

## **An Intercultural Assessment of Japanese Basketball**

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### **Abstract**

Over the past year and a half, I served as men's basketball coach for Gifu Shotoku University. During this tenure, the most gratifying experience was learning to eliminate any cross-cultural differences between the team and myself. Although the situation was not always perfect, we did achieve a high winning percentage and, according to the participants in the program, made the basketball team a positive experience for everyone involved. In this paper, I would like to expound upon this experience with a personal narrative on the cultural similarities and differences between Japanese and American basketball. On a broader scale, I will offer suggestions to expand the realm of basketball in Japan for it to better compete on an international level.

### **Key words**

basketball, international rules, intercultural sports, skill specific drills

### **Introduction**

The sport of basketball was invented in 1891 by Dr. James Naismith at Springfield College in western Massachusetts. Naismith, a transplanted Canadian and physical education instructor, had wanted to develop a new team game without the punishing physical contact of his former sport of rugby (McLean's, 1995). This class experiment that started with peach baskets placed ten foot high on both sides of the gymnasium took quite a few years to evolve as a sport. Little did Dr. Naismith realize that his invention would years later become an international sport with professional leagues spanning the globe.

Today, the National Basketball Association (N.B.A.) has players hailing from at least 25 nations (www.nba.com, 2000). The 34 foreign-born players are a testament to the international appeal of the sport. The N.B.A. has established itself as a venue in which some of the world's greatest athletes perform to sold-out arenas for nationally televised audiences eight months out of the year. Moreover, the long season, with its many games, has made the league and its players extremely wealthy.

In Japan, the popularity of basketball grew after World War II. The sport was primarily a women's activity and remained that way until the 1970's. However, the huge popularity of a serial-

ized animated comic book called “Slam Dunk” helped usher in a new generation of male players (Inoue, 1991). This phenomenon, coupled with satellite broadcasts of N.B.A. games featuring the physically artistry of Michael Jordan and his Chicago Bulls, raised the popularity level of basketball in Japan by leaps and bounds.

### **International Rules**

Japanese basketball is, however, different than the North American model. It adheres more to Dr. Naismith’s original idea for a non-contact sport because it is played according to international rules. The most obvious difference between the American game and the international adaptation is the shape of the key or paint area on the floor closest to the basket. While American courts have a rectangular shape, international courts have a wider base under the hoop. This rule variance forces offenses to position post players, usually the team’s tallest members, further away from the goal. Judging from the shooting skills of the taller European players in the N.B.A., the wider key forced them to develop an outside shooting game. From a spectator’s perspective, international basketball eliminates much of the pushing and holding associated with the game played in the N.B.A. One Japanese referee, and sometime critic of the current N.B.A., labeled American basketball as more reminiscent of pro wrestling than basketball (Y. Matsuno, personal communication, April 18, 1999).

It is common knowledge when basketball was introduced in Japan, players were hesitant of the sport because of the obvious height disadvantage. This was compensated for by teams rapidly passing the ball around the perimeter to create an open outside shot away from the goal and the taller opponents. However, times have changed in Japan. A more western style diet has physically changed today’s basketball player. Although Japanese cagers are not as tall as American or Chinese players, the height gap is narrowing. Nevertheless, the old-style of strictly perimeter play remains the main offensive set in Japanese basketball offenses. Old habits may be hard to break, but I believe teams are doing themselves a disservice by not utilizing the post position, as a main option for any basketball offense. George Gmelch (1999), a visiting American anthropologist, made the following observation about his club team in Osaka:

Basketball in Japan is more concerned about getting everyone involved. Lots of passing makes sure all players on the floor participate in the game. This differs from most American games in which the best ballplayers do most of the shooting. The highly individualistic, run-and-gun style of inner-city, American pickup basketball would be incomprehensible to my Japanese teammates. (p. 28)

The popularity in Japan of the Chicago Bulls famous “triangle offense,” which begins with a pass into the post player and follows with subsequent passes to other players as they attempt to create a shot, should come as no surprise. The triangle offense and its up-tempo style is a nice fit for a fast break oriented basketball team. However, the majority of the teams I have observed in Japan seem too dependent on this type of game. Although effective if properly executed, I chose to move away from the triangle with my players - since other teams knew all too well how to defend it - and took a far different approach.

### **Whither The Post ?**

As a high school player, I received extensive instruction in “low post offensive skill moves.” In America, good post players are taught to get in front of, and “seal off” the opponent by using one’s hips to establish a lower center of gravity, and then make an appeal for the ball. After doing so, an offensive player will then have a clear path to the goal for a possible lay-up shot or perhaps draw a defensive foul. Better yet, he may have an opportunity to score a lay-up and get fouled to complete a three point play. As long as players do not use their hands, referees usually allow them to jostle a bit for position. However, this style of basketball is strikingly North American. With a wider area underneath the basket, basketball in most other parts of the world, including Europe, Asia and Australia, is much less physical under the goal than on the North American hardwood.

As a result, low post positioning is taught far less in Japan than the States. Fundamentally sound post players occasionally utilize some of the above mentioned positioning to create shots closer to the goal, but it is not a crucial part of an offense. With our university squad, we bucked the system and spent a considerably amount of time working on post positioning for this purpose. Not surprisingly, our taller players quickly became better rebounders and this in turn allowed us to begin our fast break with more consistency. Also, we grabbed more offensive rebounds than our opponents that led to many second chance points. Furthermore, training some of our guards in offensive post skills proved quite useful. During games we often forced opponent’s smaller players to play post defense. Opposing players were placed in entirely new and uncomfortable defensive positions that disrupted their defensive schemes while creating good shots for our best shooters. This tactic was quite effective for pulling opponent’s rebounders - the trigger for any fast break - far from the goal and forcibly placed their point guard in an inopportune position. Thus, the fast break was limited because our opponents were no longer in positions they routinely practiced each and everyday.

Since most teams in Japan rigorously practice the fast break, this approach was a significant part of our success because we caused many teams to play out of sync. In other words, we forced opponents to confront situations they had not practiced and made them adjust. This coaching approach is

quite effective when playing teams of equal or better ability. For opponents with less talent, a more traditional offense may be sufficient.

### **All Inclusive v. Skill Specific**

Typical practices among Japanese basketball teams emphasize many team-oriented drills. All members participate together with the overall goal that such an approach gives everyone a chance to play and take similar shots. Personally, I found this drill work extremely inefficient and impractical. The sets of drills hardly changed on a daily basis and most players explained that they had done the same drills since high school. Of course, culturally it made perfect sense. By allowing everyone a chance to become involved, extensive team drills promote a healthy team atmosphere. Confrontation through possible situations that may cause embarrassment, especially to older, less talented players, was limited. Culture aside, the rate of progress within this system is obviously limited and from a coaching standpoint, I was frustrated. Each day after practice, I wondered to myself “do these guys really want to improve?”

One adage always drilled into our heads in America was to “practice taking shots you will take in the game.” Somehow the “all-inclusive” notion on a practice court here in Japan overrides this concept. Following the team drill philosophy, I watched many of our players continuously take bad shots out of their range and receive passes at ineffective spots on the floor. This led to our practices being filled with poor cross-court passes, numerous turnovers and horrific spacing. Regarding the latter, players often ran into each other on the offensive end. After a few weeks of witnessing this spectacle, I felt that we were unprepared to play a smart controlled game of basketball. If this system was left intact, I foresaw our team winning very few games and sensed a serious letdown in team morale.

At this point, I gathered our squad together and asked whether they would like to be a typical university “social club” whose sole purpose was to have a few laughs, take some careless shots at the hoop, and not worry about wins and losses or ... become a bona fide university basketball team. If they agreed to become a team, I explained that they would have to make a bigger commitment to the game and to our practices on a daily basis. They collectively agreed to become a university basketball team so we set about changing our practice routine. First, I asked them to think about how we can prepare to practice shots we will likely take in a game. Together, we implemented a new set of position specific drills to focus on “game shots.”

Each practice, players were split up at opposing baskets into post players or forwards and guards. There, they worked on position specific drills for approximately twenty minutes. Guards not only practiced shooting, but also the ball sweep, jab steps, and a variety of fakes. Most of the players had not practiced these moves before, so it took a few weeks for them to complete the drills without turn-

overs. My initial mistake was assuming that our players, like most American kids, had received drill work in this area under the guidance of coaches. Unfortunately, it was obvious that our players never received proper instruction.

After basic skills levels improved, one-on-one drills permitting only one dribble for the offense beginning at the top of the key were added. This drill simulated game-like conditions because after receiving a pass, players had to quickly make a one dribble burst toward the goal and create a shot. I urged defensive players to quickly determine their opponent's weakness and force them to that hand or side of the court. Frustrating at first, players had to adjust and learn to use their opposite hands more than they ever had before. By the end of the season, it was obvious that these drills helped create more versatile ambidextrous basketball players. Besides the skills being tested, these drills also brought about friendly competition amongst teammates.

Almost immediately, I noticed that the number of traveling turnovers by our guards - a major problem area prior to the implementation of position specific drills - during scrimmage games significantly decreased. Furthermore, our guards seemed to have much more confidence with the ball and any earlier tentativeness displayed by the younger players was eliminated. Daily drills made individual moves a natural basketball movement. Better yet, the movements were now fundamentally sound and much more efficient as players learned to receive the ball at better positions on the floor which led to higher percentage shots.

For the forwards, the aforementioned positioning drills along with how to properly appeal for the ball (with the hand at or below waist level) was taught. Players were also introduced to the jump hook, or baby hook as it is more commonly referred to in Japanese. This shot is vital for a post player to have in their arsenal so we spent considerable time working on it. Again, like the guards, I forced the post players to develop an opposite hand shot. One lesson I did learn when introducing footwork and offensive skill moves was to keep it simple. Initially, I thought I could teach four or five moves, but instead had to rely on two or three because our practice time was limited. Also, I had to spend more time on head fakes than I anticipated and did not want to compromise this important skill. By season's end, I was pleased with our post players progress and believe that their screening out techniques and offensive rebounding prowess gave our team an additional 12 points per game.

### **Nurturing Culture**

Generally, Japanese players follow the cultural pattern of deference to authority. While American coaches are usually hampered by the presence of one or two inflated egos per team, coaching in Japan is nearly devoid of such an occurrence. Players unwilling to work together with the team are deemed undesirable and usually do not stay with the program. Therefore, some of the negative ele-

ments that can destroy a team sport in the States are nonexistent in Japan.

Also, as a respect to authority, players always thank their elders or coaches after they receive advice. While this may be a formality, I think Japanese players are more accustomed to listening to advice and criticism than American kids. Furthermore, two or three times during practice, the coach and / or captains gather the team at mid-court to hammer out details or better explain drill work. Younger players diligently listen and hardly ever question the hierarchical nature of the system. Again, this differs from an American team where a coach may explain details at the beginning of practice, encourage feedback and work with the team to foster a horizontal social relationship.

One very positive cultural trait I encountered in coaching was the duty of older classmen, or *senpai*, to assist their underlings, *kohai*, with new moves near the end of practice. Throughout the season, I placed a lot of responsibility on our seniors to work with the freshmen to help them become better players. Each practice I tried to devote time to nurture this relationship. While it was difficult to appraise skill improvement from this exercise, it was clear freshmen really appreciated the extra time and *amaeru* (Doi, 1994).<sup>1</sup>

### **Not Quite The Same**

In the United States, college basketball games are synonymous with a boisterous student body replete with cheerleaders, a mascot and dedicated fans from the local community. The best schools recruit throughout North America, and now have extended that search globally, offering four-year scholarships to promising young athletes. The main objective is to earn a bid into the national tournament at season's end (affectionately dubbed March Madness) where national television exposure helps turn a university's name into a household word.

In Japan, a comparable event is the summer high school baseball tournament held at Koshien stadium. However, the one major difference between Japanese high school baseball and American college basketball is money. Top-ranked college basketball programs receive lucrative contracts by cable TV stations to broadcast their season's games. In America, college basketball, as well as football, is truly a big business.

Therefore, I found it frustrating at times that the university and student body did not give more emotional and financial support to its teams. On some occasions, we got a handful of students to at-

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<sup>1</sup>Takeo Doi, a famous clinical psychologist, believes that Japanese people have an innate dependency on socially superior people within one's inner group. He believes this phenomenon developed from a child's relationship with its mother. A diligent child receives *amaeru*, or loving care, from a mother. Doi extended this condition to cover most social relationships in Japan's vertical society.

tend our games. One time, I even had the university dance troupe perform at halftime, but the crowds were sparse as most students were committed to a lifestyle that demanded part-time work during the weekend. Besides, the gymnasiums in our league lack seating facilities for fans so this hinders university basketball from becoming a spectator sport.

Perhaps part of my disappointment is based on an American ideal. Sports and competition are a far more important aspect of American culture than in Japan. Instead, college sports in Japan are merely part of an overall club activity system. They serve more as a social network than a competitive sports environment. Except for a few superior sports programs at elite schools, most members foot the bill for club activities and team results are virtually unknown on campus. Newspapers hardly ever cover university sports so the public has no chance to get involved in local teams.

### **Inescapable Nuisances**

As a basketball player, my game reached a much higher level when I started weight training and cross-training for cardiovascular endurance. I no longer felt tired at the end of games and learned to use physical strength to create easier shots closer to the goal. So, it was only natural for me to suggest the same for our players to enhance themselves in the same manner. Unfortunately, our school does not have adequate facilities to accomplish this kind of training, although we were able to implement track sprints. For most of the team, the additional 400 yen daily charge to weight train at a private facility was beyond their meager weekly budget. Nevertheless, a few players took up my suggestion to weight train and two in particular, showed marked improvement in all facets of their game.

Yet another nuisance I had trouble living with as a basketball coach was the number of smokers on our squad. This goes hand in hand with the large percentage of nationwide male smokers in Japan. As soon as practice ended, this group immediately headed for the hallway and gathered around the ashtrays to smoke. At first glance, I joked about the situation and hoped they would realize the absurdity of a serious athlete also being a smoker. They embarrassingly laughed at my comments. For most of them, they see no reason to quit. Many of their elders in high school smoked and even some or most of their coaches. In Japanese society, young people constantly receive assurances that smoking is a fashionable trait for young men. There is no public outcry over smoking advertisements on billboards, in magazines and on television. Many of Japan's most popular entertainers smoke and, risking criticism from clinical psychologists, I truly believe children seek to emulate those they admire. Consequently, young people become socialized to the positive aspects of cigarette usage through the media.

I thought about putting my foot down and barring smoking on our team, but I wondered if this would be perceived as cultural imperialism on my part? Many Americans disdain smoking and in re-

cent years have enacted laws that forbid smoking in public places. As a deterrent, policymakers have raised the price of a pack of cigarettes two-fold over the past decade. Here in Japan, the common excuse one hears is that smoking relieves stress for men whose tightly wound life needs an occasional escape. While I cannot disagree with the stress brought on by jam-packed rush hour trains and an economy mired in prolonged recession, I have a difficult time justifying the social costs of smoking. It runs counter to a group-oriented society as it infringes upon those around you and costs taxpayers billions of yen in increased health care costs.

In the end, I explained that a personal act such as smoking makes individuals physically weaker by damaging the cardiovascular system. Since basketball is a team sport that demands maximum physical conditioning, smoking contradicts this because it is a selfish act. Therefore, I wanted to have non-smokers playing for our team as they are far less likely to get fatigued at the end of the game and will make fewer mistakes than tired smokers. A few players understood my point and actually quit, but most, much to my chagrin, kept on puffing away.

### **Steps Needed For Japan To Compete Globally**

The most serious setback hurting Japan in competitive basketball is the absence of youth leagues. In America and other countries, these leagues help teach basic skills to children starting in primary school. More importantly, youth leagues serve as a feeder program from grade school into junior high school where some of basketball's most formative years exist. Without the proper base usually acquired in youth leagues, players just starting the sport in their teen years are far behind others who began in primary school. Regrettably, the situation in Japan today puts kids developmentally three to five years behind other Asian countries.

Another element not being fully utilized is the summer basketball camp. Today, there are very few basketball clinics and camps conducted during school vacations. These critical periods could allow younger players an opportunity to learn advanced skills from well-known coaches and players and then compete against others their age. In addition, more international competition against China and the Philippines can only help Japanese basketball and should be pursued.

Talented players should try to study abroad in the United States or Canada where basketball is played at a higher level. Last year's high school star Yuta Tabuse, a flashy point guard from Akita commercial high school, is doing just that and will likely play for a university in Hawaii next year. I hope this will start a trend. These players can then take their acquired knowledge back to Japan and share it with others. This "multiplier effect" could raise the standard of Japanese basketball and better prepare its teams for international competition.

In America, basketball season starts in November and usually ends in March. Japanese sport



teams typically begin their seasons in April at the start of the academic calendar and then continue to practice for the entire year. Personally, if I had to practice basketball for the entire year, I am not sure how long I would have kept playing the sport. While instruction is always important in athletics, I also believe that the creativity of playing “pickup” or street ball with friends in the off-season is crucial for any player’s development. For me, it made the sport fun. Within inner-cities of America, the daily meeting on a playground basketball court is almost more a social event than a competition. Friendships are made, rivals are established, and pride of one’s game is born.

Japan is different. Full-length outdoor basketball courts are a rarity and besides baseball is the sport that attracts the nation’s best athletes and draws the biggest crowds. Worse, basketball coaches cannot tap into the athletic talent pool available to North American coaches. With the year-round practice regiment, high school athletes must choose a single sport and stick with it. Accordingly, many potential two and three sport athletes, a common occurrence in the West, play only one sport in Japan. If better athletes were permitted to play seasonal sports, talented players might make for stronger high school sports programs. Better yet, it may eliminate burnout and encourage more student-athletes - unwilling to commit to the current grinding year long system - to participate in youth sports.

## **Conclusion**

Men’s basketball is a relatively new sport in Japan. So far, it has made great strides in the few decades since its inception. Hopefully, Japan can meld some of its cultural attributes, such as team play and organization with more of those of the West. If it does so, Japan will have a chance to compete much more competitively on a global level. At the university level, school organizers should realize the marketing potential that athletic teams possess. Spectator seats need to become a part of school gymnasiums. Central heating during winter games could make watching a game more pleasant and less like going ice fishing. If these changes can be implemented, college sports in Japan will create an atmosphere where school pride flourishes and social belonging or identity increases. Sometimes it is amazing how much cheering fans can motivate an athlete. Who knows? By the end of the next decade, we may even see a Japanese player in the N.B.A.

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