by the framework of procedure and accountability of government: first, JISS is obliged to obtain explicit approval for projects/activities from its parent organisation, NAASH; second, it is regularly evaluated by MEXT; and third, despite being heavily dependent on government finance, it is nonetheless required to generate money due to its statutory status as an 'independent' administrative body.

The impetus to establish the national training centre (NTC, scheduled to open in December 2007) was the perceived national inadequacy of training facilities and fact that '9 out of 10 countries in the gold medal table at the Athens Olympic Games possess' some sort of domestic NTC (MEXT, 2006a, p. 26). Policy actors within government (especially MEXT) and non-governmental actors (such as the Japanese Olympic Committee, JOC) argued carefully for a government funded elite athlete-centred training facility which will allow 'concentrated, consistent training activities' (MEXT, 2005). The proposed NTC, it was argued, should operate in partnership with JISS and with the already-existing training bases for winter sport events, marine/waterside sports, and high-altitude training (NTC Research Committee, 2004). While the facility itself is to be managed by NAASH, the JOC will be responsible for implementing and facilitating the development of the elite school,³ the national academy for the development of coaches and management directors, together with the provision of athlete education and second career support.

At the sub-national level, the Prefectural PE/School Sport Division within the prefectural government and the PE (or Sports) Association have considerable influence on the promotion of sport in general and setting performance targets for the annual inter-prefectural National Athletic Meeting (*Kokumin Taiiku-taikai*, known as *Kokutai*⁴) by selecting the best-performing athletes at the respective prefectural levels. It should be

highlighted that although success in *Kokutai* remains a policy priority in most of the prefectures, there is growing evidence which suggests that some prefectures developed talent identification programmes to systematically identify, select and nurture 'prefecturally grown' international elite athletes whose interests are incorporated into the overall sport promotion policy. The discernible, though modest, shift of resources at prefectural level towards elite sport development is part of a slowly emerging coalition of elite sport actors, initiated by the JOC and JISS, around a set of values and beliefs that legitimise the systematic identification of potential and talented young athletes and the prioritisation of support for upcoming and elite athletes.

The development of elite sport policy in Japan

Japan gained its political independence in 1951 following the indirect occupation by the United States and from 1952 resumed its participation in the Olympic Games. The participation in the 1952 Helsinki Games was followed by the successful hosting of the 1958 Asian Games in Tokyo. In 1959, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) awarded the 1964 summer Olympic Games to Tokyo, which proved to be the most significant catalyst for the development and definition of national sport policy in Japan (Seki, 1997). The government subsequently enacted the Sports Promotion Act in 1961 which established an organisational and funding framework for sport. What was significant about hosting the Games was that it was seen not just as a Tokyo and sport project, but as a national and multi-purpose project. The government invested a huge amount of money not only to help rebuild the country's devastated infrastructure, but also to help rebuild national morale after World War II. The government recognised the powerful symbolic value both domestically and internationally of hosting a successful Olympic Games. In particular, the government saw the hoped-for success of Japanese elite athletes and the efficient hosting of the Games as opportunities to replace the Japanese name on the world map and to regain national pride for its citizens (Ikei, 1992). Consequently, the pressure to host a successful Games was immense. In relation to the Sports Promotion Act, while it was significant in terms of defining the role of government in sport and that of sport organisations, it was also significant in establishing the balance between elite sport success and Sport for All. However, the Act must be seen in the wider political context of the overriding emphasis on economic growth and industrial development which limited expenditure not only on welfare services, but also

on sport, thus delaying until 2000 the implementation of the plan for the promotion of sport.

While the government invested heavily before and during the 1964 Tokyo Games in the development of the infrastructure for sport in order, partly, to satisfy the public concern to win medals, this investment did not stimulate a long-term commitment to the development of elite athletes and to the pursuit of international sporting success. Instead, during the 1970s and at the beginning of the 1980s, a prioritisation of Sport for All over investment in the development of elite athletes gradually emerged. The post-war socio-economic recovery of Japan led Japanese citizens, who were now receiving higher and more stable incomes, to express increasing concern with their quality of life. These new concerns included leisure and sport and led, in part, to the establishment of voluntary sport organisations such as the New Physical Education League of Japan (*Shintairen*) (Uchiumi, 1993; Seki, 1997).

The government's declaration in 1972 of 'the end of the post-war period' and the subsequent commencement of 'welfare policy' in 1973 was indicative of the government considering leisure policy to be part of its policy agenda. The report, prepared by the ACHPE in 1972 on the *Fundamental Policies for the Promotion of Physical Education and Sport* was the first policy document that indicated an active concern with promoting leisure (sport) opportunities for all (ACHPE, 1972; Seki, 1997). Despite the publication of the report, overall government involvement in sport remained low, and such involvement as there was remained oriented to Sport for All rather than elite sport. However, according to Morikawa (1986) from the mid-1970s, and especially following the poor performance by Japan at the 1976 Montreal Olympics, there emerged a growing level of concern within the government and in the media with the country's declining elite performance. Part of the problem was seen as the reliance on the commercial sector to support elite athletes while the weakness in the process of talent identification and development (TID) was also considered partly responsible. The problem became more acute when Japanese business entered a period of economic recession that began in the early 1990s and which led it to reduce its support for elite sport.

The expressions of 'concern' in the mid-1970s developed into an expression of 'crisis' towards the late 1980s due to the decline in the international competitiveness of Japanese athletes. The perception of crisis attracted the attention of governmental committee meetings and the prime minister himself. Although Japan had dominated sporting competition in the Asian region since the 1964 Games, there were consecutive poor performances in

the 1982 New Delhi Asian Games, when Japan fell behind China for the first time, and in the 1986 Seoul Asian Games and 1988 Seoul Olympic Games when South Korea gained a total of 33 medals achieving 4th place in the medal table (Japan was 14th). Japan's sharp decline in international sporting success was publicly recognised and criticised by then Prime Minister Nakasone, who established a personal consultation committee on elite sport success but it was only after the ACHPE produced a report on *Strategies for the Promotion of Sports for the 21st Century* in 1989 that the level of elite sporting success began to be established as a significant public policy concern.

The ACHPE report was endorsed in a 1992 White Paper, with the MESSC noting not only the decline of Japanese achievement, but also highlighting the rapid improvement of African and other Asian countries (MESSC, 1992). Consequently, it was not until 1997 that government concern was translated into elite-focused policies. Policy action was prompted by the poor performance of the Japanese national team at the 1996 Atlanta Olympic Games (23rd with 3 gold and 14 medals in total). This and other poor performances in international sport became the key reference point in the *Basic Plan* with its 10-year national objective to regain the level of success in the Olympic Games achieved in the 1964 Tokyo Games (5th position in medal table).

The Sports Promotion Fund, comprising a one-off sum of ¥25 billion from the central government and ¥4.4 billion from the private sector, was established in 1990. The purpose of the Fund was to give more autonomy to MEXT and enable it to use its budget to undertake longer-term strategic planning of the development of elite athletes. Furthermore, the passage of the Sports Promotion Lottery Law in 1998 (the lottery, known as *toto*, was established in 2001) was seen as a major achievement for national sport actors in securing revenue sources with the purpose of building a 'lifelong sporting society' which included money for elite sport (MESSC, 1998). As previously mentioned, the annual decision over the distribution of subsidies from the Sports Promotion Fund and the Sports Promotion Lottery is managed by the quasi-government agency, NAASH. However, both government and *toto* funding have been inadequate for the planned activities for the development of elite sport due to: the severe downturn of the Japanese economy; the persistence of low interest rates (0.5 per cent in 2007) which affected the reserves of the Sports Promotion Fund; and the decline in the popularity of the professional soccer league (J-League) which led to a gradual decline in *toto* sales which are based on J-League results.

The publication of the *Basic Plan* in 2000 which provided political legitimisation for the introduction of *toto* was drawn up on

the assumption that *toto* revenue would be substantial. The *Basic Plan* identified three fundamental policy objectives: (i) the realisation of lifelong sport participation, (ii) the increase in international sporting competitiveness, and (iii) the development of school PE and sport through (i) and (ii). Its implementation provided the defining moment in the development of a more systematic elite sport policy with four elements being of particular importance. Firstly, it was the first time that the government had announced a target of 3.5 per cent of all medals available at both the summer and winter Olympic Games. The numerical target became more visible in 2003 in the preparations for the Athens Olympic Games, when the Competitive Sports Division produced the 'Nippon Revival Project', which specifically allocated funding to the high-potential medal-winning athletes and sport disciplines. Secondly and importantly, the elite-targeted sports science and medicine specialist institute, JISS, was inaugurated in 2001 as a sub-division of NAASH and its activities were defined in the *Basic Plan*. Thirdly and equally importantly, the JOC published the *Gold Plan* based on, and reinforcing, the government medal target. The JOC indicated its practical responsibility for high-performance development, not only in accrediting national federations for sport (NFs) and sending delegates to the Olympic Games, but also in devising a series of qualitative and quantitative performance indicators based on the results in world championships and the Olympic Games in order to determine the distribution to NFs of the funding that had been received from the Competitive Sports Division (JOC, 2001). Lastly, the construction of the NTC was specified in the initial *Basic Plan* and more explicitly in the revised version of the *Basic Plan* published in 2006 following populist Prime Minister Koizumi's public expression of support for the opening of the NTC in time for the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games (MEXT, 2006a).

It should be reiterated that the policy framework for developing medal-winning athletes only emerged as a systematic programme following the publication of the *Basic Plan*, some 39 years after the passage of the Sports Promotion Act in 1961. Prior to the publication of the *Basic Plan*, sport service expertise related to specialist support for elite athletes and coaches and was dispersed across a large number of organisations and institutions, including sport-specialised universities, NFs' high-performance centres and prefecturally/municipally owned training centres. With the subsequent publication of the JOC's *Gold Plan* and *Gold Plan Stage II: Summer Version* in 2006, which set the even more ambitious target to be third in the medal table by hosting the summer Olympic Games in 2016 (JOC, 2006), the

JOC's responsibility was specified as overseeing the achievement of international success and acting as the mediating and supporting agency for NFs. The role of the JOC was to evaluate the activities and performance of NFs and, on the basis of its assessment, to distribute the annual government subsidy. The assessment criteria used by the JOC emphasised the role of NFs in developing elite success and formed the basis of an implicit contract between the JOC and the NFs in relation to elite sport development.

The JOC's concern with elite success is reinforced by its strong collaborative link with JISS which has focused on: designing a programme of TID; supporting elite athletes through sports science, medicine, and nutrition; and distributing information to athletes, coaches, and support staff within NFs and prefectural/municipal sport agencies. What is significant is the establishment of an organisational and personal network which includes policy actors from local, regional, and national levels that has been facilitated especially by JISS and the JOC leading to the gradual emergence of an elite sport policy community. Furthermore, the importance of constructing a policy community with international contacts is reinforced by the activities of the Department of Sports Information in JISS and the Information Strategy Section of the JOC. Both organisations have been instrumental in using their international contacts to systematically gather ideas and information from successful elite sport countries (discussed more fully below). The concern to develop a domestic elite sport policy community was also reflected in the establishment of the Japan Top League (JTL) in 2005 authorised by the Competitive Sports Division. The objective of the JTL is to establish a collaborative link across the nine leagues of the eight ball sport disciplines not only to provide support with management of each others' professional leagues but also, and more significantly, to produce a solid foundation for achieving medals in team sport at the Olympic Games (JTL, 2006).

The first policy evaluation report commissioned by MEXT on the *Improvement of International Competitiveness* was published in 2006 and was broadly supportive of the current approach to elite sport development (MEXT, 2006b). Part of the reasons for publishing the report may have been to legitimise current government policy and underline the contribution of JISS to elite success in Athens as the report lacked the critical review of policy that would have been provided by an independent third party. The *Basic Plan*, the role of the JOC, and the MEXT review of policy in 2006 all provide evidence of an increasingly structured and long-term approach by the government to the preparation of elite athletes underpinned by a neo-liberal and 'value

for money' approach to effectiveness as measured by high-performance achievement in the Olympics and major world championships. The high level of elite success in recent Olympic Games and international championships has been taken as confirmation of the value of the *Basic Plan* and the 2006 review restated the policy goal of 3.5 per cent of medals in future Olympic Games (MEXT, 2006a).

Despite the recent burst of policy-making, the degree of consistency of emphasis on elite sport policy should not be exaggerated as sport remains relatively marginal both within the lead ministry, MEXT, and across the other government ministries that have a more limited interest in sport. However, whether the generally marginal status of sport is a threat to investment in elite sport is debatable, for at the time that the government is privatising public sport facilities managed by local authorities in order to ease the pressure on public expenditure, it is investing about ¥20.2 billion in the construction of the NTC. It should be noted that policy for mass participation and elite sport are the responsibilities of different divisions of MEXT (the Life-Long Sports Division and the Competitive Sports Division, respectively) and that their budgets are not therefore in direct competition. However, the investment in elite sport is partly rationalised by arguing that international elite success boosts enthusiasm for sports participation across the nation (MEXT, 2000, 2006a).

Four dimensions of the elite sport infrastructure in Japan

The development of elite level specialist facilities

The inadequacy of elite training facilities and the incoherence of support for elite athletes have been recurring themes since before the 1964 Tokyo Games, as has been the idea of creating a national training centre and the provision of specialist support services. However, it was only after the 1998 Nagano winter Olympic Games and the 2002 Football World Cup in Korea/Japan that the government felt able to redirect public money towards the establishment of a national elite institute (JISS) which contained a small training facility. Two years later in September 2004, and immediately after the success at the Athens Olympic Games, the most significant facility development for elite athletes was announced as a result of the direct instruction of the then Prime Minister Koizumi to construct an NTC, next to JISS, in time for Beijing Olympic Games. A major reinforcement of this decision was the failure at the 2006 Turin winter Olympic Games, where Japan won just one gold medal. As a result of

this poor performance, the development of high-performance facilities designed to meet specific training needs (such as for winter disciplines and high-altitude sports) was argued (MEXT, 2006c). The need for effective and close cooperation between these specialist facilities and the functions of the NTC was highlighted in the revised *Basic Plan* (MEXT, 2006a). When the NTC is fully operationalised at the end of 2007, it is expected to be the hub training base cooperating with the network of regionally based training centres, and collaborating with the existing specialist services provided by JISS.

The history of the development of other specialist services for athletes (sports medicine and sports science) is very similar to that of the development of facilities, namely short-lived enthusiasm around the time of the 1964 Tokyo Olympic Games and then little significant activity until the mid-1990s. Following the decision to host the Olympics and the establishment of the Tokyo Olympic Performance Specialist Committee in 1960, the Sports Science Research Committee and Training Doctor System were launched. The launch of the Sports Science Research Committee was noted as 'one of the most valuable assets' of the Tokyo Olympics (Japan Sports Association, JASA, 1986, p. 154) and, consequently, JASA opened the permanent Sports Science Research Institute in 1967. However, the activities of the Institute were 'small scale' and sporadic (Asami, 2005). Following a review of the importance of sports science and medicine by the President of JASA in 1975, he proposed a plan to construct specialised centres for sports science and medicine at the national and regional levels. The President's view was reinforced by one sports academic who noted that: 'there was confidence in sports science in Japan among scientists ... but there was no institution that could provide feedback from the most advanced research results of sports science' (Interview A, 7 April 2005). However, the proposal was not helped by the considerable scepticism towards sports science (but not sports medicine) among athletes during the 1960s and 1970s, many of whom felt they were being used as 'guinea pigs' (Asami, 2005).

The most likely explanation for the institutional shift from scepticism to a willingness to embrace the application of sports science and medicine was the Korean success in the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games where the host nation's medal count exceeded that of the Japanese. However, the combined effect of the economic recession of the 1990s and the construction costs of the facilities for the 1998 winter Olympic Games in Nagano and the Football World Cup in 2002 was to drain the budget of the Competitive Sports Division, and delay or, as Asami (2005) who was the first Director General of JISS claimed, 'hibernate' the construction work on a national sports science centre until 1997.

Retreating from the initial plan to construct national sports service institute with sports science capability, the Competitive Sports Division intended to establish a specialist sports science research institute which would include a small-scale 'mini'-training centre inside the institute. Table 3.1 shows that a large proportion of the budget of the Competitive Sports Division was allocated, from 1997 to 2001, as a 5-year project for the construction of JISS. It is ironic and indicative of the erratic

Table 3.1 Competitive Sports Division Budget Allocation regarding the preparation for the NTC, JISS, 1998 Nagano Games, and 2002 World Cup

Project name	Allocated budget for the preparation of a national sports science institute	Allocated budget for the preparations for the Nagano Winter Games
1994	3,000,000	13,000,000
1995	3,000,000	14,000,000
1996	4,000,000	14,000,000
<i>Project name</i>	<i>Allocation to the development of a national sports centre – 5 year project:</i> (i) preparation to establish National Sports Science Centre (ii) research on a large-scale National Sports Centre	<i>Allocation to the support for the international competitions:</i> (i) preparation for the Nagano Winter Games (ii) preparation for the 2002 World Cup
1997	4,170,000,000	24,000,000
1998	6,679,100,000	22,390,000
1999	3,142,883,000	31,443,000
2000	4,011,000,000	31,443,000
2001	1,690,560,000 14,995,000 – a new project on researching for the preparation of establishing NTC	n/a

Note: Up to 1996, the proposal was to have a national sports service institute which would incorporate sports science and research and elite training facilities. In 1996, it was decided to separate these functions and establish a National Sports Science Centre (later renamed JISS) and a National Sports Centre (later renamed NTC).

Sources: MEXT Budget Allocations, 1994–2001.

commitment to elite sport that while the hosting of the Olympics in 1964 (Tokyo) and 1972 (Sapporo) led to increased investment in sports science/medicine and eventually to the establishment of a research centre at JASA (JASA, 1986), hosting the 1998 Nagano Games (despite their perceived success) resulted in priority being given to the construction of facilities over the establishment of a foundation for sports science/medicine, suggesting that hosting the most recent Games did not stimulate the same degree of government interest as the previous two.

However, there seems to be a clear relationship between the increasing acceptance of the application of science/medicine to sport and the growing sense of crisis due to the failure of Japanese elite athletes. Although coaches at the elite level still tend, as they did throughout much of the 1980s and 1990s, to rely on their experience and personal training methods, there was a gradual accumulation of trust and confidence in sports science among elite coaches. The greater willingness to acknowledge the potential of sports science was due to the evident success of the communist/socialist countries, particularly the Soviet Union, and the field research in those countries conducted by Japanese national sport actors who emphasised the value of a centralised approach to developing athletes and particularly a centralised research centre for sport.

After the crisis period of failure in international sport between the late 1980s and mid-1990s, the National Sports Science Centre (later renamed JISS) was planned by following the example of countries such as Australia, Canada, and the United States. However, in the end, downsized from the earlier and much preferred comprehensive training centre, the Competitive Sports Division decided to include only the centralised functions of sports science research and medical support plus a mini-training centre with a limited range of indoor facilities which could be used for training camps. Despite the modest remit of JISS, its significance is that it made available, for the first time, to elite athletes access to specialist support services on a daily basis and particularly free access to medical services (called Total Sports Clinic, TSC). The impact of JISS as shown by the 'success' stories of athletes and coaches at the 2002 Busan Asian Games and the 2004 Athens Olympic Games had already been acknowledged by a number of officers from JISS, JOC, and the NFs (cf. JISS, 2004a, b; MEXT, 2006b).

However, two high-ranking officers at the JOC and JISS were both reluctant to identify sports science/medicine as the sole cause of success in the 2004 Olympic Games partly because the achievement in Athens was also a function of the mini-training centre established inside JISS and because the achievement in

high-performance sport had not yet been sustained over the long term (Interview B, 6 April 2005; Interview C, 18 August 2005). Expanding the role of JISS in elite sport development is hindered by the legislative constraints of a fixed budget and a fixed number of permanent employees (researchers) which was seen by some as limiting its long-term impact on the accumulation and utilisation of knowledge. The construction of a NTC, next to JISS, is an acknowledgement that the services and functions provided by JISS are insufficient and that athletes require a more comprehensive support programme.

Athlete support and athlete development

Support for 'full-time athletes' • • •

The two main ways in which athletes and coaches can obtain funding for their activities are from: (i) the government subsidies centrally allocated to the JOC that are distributed to NFs, and then to athletes and (ii) the 'Sports Activities of Athletes/Coaches' stream within the Sports Promotion Fund established in 1990. The latter provides financial aid to athletes in the JOC's high-performance categories of 'Elite A, Elite B, and Youth Elite' and to the coaches of the designated athletes. The level of funding available to athletes varies depending on their high-performance category. The maximum amount provided for Elite A athletes is ¥200,000, Elite B ¥100,000, and Youth Elite ¥50,000 per month, which is barely sufficient for them to live as full-time athletes even though all funded athletes also receive free access to specialist services such as massage and physiotherapy. Consequently, elite/youth athletes still rely on additional income from sources such as private companies to which most of them belong, part-time employment and/or commercial sponsorship where their image is used for their sponsors' advertisement campaigns or public relations. It should therefore be noted that the introduction of the Sports Promotion Fund did not make a dramatic difference to the income of elite level athletes.

Three weaknesses of the current sporting environment for top athletes were identified by MEXT and its commissioned research team (MEXT, 2000; CSRC, 2005). The first was the dependence of athletes on corporate companies who owned sport clubs and teams and provided athletes with coaching, financial and technical services, and welfare support. The weaknesses arise from the fragility of the financial base of many company sport clubs due to the financial problems of their parent companies with the result that some athletes have lost their income and some been forced to give up their athletic career

(CSRC, 2005). The second weakness is, as a senior JOC official stressed, a sense that the experience of ex-elite athletes is being wasted because they tend to be engaged in non-sporting careers/sectors after their athletic career as there are not enough opportunities to utilise their knowledge and competencies within sport, as coaches for example, and not enough social recognition for sport-related occupations (Interview B, 6 April 2005).

Lastly, it is pointed out in the *Basic Plan* that there is not enough protection (e.g., financial support) when athletes are injured and especially if injury forces early retirement from their sporting career (MEXT, 2000; JOC, 2001). These weaknesses can be seen as a product of the insufficient financial support available for international level athletes. In part, the under-funding of elite athletes is a consequence of the tradition in Japan of relying financially on business for the production and support of elite athletes. While there is a growing awareness of the necessity to increase levels of government support in order to produce a supportive environment in which athletes can train, there are strong reservations, as expressed by a high-ranking NASSH official, regarding the provision of comprehensive financial support due to the association between state support and the system of 'state amateurs' found in the communist and many ex-communist countries (Interview D, 18 August 2005). These reservations notwithstanding the Competitive Sports Division allocated a budget based on the 'Nippon Revival Project' in 2003 and 2004 to prioritised NFs based on performance criteria provided by the JOC. The Project was financed by the Competitive Sports Division as a direct subsidy to the JOC with an increased budget of ¥335 million in order to expand the opportunities for intensive training camps for elite athletes and for the establishment of national team sport leagues in order to prepare for the Olympics and Asian Games. In the same year, the Competitive Sports Division also allocated ¥450 million for the 'Development of Prioritised Disciplines' and distributed additional funding via NAASH to selected Olympic-discipline NFs to maximise their chances of success in the Athens Olympic Games.

The decision to allocate subsidies to athletes based on an identification of the disciplines/events with a 'high potential' for success was unprecedented. It was noted by an officer in the Competitive Sports Division that they intended to demand 'an "immediate outcome" by Athens, by Turin, and Beijing' (Interview E, 18 August 2005). To meet the expectations of 'immediate outcomes' stated in the 'Nippon Revival Project' and the political objective of winning 3.5 per cent of Olympic medals, the above cited interviewee explained that the concept

of 'Revival' proved controversial. Although there were those in government who interpreted 'revival' to mean the revival of sports in which Japan had previously excelled, such as gymnastics, the prevailing view was that the objective was to 'revive the level of success achieved in the 1964 Tokyo Games' (Interview E, 18 August 2005) through success in the sports identified by the JOC's evaluation of national federations and the resultant prioritised sports.

There are two categories in the criteria-based evaluation undertaken by the JOC's Information Strategy Section: Category I is a quantitative evaluation, mainly based on past achievement in international championships, Olympic Games, and world rankings (points awarded range between 12 and 20); and Category II, which is a qualitative evaluation of those NFs that have fewer than 12 points but which are recognised by the JOC as having some emergent international quality athletes or having a strong youth/junior development system (NAASH, 2003). It can be observed that the JOC's discretion over the allocation of the performance budget and the identification of prioritised disciplines has strengthened in recent years. The evaluation criteria used by the JOC are consistent with the government's emphasis on the willingness of NFs to establish a long-term structured and planned TID system. The NFs are consequently being pulled in two directions, one to establish a long-term strategic approach to TID and the other to deliver an 'immediate outcome', that is, medals.

Lifestyle support and 'second career' programme • • •

There is a growing awareness of the necessity of constructing a holistic talent identification and nurturing system focused on a national elite academy as perceived to be evident in other countries that have enjoyed elite sport success. As more systematic and scientific approaches to the identification of talent have been promoted, the more the idea of the holistic development of athletes in society has become recognised. However, the desire for the systematic development of talented athletes is challenged by growing criticism of the excessive hours of training that athletes of junior high and high school age undertake and of a 'trade-off' between study and training (Kono, 2003; Saeki, 2006). Kono, a member of the Board and Science/Medical Committee in the JOC and a sports doctor, stressed the necessity of establishing a programme to nurture and develop the character, intellectual and communication skills of athletes (including cross-cultural and presentation skills), and the ability to maintain

emotional balance and independent control over their training (Kono, 2003, p. 27; see also Katstuta, 2007). As can be found in such innovative talent identification programmes as the 'Fukuoka Sports Talent Scout Project' (more details below), the objective of the development of physical abilities from an early age is complemented by the holistic approach to young and elite athletes which emphasises the development of conceptual and intellectual skills which have become increasingly recognised as significant for the successful development of young athletes.

In relation to senior athletes, in particular, the career management and career development of young athletes has become more focused in recent years. The JOC established a 'Second Career Project' in 2004 as one of its Athlete Programmes designed to provide 'an environment where athletes can devote themselves to training' (JOC, 2001) and opened a designated website in November 2005 (<http://www.joc-athlete.jp/index.php>). From 2005, the Competitive Sports Division of MEXT also provided a subsidy of ¥8 million for research to develop a comprehensive support programme for athletes which resulted in the Athlete Career Transition Programme delivered by a specialist recruitment agency. While the term 'second career' implies that it is only concerned with the post-retirement career of athletes, the project is not only focused on career transition, but is also concerned with educational programmes for junior and top athletes. Similar schemes in Australia, the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States were researched, in particular the 'Athlete Career Education Programme' (ACE) of the Australian Institute of Sport which was seen as a model of good practice (Tanaka, 2004, pp. 54–55). However, although the necessity to investigate the issue of post-athletic career and transition had been recognised, empirical research on athletes' experiences after their retirement remains absent. As Saeki (2006, p. 1) rightly argues, by comparison to the growing salience of early years TID, 'the development of second careers has been marginalised' and the extent to which a sports career is 'socio-culturally valued' remains to be seen.

Developments in coaching • • •

The intention to develop coaches and sport (PE) instructors⁵ in an organised and systematic manner at the national level goes back to 1965, a year after the Tokyo Olympic Games. However, progress in turning the 'intention' into practical policy regarding the development of high-performance coaches seemed to

have suffered due to the reduction of governmental subsidies to sport during the 1970s (JASA, 1986, pp. 154–155). In 1986, the ACHPE set up by the Ministry of Education emphasised the need to increase the quality of coaches/instructors to meet the ‘diversified and sophisticated needs’ of sports participation and also ‘to obtain social trust’ by which was meant increasing the status and quality of coaches in the eyes of the general public (ACHPE, 1986). ACHPE then proposed the establishment of a nationally recognised certification system by setting criteria for competency and ‘guaranteeing the knowledge and technical skills of coaches’ as well as a national ‘data bank for coaches’ (ACHPE, 1986). Responding to the recommendations of ACHPE, JASA, in 1988, redesigned and implemented courses leading to government recognised certificates for the development not only of coaches and sport instructors at the community level, but also of coaches concerned with the ‘development of international competitiveness’ (JASA, 2004a). Because JASA had had a responsibility for the promotion of *both* community sport and elite level success (until its separation from the JOC in 1990) its focus was directed to developing certified coaches/instructors across a broad range of levels of athletic ability.

The need for a sharper focus on elite coach development was highlighted in the 2000 *Basic Plan*. As a result, JASA was required to collaborate with NFs to redevelop the coaching programme so as to ‘allow coaches the effective acquisition of knowledge in the athlete development programme’ (JASA, 2004a, pp. 5–6) in order to meet the needs of elite athletes. Due to a period of administrative reorganisation within central government, the ‘Certified Sports Instructor System’ developed by JASA was only given the status of a non-governmentally recognised certificate in 2002. It could therefore be argued that the certificate had been downgraded which prompted JASA to start (re-)conceptualising the profile of the ‘desirable sport coach/instructor’ to redesign the system yet again (JASA, 2001, 2004b). However, despite the increasing emphasis on elite sport success, JASA continued to stress the goal of realising ‘lifelong participation in sport’ and the consequent necessity of developing ‘a high quality instructor who can develop each individual’s skill to enjoy sport culture’ (JASA, 2004a, p. 10), namely, a coach with generic skills rather than with the particular skills needed to support elite athletes.

As regards the needs of elite athletes, the Competitive Sports Division recognised not only the unsuitability of the certificate system provided by JASA in 1988 for the development of highly skilled coaches, but also the absence of a structure to systematically develop specialised elite coaches (MEXT, 2002). In 2001, the Competitive Sports Division invested in establishing a training

system for nurturing and maintaining coaches with specific experience in working with high-performance athletes. Further investment followed in 2003 aimed at placing two national professional coaches in each national federation (46 coaches had been placed in 30 sport disciplines as of 2005–2006) and to developing 5,000 specialists (coaches, sport doctors, athletic trainers) (MEXT, 2003). The development of specialist coaches is the responsibility of the JOC and it is intended that the process of coach development will take place at the National Coaching Academy which will be located in the new NTC (JOC, 2001, 2002). It is intended that the specialist training system for top-level coaches will enable them to acquire the 'advanced specialised skills' which they can then use within their own sports to 'construct a strategy in accordance with an international competition standard and plan and organise training programmes by applying the knowledge of sports science and medicine' (MEXT, 2002).

Despite recent investment in coach development, it is acknowledged that Japanese elite coaching remains considerably underdeveloped and there is consequently a dependency on importing foreign coaches, especially for ball games. The shortage of 'home grown' elite level coaches was pointed out by one high-performance committee member in the JOC who noted that there are very few Japanese coaches who are 'exported' and internationally recognised (Interview F, 24 August 2005). This point was illustrated by the comment from Masayo Imura, the ex-synchronised swimming national head coach whose team gained medals in all Olympic Games from 1984 to 2004, when she revealed that one of the reasons for accepting the position of coach to the Chinese national team in preparation for the Beijing Games was that: 'it would be the best chance to increase the international status of Japanese coaching' (*Mainichi News Paper*, 24 December 2006). Indeed, a clear secondary objective of the coach development strategy is to produce top-level international coaches who will then gain easier access to globally disseminated information and tactics and also be influential in the decision-making of the international sporting federations (JOC, 2002).

Talent identification system and the development of potential athletes⁶

While the concept and importance of talent identification was recognised prior to the Tokyo Olympic Games in 1964, and has been a constant theme during the latter half of the twentieth century, the operationalisation of a structured TID programme

at prefectural/municipal level has only recently been recognised in Japan with the first example of a structured TID programme being introduced in the Fukuoka prefecture in 2003. The acceptance of the need for a systematic approach to talent identification was a result of the criticism of a training and coaching system which was fragmented between schools, universities, and corporate teams and identified as 'one of the causes of the decline of international competitiveness' (MEXT, 2000, p. 15; JOC, 2001). According to MEXT, the dominant pyramid-shaped selection method has limitations, not least because of the rapid decline in the birth-rate and the consequent overall decrease in participation in sport and 'human resources at the national level' which is making it increasingly difficult to find talented young people who can be developed to elite level (MEXT, 2006a).

Overall, the Japanese approach to youth talent identification is fragmented and relies too heavily on private corporations and schools to support potential elite athletes. Neither the corporations nor the schools are systematic with a long-term view or coordinated in what they do. They also tend to act independently of NFs. Furthermore, while a substantial proportion of the annual budget for *Kokutai* has been allocated by municipal authorities to talent identification, the sector remains unsystematic largely relying on school clubs and teachers, especially PE teachers, to take responsibility for coaching school teams and the identification of talented young athletes. PE teachers were also criticised by the project leader responsible for establishing a model of talent development in the JOC for their short term interest in 'winning' (Gamo, quoted in JOC, 2003a, p. 14). Due to the nature of *Kokutai* as an inter-prefectural competition, it is imperative to note the difficulty of achieving cooperation between prefectures and thus contributing to the establishment of a coherent TID system at the regional and national levels.

Following the establishment of JISS, the systematic identification of talented children was seen as the essential basis for sustaining long-term international competitiveness. The 'JISS-JOC Information Strategy Project' played a core role in researching examples of TID programmes developed in other countries and in designing a TID programme for Japan (JISS, 2005, p. 68). The 'Fukuoka Sports Talent Scout Project' was introduced in 2004 as the first example of the systematic selection of children from years 4 and 5 (age 9–11 as 'Fukuoka Kids') and year 6 (age 11–12 as 'Fukuoka Juniors') based on physical testing and scientific and genetic data. Fukuoka Action, the prefectural high-performance sport centre, manages the programme where the selected Fukuoka Kids and Juniors can experience multiple disciplines to develop basic physical skills

and later be advised on the one or two 'most suitable disciplines' for specialisation (Tanaka, 2005).

This project is significant for three reasons: first, the initiative came from a prefectural government and may indicate a gradual change in the composition of the elite sport policy community. Earlier comments about inter-prefectural rivalry notwithstanding, it offers the prospect of cross-prefectural/institutional cooperation to complement the cooperation between JISS, JOC, and NFs at the national level. Second, the implementation of talent identification and selection programmes at the prefectural level have to be consistent with the broad policy objective of promoting lifelong participation in sport. As stated in the prefectural policy document, *Basic Plan for Fukuoka Sports Promotion* (2003) and as emphasised by a senior officer of Fukuoka Action, the TID programme needed a mass participation rationale. He commented that terms like 'talent', 'selection', and 'elite' are controversial due particularly to the programme being operationalised by a quasi-governmental agency at prefectural level (Fukuoka Action) and that they needed to be legitimated by connecting with the promotion of citizens' sport participation, educational purposes, and the provisions of opportunities to every child (at the first selection stage at least) (Interview F, 9 May 2006).

Thirdly, and related to the second point, this project is significant insofar as it intends to develop not only the physical abilities of selected children, but also their intellectual abilities and personal competencies, including logical thinking, knowledge of nutrition, and communication skills. This reflects the extent to which the project is based on the development of young talented athletes 'holistically' with a long-term perspective taking precedence over the short-term, thus avoiding the elite athlete 'trade-off' between academic work and sport training. As this project is still in its infancy, its effectiveness in producing medal-winning athletes remains to be seen. However, the accumulated knowledge in TID has already been disseminated to 'interested' prefectural/municipal governments or education departments. Although there are differences in objectives and delivery, the rationale developed for the Fukuoka project appears to have influenced other prefectures such as Wakayama, Okayama, and Yamagata, and the district government of Bifuka in Hokkaido all of which have decided to implement and operationalise a similar TID programme (JISS, 2007).

Competition opportunities for young athletes

The major international competitions to which the JOC sends squads include the summer and winter Olympic Games, the

Asian Games, the East Asian Games, and the Universiade. However, the coordination of the national competition structure in order to provide opportunities for talented and potential upcoming young athletes to prepare for international competitions is proving problematic for the JOC. Although the JOC organises the Junior Olympic Cup, which is part of its Junior Development Programme, and is defined as 'the pinnacle of junior-level sport' (JOC, 2003b), the JOC's proposal to reform the East Asian Games into the top junior athlete competition has been postponed (j-net, 21 June 2006) and overall the domestic competition opportunities and structures for young athletes are fragmented.

The scheduling of domestic (*Kokutai* and inter-collegiate/school games and events) and international competitions is seen as conflicting in terms of the different interests and values held by the various organisations and agencies. In particular, the policy priority of the prefectural governments and their PE Associations with regard to *Kokutai* is to produce the best set of results and is seen as an inter-prefectural competition rather than a national championship which is part of an elite development strategy. In the absence of a long-term vision of national athlete development, the primary concern within most prefectures was to use the budget to construct facilities and prepare athletes in order to do better than other prefectures.

The different perceptions of *Kokutai* are illustrated by the recurring conflict, from the late 1960s through to the 1980s, between the Minister of Education and JASA on the one hand and the educational organisations and teachers on the other over the criteria for participation. Whereas the former bodies would have liked to lower the age limit in order to raise the level of international performances through *Kokutai*, the educationalists have proved to be unsympathetic due to their perception of participation in *Kokutai* as a distraction from 'students' normal schooling' (Morikawa, 1988, p. 27; Seki, 1997; Takahasi and Takimoto, 1996). A senior member of the JOC identified the issue of 'gypsy' athletes who transferred from one prefecture to the other in order to help the host prefecture to win *Kokutai* as also undermining the contribution of *Kokutai* to national athlete development (Interview G, 12 April 2005).

The absence of a substantial number of elite athletes who prefer to train or take part in the international Grand Prix circuit, the decline in popularity of, and media attention given to, *Kokutai* combined with the expansion in the number of participants and the increased infrastructure costs prompted JASA to propose a reform plan for *Kokutai* (JASA, 2003). Interestingly, the reform plan is intended to make *Kokutai* the highest domestic sport competition with a higher level of competition and

focused on the Olympic disciplines combined with a 15 per cent reduction in the number of athletes. With the lowering of the participation age limit to include junior-high students (age 14–15 years), JASA recognised *Kokutai* as the stage to identify and develop junior athletes (JASA, 2003, pp. 8, 18). The most significant element in the reform plan was to allow athletes already competing at international level to participate without preliminary competition and to reschedule the *Kokutai* calendar by integrating the summer and autumn games and thereby enabling more athletes to participate in both international competitions and *Kokutai*. This attempt to resolve the tension between the national and international competition calendars is crucial. In the words of one JOC member, 'it's nonsense to chase the schedule ... Japan needs to adjust its schedule to the international one' (Interview G, 12 April 2005). In conclusion, although the reform of *Kokutai* reflects its slow decline it also indicates JASA's concern to maintain its organisational interest in elite sporting success and the development of junior athletes.

Distinctive features of the Japanese elite sport system

While many features of the Japanese elite sport development system correspond to the four dimensions identified by Green and Houlihan (2005), Japan possesses at least one distinctive feature which illustrates processes of policy learning and policy transfer.

The significance of intelligence gathering and the development of a communication network

The establishment of an effective communication network involving actors across all levels of sport and the strategic utilisation of information have become *the* most distinctive features of the Japanese system for developing elite athletes. The facilitation of the sharing of ideas, information, and experience within Japan is organised by JISS and the JOC which are also both responsible for the strategic gathering of information from other countries and its incorporation into debates on elite sport policy. Developed from inter-sport discipline collaborations initiated in the late 1990s,⁷ the emphasis given to network-building, the exchange of ideas, information and good practice, and the accumulation of knowledge intensified when JISS formed the Department of Sports Information in 2001, which was encouraged to work closely with the Information Strategy Section of the JOC's Information and Medical Science Special

Committee. These two specialist sections coordinate their work and deal with the technical and strategic aspects of elite sport policy.

One of the most significant features of the work of these sections in JISS and the JOC is that they anchor the ambitious initiative to establish a comprehensive information network which includes local, regional and national sport organisations, academic research organisations and international bodies, through a communication network which relies on email circulations, personal contacts, occasional conferences, forums and seminars, and informal meetings. Effective systematic TID has gradually been recognised as the essential core policy for the long-term success of Japanese elite sport. Crucial to the success of this strategy is the network-building, strategic planning, and analysis through the exchange of information, and sharing of knowledge and resources at the regional and local levels. The data obtained from other countries are analysed by the Sports Information Department to provide not only assessments of Japanese competitiveness, but also details of the different models of talent identification adopted in other countries for specific sports which the JOC then uses to influence both sport-specific policy and national policy (Katsuta et al., 2005b).

The 'information strategy' is perceived as an 'intelligence gathering' activity which according to an interviewee in the JOC can be seen as similar to the services provided by a 'think-tank' or the work of intelligence agencies such as the CIA (Interview F, 1 April 2005). It was also suggested that the function of intelligence gathering was not simply to help set the priorities in elite sport policy, but to influence policy decision-making, particularly at the state level by producing advocates for elite sport programmes who were well informed (Waku, 2005). In addition, the importance of intelligence activities needs to be understood in relation to the geographical position of Japan and the concern that the country is remote from the dominant elite international sport communities located in Europe and North America. This concern was highlighted by one JISS official:

With regard to information, it is more or less borderless. However, ... Japan is isolated [from Europe] and also from information. Yet, in the world sporting community, sharing information is taken for granted and from the shared information, [they] consider the next step. Japan had drifted away from this trend, I mean, Japan was way behind this trend (Interview I, 18 March 2005).

There is a strong perception of a world trend in the development of high-performance sport and support provision. However, there is a clear intention to build an international network not

only to identify good practice and adapt it to the Japanese context, but also to disseminate selected information from JISS to equivalent bodies in other countries (JISS, 2005, pp. 88–89). This practice of putting ‘information’ at the core has resulted in, intentionally or unintentionally, stimulating the emergence of a previously latent advocacy coalition for elite sport which, through the intensifying of information exchange, has the potential to develop a view of the preferred elite athlete development system in Japan.

Conclusion

There are three factors that help us to understand the emergence of the priority currently accorded to elite sport policy in Japan. First, the catalyst for policy change and the commitment of government is mainly based on exogenous factors, namely, consecutive poor performances in international sporting events (Olympic Games and Asian Games). Nevertheless, elite sport policy objectives, though of increasing salience to government, need to compete with policy objectives related to improving lifelong participation in sport and PE in school. Indeed, children and young people’s participation and their level of physical fitness is steadily rising up the contemporary agenda of the ministry (MEXT) and is prompting some tension with elite sport objectives.

Second, the government maintains the dominant role in shaping and specifying the direction of elite sport policy, in part, through its control over the distribution of financial resources particularly for the construction of elite sport specialist facilities. The role and influence of national elite sport organisations (JISS, JOC, and NFs) is substantially determined by the government due to the fragility of their funding base, their high dependence on public resources, their lack of significant organisational autonomy, and their strict accountability to the state. Although JISS and the JOC can be seen as direct agents of government elite policy, following Sabatier (1993), it should be borne in mind that the elite sport policy subsystem plays a significant role in translating government policy into elite sport policy programmes and in supporting the development of particular sports and individual athletes. In other words, there is still considerable scope to interpret governmental policy at the ‘street level’. However, this is not to downplay the dominant role of government in the elite sport policy process. This last point leads to the third characteristic which is the engagement in policy-oriented learning by national elite sport agencies and the transfer and adaptation of good practice from other countries to the Japanese

context. The systematic accumulation and analysis of information and data by the specialist departments in JISS and the JOC is particularly designed to improve systems of TID at the municipal/prefectural levels and among national sports federations.

Notes

- 1 In 1986, the Japan Physical Education and School Health Centre (JPESHC) was created through the merger of three national agencies: the Japan School Lunch Agency, Japan School Safety Agency, and the National Stadium. A further restructuring took place in 2001 with the JPESHC being replaced by NAASH.
- 2 The *Basic Plan for the Promotion of Sport*, published in 2001, defined the value of sport as to 'realise a bright, fulfilling, and vital society in the twenty-first century' with three objectives to increase lifelong participation in sport, high-performance success in international sport events and opportunity in Pe in schools. The revised *Basic Plan* maintains similar objectives but with a stronger emphasis on children's physical fitness.
- 3 Whether there will be one or a number of elite schools is yet to be decided.
- 4 *Kokutai* is the intra-prefectural national sporting competition held annually and coorganised by the host prefecture, JASA and MEXT. It was inaugurated in 1946 and has maintained its status as the premier national competition.
- 5 Caution is needed in relation to the term '*Shidousha*' which in Japanese can cover 'instructors', 'trainers', and 'coaches'.
- 6 'Talent identification' or 'talent selection' is used here to refer to the systematic identification of talent from a wider group of young children. The concept of TID in a systematic manner was described as the process of 'identifying, nurturing, and making use of talented human resources' (Katsuta et al., 2005a).
- 7 The 'Inter-Disciplinary Support Project for Ball Games' (baseball, basketball, handball, rugby union, and soccer) was launched in 1998 in order to share coaching methods and training regimes. The concept was repeated in relation to combat sports (wrestling, judo, and sumo) and artistic sports (synchronised swimming, gymnastics, and figure skating), both of which established their respective support projects in 2000.

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