

《その他》

# Social and cultural contributions from my experience as a top athlete

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トップアスリートとしての経験から捉える社会貢献

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Key Words: Social and cultural contribution, Top athlete, Sport, Asymmetrical relationship, Rugby  
キーワード：社会貢献， トップアスリート， スポーツ， 関係の非対称性， ラグビー

## 1. Introduction

I was once a professional rugby player. I had the great opportunity to play for Japan's national team in the early 2000s, and I was one of many who was excited to see the success of the Japan team last year, in what is said to be "the greatest Rugby World Cup ever<sup>1)</sup>". Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games scheduled this year were unfortunately postponed to next year due to the coronavirus, but this situation has offered a chance to see many top athletes make contributions in ways such as donations to support medical staff<sup>2)</sup>. These activities by top athletes may be considered an example of the theme for this symposium, "Social and Cultural Contributions by Top Athletes." There are many such examples, but it is very difficult for me to take these initiatives and collectively call them "Social and Cultural Contributions by Top Athletes." That is because, I think the

characteristics of the contributor, and also the characteristics of the community and people that accept the contributions have a great impact. And the outcome of Social and Cultural Contributions can vary greatly depending on the interaction between the two parties. So, in this presentation, I would like to think about Social and Cultural Contributions by Top Athletes by sharing my experiences with you.

On to the main subject. The presentation will be divided into three parts. First, I will talk about my personal experience as an athlete, so that you will understand why I became involved in Social and Cultural Contributions. Second, I will talk about international cooperation initiatives in rugby that I am involved in, so that you can get a better image of the topic. The third part will focus on the significance and challenges of Social and Cultural Contributions by Top Athletes based on my personal experience, and conclude with a brief summary of

what it implies from a sociological perspective.

## 2. Experience as an athlete

Let me begin by talking about the time after I graduated from university. I'd like to highlight two points. First, what I learned through playing rugby abroad. And second, what I learned as a member of the Japan national team. So, I will start with what I learned through playing rugby abroad. I went overseas to pursue rugby for about one year in my mid-twenties. In the first half of my stay abroad, I joined a team in Christchurch, New Zealand. At the end of the rugby season in New Zealand, I then went to London to play. Of the many things that I learned, I was particularly inspired to see an environment where everyone could take part in rugby. The clubs had multiple teams, so that all players could compete in a team suited to their level. I was also surprised to see many clubs with a women's team, and women were active not only as players but also as coaches and referees. In Japan, even today, a club only has one team, and all players must often compete for a position on that team. Those who don't make the team cannot play in a match. Instead, they are expected to cheer on their teammates. To put it more directly, they assume the role of a supporter. Those who don't play in a match may no longer be called players. Also, back in those days, there were few clubs where women could play, and I had never met a women coach or referee. So, Japanese women faced a tough situation when playing rugby. I was somewhat

aware of this before going abroad, but being fortunate enough to play in matches, I had not given serious thought about how sports can be exclusive. By going abroad and actually seeing an environment where everyone regardless of their skills or gender could play, I became aware of how important it was to develop such an environment.

On to the second point, my experience as a member of the national team. After returning to Japan, I continued to play rugby on a Top League team. And I was fortunate to be selected for the national team in 2004. There, I learned the joy of competing at the highest level. At the same time, I became more aware of the two sides that existed in sports. What I mean by two sides in sports is, for example, you hear that having fun is the essence of sports, but it is also "harsh" because you must regularly endure fierce competition. You are expected to train because your "efforts will be rewarded," but this can be "cruel" because it is extremely hard to beat a player who is more competent. And sports can be "irrational" because regardless of the process, the final outcome may depend on luck. Through these experiences, I learned that when emphasis is placed too strongly on either of the two sides in sports, then the attractive aspects of sports are reduced by half, and may even create problems at times.

Through my experience in rugby, I came to understand that it was dangerous to judge how sports ought to be, simply from the standards of the rugby or sports environment in Japan.

Having experienced all of that, when I retired from rugby in 2009, I pursued the attractive world of sports at graduate school. There, I encountered the field “Sport for Development” that aims to use sport as a tool to resolve social issues. I have since continued research on “Rugby for development” focusing on Southeast Asia<sup>3)</sup>, and research on how the domestic issue of reconstruction from the Great East Japan Earthquake relates to the organization of sports mega-events<sup>4)</sup>. And when I did research for international cooperation through rugby being promoted by the Japan Rugby Football Union or JRFU, it led to taking part myself in international cooperation initiatives.

### 3. International cooperation initiatives

Now, I would like to talk about international cooperation initiatives being promoted by the JRFU. I now serve as the Head of International Cooperation Section at JRFU, responsible for a wide range of roles, from project management of international cooperation through rugby, to actually taking part in various projects. I'm now involved in a project called Asian Scrum Project or ASP<sup>5)</sup>, which was founded when Japan won the bid to host the Rugby World Cup 2019.

ASP was founded in order to support the Rugby World Cup for Asia movement. Its vision is “Engage, Asia! ‘Asia and Japan Rugby bind to inspire the World through the Spirit of Rugby!’” We are rolling out the project together with members from all over Asia. The project

has three objectives. First, rugby development in Asia, which is linked to an important role of the JRFU to promote rugby. The second objective is to deepen mutual understanding and symbiosis through rugby, mainly in Asia. The project aims to strengthen ties with Asian countries through rugby, and develop a foundation to realize a better society. And the third objective is social return through human resources nurtured through participation experience. Human resources here include not only the local participants but also JRFU members who take back what they experience through the project to their own community.

ASP was established in 2011. We have been cooperating with Japan International Cooperation Agency since 2013 and with Japan Sport Council since 2015 to run projects in 20 countries, mainly in Asia. Since time is limited today, I will talk about the project in India promoted in cooperation with Japan Sport Council. JRFU and Japan Sport Council worked with Rugby India in 2019 to run a rugby-oriented international cooperation project in Bhubaneswar in Odisha state<sup>6)</sup>. This project was launched based on a request from Rugby India, who wanted to hold a rugby event in India to set the mood for the Rugby World Cup 2019. So, we planned three programs that lasted several days: a performance improvement program for rugby sevens, a workshop program for female rugby players, and an awareness building program for wheelchair rugby. These programs were chosen because we thought sports can be exclusive against women and people with

disabilities, and we wanted to help correct this. Also through the project, we wanted to give a positive impact, however small it may be, toward creating a society where women and people with disabilities can be active.

Let me give an overview of the program for female rugby players. The women participated in both the rugby sevens performance improvement program and the women's workshop. The rugby sevens program was taught by another former member of the Japan national team. Based on that, the women then participated in the workshop. The workshop was held twice. In the first session, players as well as coaches participated, regardless of gender. The instructor talked about challenges that women face in sports and about leadership by women, and discussions were held afterwards. The second session was for women only, to provide an environment where they could feel at ease in expressing and exchanging frank opinions. In the two sessions, the women voiced concerns and opinions about balancing sports and studies, when to marry, and building proper relationships with coaches. After the project finished, the workshop instructor indicated that, as the number of female rugby players increase, it is becoming important to resolve issues that have surfaced due to this. We intend to continue working with Rugby India to promote rugby and overcome these challenges. And I think Japan also faces similar challenges that need to be addressed<sup>7)</sup>.

As explained in the project in India, ASP implements not only performance improve-

ment programs but also projects that address challenges in sports and society. However, the effects of sports participation can vary according to time and situation, and I think we need to properly measure the effectiveness. I also think we need to collect evidence little by little on how implementing sports programs can change society. Because JRFU is not an organization specializing in international cooperation, there are difficulties in scientifically evaluating the effectiveness of JRFU projects, but I plan to cooperate with various organizations to take steady steps forward.

#### 4. Significance and challenges

I've talked about my personal experience up to this point. Now, let me discuss my views on the significance and challenges of Social and Cultural Contributions by Top Athletes. In terms of significance, I want to point out that the great achievements and popularity of top athletes can have a positive impact to improve and develop projects. Participation of top athletes in a project will encourage participants to proactively take part, and has the power to communicate the wonderful and fun aspects of sports. The top athlete's achievements will encourage those who admire these athletes to participate proactively. I have experienced several times, when I introduce myself as once a Japan national team player, the participants' attitudes change for the better. I am the same person, but as soon as they find out that I was a top athlete, they are more eager to listen and

participate more actively in the project. This shows that the participation of top athletes can positively change the attitude of participants, and thereby improve the quality of the project.

The next point is about the popularity of top athletes. By leveraging the name value of top athletes, I think you can strengthen communication about the project, and enhance the Social and Cultural Contribution itself. Communication here is not just about relaying the details of the project. It should also send out the idea that sports can be used to overcome social challenges, and about the gravity of the social challenges that the project is addressing. In addition, by utilizing the network built through this communication, we may even be able to involve people who sympathize, and create a social movement about Social and Cultural Contributions. What I did was, when I connected with people who sympathized with what I communicated about projects, I then link them up to a global network that I built through my past sports experience. And this led me to establish a nonprofit organization that aims to create a better society by utilizing sports, which may be an example of how Social and Cultural Contributions by Top Athletes can evolve<sup>8)</sup>.

Next, I want to talk about the challenges of Social and Cultural Contributions by Top Athletes. I think that one challenge is, top athletes who participate in projects tend to become empirical, in other words, they tend to think only from experience. This means that top athletes tend to have the risk of becoming

so-called “evangelists<sup>9)</sup>” who think that there is universal “virtue” in sports itself and in participating in sports. Those of you listening to me now, recognize that sports has the potential to make contributions, while understanding that there are various challenges in sports itself. Situations where the sport becomes too biased toward the harsh and cruel aspects, or difficulties that women and disabled people have when participating in sports, as I mentioned earlier, are common challenges around the world. Another challenge is, the fact that the effect of sports on the participants can depend on the time and situation. However, if you consider top athletes as people who have shown high adaptation to this world of sports that has many challenges, you can say that they have benefited from the wonderful aspects of sports, rather than feeling the issues related to sports. This applies to me as well. In fact, I have gone through lots of “harsh” training, but most of my efforts were rewarded and I was able to defeat my rivals and win in the end. And I was also able to experience many victories that were not by chance, but based on advantages in technical and physical strengths. That is why I did not have such a critical eye about the world of sports as I have today. Of course, I was aware of the challenges in sports, but I didn’t think seriously about them as I do today. Looking back, I think I assessed the possibilities of sports more positively than now. If an “evangelist” like myself back then, participated in a Social and Cultural Contribution project, I may be at risk of uncritically promoting the

project and reproducing the problems that lie in sports.

Lastly, I will discuss what Social and Cultural Contributions by Top Athletes implies from a sociological perspective. Let us look at it from the perspective of, who will be advocating it, and for what reason. Discussing this is a little hard for me because I will need to look critically at myself. But, first of all, when top athletes speak about their own contributions, we cannot deny the fact that they have secured a privileged position. Top athletes must accept the fact that through the stories they tell, they are justifying their own sports career to gain their own social position. In other words, participating in a project that puts to use their sports experiences will prove that their life so far was worthwhile. All of us want to think that, what we have done in the past was worthwhile. I think participation in Social and Cultural Contribution projects is an opportunity to confirm that. And participation and sharing stories about their activities will allow the top athletes to secure and strengthen their social position. In other words, it gives them a chance to secure a position as a “good person” in society. I think this is true from my own experience, that I have secured a social position as a “good person” and reinforced that position through participation in projects. Speaking about Social and Cultural Contributions at this symposium has the same meaning. Here, I feel that there is an asymmetrical relationship that fixes top athletes as privileged persons who “provide support,” and the participants as those who “receive support.”

This can be also explained by the fact that the voices of participants are almost never heard. No matter how hard we try, this structure may be hard to fully overcome, but I think it’s possible to always have this structure in mind and participate in Social and Cultural Contribution projects with a critical eye.

When we have a stance to promote contributions in an interactive environment that does not fix the roles of the two sides, and listens to the voices of participants, Social and Cultural Contributions by Top Athletes will take on the true meaning of “efforts made for the betterment of society.” This is also a thought to discipline myself, and with that I would like to conclude my presentation.

### Note

This paper is based on the presentation at the 2020 Yokohama Sport Conference held online from 8 to 22 September 2020 (Social and Cultural Contribution by Top Athlete).

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