Book review

Christopher P. Hood

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Book review


Too few academics study sports. As I know from my own experience of writing an undergraduate dissertation about the creation of the J.League and the plans to host the 2002 World Cup in Japan, many are happy to deride sports as not a serious subject, and that is part of the reason why I have yet to return to doing much work in this area. Yet, as Kelly (p.1) notes, ‘sports are far more than fun and games’. Kelly’s study, therefore, is a very welcome addition to the field.

The first thing to consider in relation to the book, is who is it for? Is it for academics (and if so, which discipline)? Is it for sports fans? Is it specifically for Hanshin Tigers fans? Of course, these three readerships (and there may be others) are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, as an academic who likes a variety of sports and who has been supporting Hanshin Tigers for nearly 30 years, the book particularly appealed to me. I have been looking forward to its publication since I was aware of its development, having heard Kelly give a presentation at Oxford Brookes back in 2011. It’s been a long wait and the issue of timing is one of the issues that any reader needs to be aware of when reaching for this book. Even when Kelly gave that paper, some 8 years had passed since he had completed the last of eight main fieldwork trips to Japan, having started the work in 1996. Does this mean that the book is out of date, therefore? I would say most certainly not – so long as you approach it in the right frame of mind. After all, the reality is that many academic studies can become dated in some form soon after publication, regardless of when fieldwork has been done. But most will have lessons for readers, even if there have been some significant changes (as applies in this study, which Kelly addresses in the final chapter which based on additional research done in the years since 2003).

During much of the time that Kelly conducted his fieldwork, and most of the years prior to that, Hanshin Tigers were not a successful team. In fact, they often finished bottom of the League. Kelly admits (p.21) that when he began his research he was ‘fixated on and somewhat blinded by this apparent thematic of failure’. But, Kelly, through his fieldwork, came to appreciate that Hanshin Tigers is more than a matter of performance in the Central League standings. Given how many times Kelly presses home the poor performance of the Tigers over the decades, I find it somewhat ironic that in years I have been supporting them, the Tigers have been the most successful of the three professional sports teams I support (Cincinnati Bengals have only been to one Super Bowl, which they lost, and...
Sheffield United have not won the top division title or the FA Cup. Yes, there is a shared culture of pain amongst Hanshin Tigers fans (particularly those who have been supporting them in the years prior to 2003), but, as Kelly also finds, the victories through the season, particularly over main rivals, and the hope that this year will be different can help sustain many fans.

However, more than this, what Kelly discovered is that the Hanshin Tigers and support of them is a much greater phenomenon, which he calls a ‘Sportsworld’. The sportsworld refers to the whole soap opera and extended impact and drama of professional sports. Although in the final chapter Kelly points to how elements of this may be changing, so the almost constant coverage on the front page of sports newspapers of Hanshin Tigers all year long (despite matches largely only played from March to October) is waning in its significance, the development of online communities of fans (an area which Kelly has not had an opportunity to consider in this book) will ensure that many of the findings of this book will be maintained. In essence, Kelly’s sportsworld concept ties in with what I have long argued is the most important aspect of any sports team: whilst league tables and trophies suggest that teams are aiming to be the best (but as Kelly points out only one team ultimately has a successful season), fundamentally every team is the best at being itself. That nature, its culture, is what fits with the fans and what maintains them even when results suggest that the team is anything but the best. Hanshin Tigers are the best... at being the Hanshin Tigers.

Although Kelly is an anthropologist, there is much for historians and those who study journalism too. Indeed, I would suggest that the book could have been packaged, with some minor alterations to structure, more as a historical study than an anthropological one. However, worrying about such labelling may also be unhelpful. There is much that students of Japan will find useful in this study; even if not all of it, or necessarily in the order that the chapters are presented (those unfamiliar with Japan or baseball may want to start with two of the latter historical chapters, for example).

There were a few things that I would like to have seen handled differently in the book. Personally, I don’t like the convention of not writing Japanese words in italics once the word has been first introduced and written in italics the first time. I also think that the book assumes that readers may be quite familiar with baseball and be American. Although those who have no, or limited knowledge, of baseball should still be able to follow the text (perhaps aided by checking some terms online), the general comments about assumptions of people’s thoughts on Japanese baseball and the switching (sometimes on a single page) between presenting financial information in US$ and Yen jars a little. That there are many instances where the book refers to what others think but without references is somewhat unhelpful, as is the relative lack of suggestions for further reading, for example. Someone who knows about sport in Japan, or journalism in Japan, will find this book a useful addition to their knowledge, but it cannot stand alone.

There were two things that I would like to have seen included in the book. One, given that there is a glossary of Japanese baseball terms, would have been an appendix including a detailed summary of how the Hanshin Tigers performed in each season and the inclusion of the team song, Rokkō Oroshi. Although...
such things can be found easily on the internet, and the former will become dated as the years pass, I think their inclusion could have been beneficial. The other thing that I think needed mention, albeit my own research interests may be driving this to a degree, is that in the book's coverage of the 1985 championship year, there is a somewhat puzzling lack of mention of the JAL flight JL123 crash of that year. This crash took the life of the Hanshin Tigers president and most of the victims on the flight were from Kansai. Although many Japanese were happy to see the Hanshin Tigers do well (at last) that year anyway as they were, unusually clearly in a strong position all season, the crash further galvanised many to support the Tigers that year as a means of also voicing their support for the families of the JL123 victims.

On balance, the book is a wonderful addition to the studies on Japanese sport and will be of use to many of those in disciplines other than sports or anthropology. It is also not just a book for Hanshin Tigers fans – though I am sure that they will be able to get more out of it than fans of other teams. I hope that it will encourage more to do such studies and it will encourage people to also explore Kelly's other articles and publications.

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