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Book review

Christopher P. HoodDr.

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Book review

William W. Kelly, *The Sportsworld of the Hanshin Tigers: Professional Baseball in Modern Japan*, University of California Press, Oakland, 2019, 315 pp.

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 Does this mean that the book is out of date, therefore?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

47 Sheffield United have not won the top
48 division title or the FA Cup). Yes, there is
49 a shared culture of pain amongst Hanshin
50 Tigers fans (particularly those who have
51 been supporting them in the years prior
52 to 2003), but, as Kelly also finds, the vic-
53 tories through the season, particularly
54 over main rivals, and the hope that this
55 year will be different can help sustain
56 many fans.

57 However, more than this, what Kelly
58 discovered is that the Hanshin Tigers and
59 support of them is a much greater phe-
60 nomenon, which he calls a 'Sportsworld'.
61 The sportsworld refers to the whole soap
62 opera and extended impact and drama of
63 professional sports. Although in the final
64 chapter Kelly points to how elements of
65 this may be changing, so the almost con-
66 stant coverage on the front page of sports
67 newspapers of Hanshin Tigers all year
68 long (despite matches largely only played
69 from March to October) is waning in its
70 significance, the development of online
71 communities of fans (an area which Kelly
72 has not had an opportunity to consider in
73 this book) will ensure that many of the
74 findings of this book will be maintained.
75 In essence, Kelly's sportsworld concept
76 ties in with what I have long argued is the
77 most important aspect of any sports
78 team: whilst league tables and trophies
79 suggest that teams are aiming to be the
80 best (but as Kelly points out only one
81 team ultimately has a successful season),
82 fundamentally every team is the best at
83 being itself. That nature, its culture, is
84 what fits with the fans and what maintains
85 them even when results suggest that the
86 team is anything but the best. Hanshin
87 Tigers are the best... at being the
88 Hanshin Tigers.

89 Although Kelly is an anthropologist,
90 there is much for historians and those
91 who study journalism too. Indeed, I
92 would suggest that the book could have
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been packaged, with some minor altera-
tions 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 neces-
sarily 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 con-
vention of not writing Japanese words in
italics once the word has been first intro-
duced and written in italics the first time.
I also think that the book assumes that
readers may be quite familiar with base-
ball 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 sum-
mary of how the Hanshin Tigers per-
formed in each season and the inclusion
of the team song, *Rokkō Oroshi*. Although

94 such things can be found easily on the
95 internet, and the former will become
96 dated as the years pass, I think their
97 inclusion could have been beneficial.
98 The other thing that I think needed
99 mention, albeit my own research interests
100 may be driving this to a degree, is that in
101 the book's coverage of the 1985 cham-
102 pionship year, there is a somewhat puz-
103 zling lack of mention of the JAL flight
104 JL123 crash of that year. This crash took
105 the life of the Hanshin Tigers president
106 and most of the victims on the flight were
107 from Kansai. Although many Japanese
108 were happy to see the Hanshin Tigers do
109 well (at last) that year anyway as they
110 were, unusually clearly in a strong pos-
111 ition all season, the crash further galvan-
112 ised many to support the Tigers that year
113 as a means of also voicing their support
114 for the families of the JL123 victims.

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115 On balance, the book is a wonderful
116 addition to the studies on Japanese sport
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and will be of use to many of those in dis-
ciplines other than sports or anthropol-
ogy. 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 encour-
age more to do such studies and it will
encourage people to also explore Kelly's
other articles and publications.

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