Targeting Modernity: Archery and the Modernization of Japan

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Japan was the first Asian society to cross the cultural boundary that separates traditional societies from modern ones. One aspect of the transition to modernity was the swift diffusion within nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Japanese society of baseball, soccer football, golf, tennis, and other modern sports invented in Europe or North America. One reason for this swift diffusion and for this quick acceptance of new sports could have been that some of their characteristics might not have been all that new. I am not about to claim that Japanese aristocrats of the Heian and the Kamakura periods played baseball or soccer, but some aspects of Japanese archery intrigue me.

As early as the seventeenth century, Japanese archery had several of the most important characteristics of modern sports—and at least one of these characteristics can be traced as far back as the thirteenth century. I do not mean to imply that the modernization of Japanese society was in any sense “caused” by the sport of archery. Far from it. I do mean to say, however, that Japanese archery—kyūjutsu—is a clue to a predisposition within Japanese culture that made Japan especially receptive to modern influences from the West.¹ I should add that historians have been more or less blind to the modern aspects of Japanese archery because they have been dazzled by archery’s religious aspect. In his book, Zen in the Art of Archery, the German philosopher Eugen Herrigel tells a good story, but it is not the only story that can be told about Japanese archery.²

Let me now state very briefly, without the evidence that I have offered elsewhere, three of the characteristics of modern sports (which are also generally characteristic of modern society). Modern sports display a high degree of what the German sociologist Max Weber called zweckrationalität—“instrumental rationality.”³ Abstractness and standardization are two forms of this rationality. One of my favorite examples

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is the gymnast’s pommel horse. Originally, of course, the horse was a real horse, mounted by real riders who then demonstrated their equestrian skills as they do even today in a sport like dressage. Now, as everybody knows—many to their great sorrow—some horses are better than others, stronger, faster, more easily managed, which confers a distinct advantage upon their fortunate riders. Standardization equalized the competition. The equestrian’s stallion became the gymnast’s wooden horse. In the nineteenth century, it still looked reasonably equine. In addition to its four wooden legs, the apparatus had a wooden head and a horsehair tail, neither of which has survived the impulse to rationalize. The point of this not-quite-Platonic version of a horse was that it was a standardized piece of equipment that advantaged none of the competitors. A triumph of ludic rationality and a splendid example of what Georges Vigarello calls “deréalisation.”

A second and more remarkable characteristic of modern sports is the impulse to quantify achievement. This characteristic deserves a little more in the way of comment. We live today in a world of numbers—the Earned Run Average and the Gross Domestic Product, Yards Gained Rushing and the Grade Point Average. In track and field sports, we measure distances to the centimeter and times to the hundredth of a second. In Munich, in 1972, the German organizers of the Olympic games measured the swimmers’ times to the thousandth of a second, which meant in at least one case that the winner of the silver medal actually swam faster than the winner of the gold medal. (The explanation is that the spatial difference, that is, the difference in length between the swimmers’ lanes, was much greater than the temporal difference.)

When the Olympic games were revived, in 1896, an American observer commented that gymnastic contests were not especially popular because they were not amenable to precise measurement. Today we measure gymnastic scores to three decimal places. Nadia Comencí’s 1976 total at the Montreal games was 79.275, which means—we think—that her performance must have better than Ludmilla Tourisheva’s at the Munich games four years earlier. After all, Tourisheva scored a mere 77.025.

We live in a world of numbers, but the Greeks did not. Although Pythagoras, Archimedes, Euclid, and others made great contributions to mathematics, Greek civilization was not obsessed with the need to quantify. For them, man was still the measure of all things, not the object of endless measurements. At the Olympic games, there was no attempt to measure times, which would have been difficult. And there was no attempt to measure distances, which would have been easy. The Romans paid somewhat more attention to the numbers, especially at their chariot races, but the quantification of every conceivable sports achievement—from the height of a pole vault to the speed of a tennis serve—is a distinctly modern mania.

The quantification of performance provides the basis for the quantified sports record, a concept unknown before the emergence of modern sports at the end of the seventeenth century. What exactly is a sports record?