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The ‘30-Gold’ Ambition and Japan’s Momentum for Elite Sport Success: Feasibility and Policy Changes

Jinming Zheng¹ and Dongfeng Liu²

Abstract

This article reviews Japan’s elite sport capabilities and analyses Japan’s recent elite sport policy changes. The policy analysis is underpinned by Kingdon’s (1984, 1995) multiple streams framework. Data were gathered from both official performance-related databases and websites, and official and semi-official documents in Japanese and English. The main findings are that (1) Japan’s ‘30-gold’ target is not unattainable, although the narrow source of Olympic gold medals is a potential constraint; (2) the Japan Sports Agency (JSA) and the *Suzuki Plan* resonate with the government’s values and are largely supported by the public; and (3) policy changes were prompted/accelerated by both the political event and problem-based policy windows created by the 2011 Earthquake and other economic and social problems, Tokyo’s successful Olympic bid in 2013 and Japan’s performance at the 2016 Olympics. The study highlights the utility of the multiple streams framework and some opportunities for further advancement.

Keywords: Japan; Elite Sport; Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games; Policy Changes; Multiple Streams Framework; Japan Sports Agency; *Suzuki Plan*

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The ‘30-Gold’ Ambition and Japan’s Momentum for Elite Sport Success: Feasibility and Policy Changes

Introduction

The burgeoning of government interest and investment has been a dominant characteristic of elite sport development over the last two decades. The concomitant ‘global sporting arms race’ (Oakley and Green 2001) has locked many nations on to a path from which it is difficult for them to deviate (Houlihan and Zheng 2013). Elite sport is an irresistible dimension of sport policy for Olympic host nations (Houlihan 2011). Almost all recent Summer Olympic host nations, ranging from Australia, China and the UK, to Greece and Brazil, elevated the support for elite sport and were rewarded with a notable increase in Olympic medal performances before, during and even after their home Olympics. However, this type of ‘elite sport legacy’ (Chen, Zheng, and Dickson 2018, 1276) is fleeting or devoid of sustainability in some cases because of the decline in government support and the rise of later Olympic host nations that target similar sports.

Japan is no exception to the list of Olympic host nations. In June 2018, the Japanese Olympic Committee (JOC) explicitly announced Japan’s ambitious target of winning 30 gold medals at the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games (Kyodo 2018). While there is a general tendency for all recent Olympic host nations to rise in the gold medal table on home soil, there remains a question mark over the attainability of Japan’s ambitious target. Their target is more than double their twelve gold medal haul from Rio de Janeiro 2016, and is nearly double the size of their greatest ever gold medal haul, 16 gold medals at Tokyo 1964 and Athens 2004.

Despite a plethora of research that directed attention to elite sport, there is a dearth of studies in the English literature that demystify Japan’s elite sport pathways. This relative under-exploration is not commensurate with the growing significance of Japan on the international elite

sport stage, Japan's status as the host nation of the upcoming Summer Olympic Games and the country's elite sport policy developments in recent years. Beyond Japan and despite the clearly discernible impact of government involvement in elite sport development, the application of public policy perspectives to sport policy research remains sparse. The present study aims to bridge these two gaps. An additional value of this paper resides in its timeliness (i.e. researching Japan's final preparations for Tokyo 2020).

It is within this context that the research aims to (1) evaluate Japan's elite sport performances and competitiveness; and (2) critically review the policy changes and resultant policy measures in preparation for the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games since 2013. These two research aims are further split into four research questions:

1. What is Japan's Olympic medal performance in the post-Cold War era and its recent elite sport competitiveness from 2013 to 2020?
2. What were the key policies launched to translate the ambition into actions, why were they successfully promoted and what was the impact of these policies?
3. What were the junctures or windows that prompted these changes?
4. What were the political and public factors that impacted these changes?

The first question, which is more descriptive in nature, corresponds to the first research aim. Research Questions 2, 3 and 4 are underpinned by Kingdon's (1984, 1995) multiple streams framework (MSF), and more specifically, Research Question 2 addresses the policy stream, Research Question 3 corresponds to the problem stream, and Research Question 4 focuses on policy windows and the political stream. Collectively, these four questions explore Japan's preparations for Tokyo 2020. The realization of the 30-gold medal target is a key objective that the recent policy changes and developments aim to pursue. The focus of the policy analysis of

this paper is on Japan's recent elite sport policy changes and developments through the illustrative examples of the creation of the Japan Sports Agency (JSA) and the release of the *Suzuki Plan*.

Data are sourced from both official databases, and official and semi-official documents in Japanese and English. The remainder of the paper comprises four additional sections: literature review, methods, findings and discussion.

Literature Review: Policy Changes and the Multiple Streams Framework (MSF)

Public Policy Theories

Consistent with the focus on elite sport policy changes in Japan, public policy literature provides the theoretical underpinning. Several meso-level public policy frameworks (i.e. those that focus on national sport organizations) have been adopted by scholars to analyse sport policy. Kingdon's (1984, 1995) MSF is a powerful analytical gateway explaining policy making and changes (Baumgartner 2016; Béland and Howlett 2016; Houlihan 2005).

The MSF: Panorama and Structural Elements

Cohen, March, and Olsen's (1972) nascent work on the 'garbage can' model heralded the debut of the MSF. The MSF distinguishes itself from other public policy frameworks by its accent on 'the ambiguity, complexity and degree of residual randomness in policy-making in marked contrast to the dominant assumptions of actor rationality' (Houlihan 2005, 171). Contrasting starkly with the primacy given to rationality which features in many other public policy theories and frameworks, the MSF assumes that public policy is predicated on a 'temporal order' (Zahariadis 2007, 65) which emphasizes ambiguity (Ackrill, Kay, and Zahariadis 2013). A

policy system comprises three largely discrete streams: the problem stream, policy stream, and the political stream. These three streams, in combination with policy windows and policy entrepreneurs, form the five structural elements of the MSF (Kingdon 1995).

The **problem stream** refers to issues that governments address and plan to resolve through three sources: focusing events (e.g. crises such as poor Olympic performances), indicators (e.g. statistics on obesity rates) and feedback on current policies. For example, Jones (1994) claimed that focusing events, most notably crises and disasters, focus considerable public attention on specific issues/problems and are likely to spur policy changes.

The **policy stream** is analogous to a ‘primeval soup’ (Parsons 1995, 194) within which ‘ideas, backed by particular policy communities, float around’ (Houlihan 2005, 171) and vie for acceptance and legitimacy by policy makers. In brief, there are two criteria for determining the survival or elimination of policy ideas: technical feasibility and value acceptability. In many cases, policy changes and policies are dynamic, incremental and developmental, and some policies are more enduring than others (Travis and Zahariadis 2002).

The **political stream** primarily comprises three elements: the national mood, organized political forces (e.g. party ideology and interest groups) and government. Amongst these three elements, Zahariadis (2007) argued that the national mood and government are more likely to affect the government agenda. According to Zahariadis (2007, 73), the national mood is defined when ‘a fairly large number of individuals in a given country tend to think along common lines’. In many cases, policy changes are prompted by a negative national mood with existing policies, or *status quo* (Downs 1972), particularly when the national mood is evolving (Peng, Skinner, and Houlihan 2019). Public opinion surveys are a common indicator of the national mood. The third element (i.e. administrative or legislative turnover) refers to key personnel and structural change

within the government (Zahariadis 2007). For example, John Major's appointment as the United Kingdom's (UK) Prime Minister in 1990 raised the prominence of elite and non-elite sport in the UK.

Normally, the three streams are largely discrete. However, at critical junctures, the problem, policy and political streams are coterminous and coupled. These junctures are termed **policy windows**, representing 'an opportunity for advocates of proposals to push their pet solutions, or to push attention to their special problems' (Kingdon 1995, 165). There are two types of policy windows: 'problem and political windows' (Kingdon 1995, 173). To elaborate, policy windows can be opened by either compelling problems or events in political streams. As Baumgartner (2016) and Weiner (2011) espoused, the MSF is very effective in explaining the crucial timings, or 'windows of opportunity' (Béland and Howlett 2016, 222) for a policy change.

Authors most notably Exworthy and Powell (2004) and Howlett (1998) have further advanced the concept of policy windows. Exworthy and Powell (2004) introduced the broad distinction between 'big windows' at the national level and 'little windows' at the local level. This divide was further localized by Zheng (2017) in the context of elite swimming in China. In specific terms, 'big windows' refer to events beyond elite sport *per se* (e.g. prominent political and economic events), whereas 'little windows' are interpreted as 'sport-specific windows'.

In addition, Howlett (1998) proposed the predictable–unpredictable distinction regarding policy windows and concomitantly all policy windows were further categorized into four types: routine, discretionary, spillover and random. According to Zheng (2017), elite sport policy windows tended to present a certain degree of predictability, but the detailed results or the outcomes in these windows (regular competitions) are more likely unpredictable.

Assembling the three streams requires a promoter or advocate (i.e. a policy entrepreneur). Five elements combined, the successful launch of a policy change is prompted by opening a policy window whereby ‘solutions which have been floating around become attached and coupled to a problem and policy entrepreneurs seize the opportunity to change the decision agenda’ (Parsons 1995, 194) (see Figure 1).

[Figure 1 about here]

The MSF: Applicability, Sport Policy-Related Studies and Gaps

The MSF has utility across a broad range of policy areas, particularly in Western contexts, although its application to sport policy is limited (e.g. in New Zealand, Chalip 1996; in Norway, Bersgard 2000; in China, Peng, Skinner, and Houlihan 2019; Zheng 2017; in Australia, Sotiriadou and Brouwers 2012; and in the UK, King 2009). Moreover, the lack of the adoption of the MSF in non-Western contexts, irrespective of policy areas, is increasingly inconsistent with the shifting geopolitical and sporting prominence of many non-Western countries.

In summary, the MSF provides a useful perspective for analysing Japan’s elite sport policy. However, the role of policy entrepreneurs is not examined in this study because of this study’s reliance on secondary data.

Research Methods

Research Design

This research is predicated on a single case study research design (i.e. Japan) (Yin 2009). The selection of Japan is consistent with the three principles of case selection. The first is that the

case should be ‘significant’ (Denscombe 2007, 39). Japan is a major power on the Summer Olympic stage, the host nation of Tokyo 2020 and has ever-increasing government support for elite sport success. The case should also be ‘typical/representative’ (Stake 1995, 4), or ‘exemplifying’ (Bryman 2016, 62), demonstrated by this study’s coverage of traditional, emerging and relatively lagging sports. The principle of ‘convenience and feasibility’ (Denscombe 2007, 41) also applies to this study, evidenced in the research squad’s linguistic proficiency in Japanese and English, existing knowledge on elite sport in Japan and familiarity with document sources.

Data Collection

This research applied both quantitative and qualitative methods. For Research Question 1, Olympic medal-related data were sourced from the International Olympic Committee (IOC) website (IOC 2019) and Sports-Reference that is a widely-accepted sports statistics website. Congruent with Forrest, McHale, Sanz, and Tena (2017), the Barcelona 1992 Olympic Games was selected as the starting point because it was the first Olympics held in the post-Cold War era and largely immune from boycotts. Data on Japan’s non-Olympic performances (e.g. World Championships 2013-2020) were collected from the International Federations (IFs) websites.

Research Questions 2-4 that investigated Japan’s recent elite sport policy changes relied on official and semi-official documents. While primary interview data would be valuable, the attempt to conduct semi-structured interviews was discouraged by potential Japanese interviewees because of the concerns about disclosing trade secrets to a competitor nation, the need to focus on final preparation for the Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympic Games and the outbreak of the coronavirus. Nevertheless, documents are powerful ‘windows onto social and

organizational realities' (Bryman 2016, 560) and eligible as the sole data sources for social science including elite sport research (e.g. Sotiriadou and Shilbury 2009).

These secondary document data included both printed and online publications and content from official organizations, ranging from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), JSA, Japan Sport Council (JSC), Japanese Olympic Committee (JOC), and Japanese National Federations (NFs) such as the Japan Association of Athletics Federations (JAAF), Nippon Badminton Association (NBA) and the Japan Table Tennis Association (JTТА). Official documents were accompanied by semi-official media sources, namely influential media in Japan most notably Nippon Hoso Kyokai (NHK, Japan Broadcasting Corporation), Asahi Shimbun (News), Sankei Shimbun (News), Nikkei Shimbun (News) and The Japan Times, and foreign media (e.g. Telegraph and Forbes), as well as English academic publications of representative Japanese scholars (e.g. Yoshiyuki Mano, Hiroaki Funahashi, Mayumi Ya-Ya Yamamoto, Satoshi Shimizu and Kentaro Yamada) or researchers that work in Japan and specialize in Japanese sport studies (e.g. Shuying Yuan). Japanese research outputs from CiNii, the most influential Japanese academic database, supplemented the collection of secondary data. All articles published in CiNii are peer-reviewed.

In total, more than 100 printed and online documents/sources were selected and reviewed. Fifty of these provided data for this study. These 50 Japanese and English sources included ten policy publications and financial reports from official Japanese sport and related organizations, 19 internet sources of various Japanese and international organizations (online information, data and news), eight media releases and commentaries from influential Japanese and foreign media companies, and 13 academic publications (i.e. one book and 12 journal articles). Table 1 thoroughly summarizes Japanese sport policy-related documents used in this paper.

[Table 1 about here]

Data Analysis

Medal calculations were performed using Microsoft Excel, while a thematic analysis approach was deployed to process all qualitative document data (Patton 2002). To ensure the quality of data, back translation (between Japanese and English) was conducted for all non-English data (Brislin 1970). Responding to Ryan and Bernard (2003), the research questions and theoretical frameworks, namely four of the five structural elements of Kingdon's (1984, 1995) MSF, directed the theme identification process. Higher and lower order themes were reviewed and verified by other members of this project, who acted as 'critical friends' (Sparkes and Smith 2014).

Trustworthiness

Various techniques were employed to maximize trustworthiness (synonymous with the combination of reliability and validity in quantitative studies) of the data (Guba and Lincoln 1994). Results were interpreted and presented tentatively in recognition that predictions or generalization are not an innate feature of qualitative research (Stiles 1993). The authoritativeness and diversity of the sources of data further reinforced the quality of results.

Findings: Japan's Elite Sport Performances and Tokyo 2020-Derived Policy Changes

Japan's Recent Summer Olympic and World Championship Performances

Olympic Performances: 1992-2016

At the seven most recent Summer Olympic Games combined, Japanese athletes have won 195 medals including 55 gold medals. Gold medals have been sourced from eight sports/disciplines. Japan has been characterized by a relative gender balance with respect to gold medal and medal distributions, and notable progress in recent Olympic Games. Table 2 provides more detail.

[Table 2 about here]

However, a more thorough scrutiny of Japan's Olympic medal performance trajectory revealed that their medals are concentrated in only a few sports/disciplines. To illustrate, over 80% of all Japan's gold medals are in judo, wrestling and swimming. If artistic gymnastics and athletics are included, then these five sports combine to account for 95% of gold medals won (Figure 2). In other words, only three gold medals have been sourced from 'non-Top Five'.

[Figure 2 about here]

World Championships Performances 2013-2020

Since the IOC's decision to award the 2020 Summer Olympics to Tokyo in 2013, Japanese judokas won eight gold medals at each of the World Championships in 2016, 2017 and 2018. Japanese wrestlers won between three and six World Championships gold medals between 2013 and 2019, including six and five gold medals in 2017 and 2018 respectively. Japanese swimmers

averaged two World Championships gold medals between 2013 and 2019. While it is inappropriate to apply Japan's medal performances at the recent World Championships mechanically to the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games, it would be hardly surprising if Japan wins twelve gold medals from these 'Top Three' sports/disciplines.

Artistic gymnastics and athletics have the potential to add another two to three gold medals to Japan's 2020 medal tally. Japanese artistic gymnasts won four and three gold medals at the 2015 and 2017 World Championships respectively, but significantly deteriorated in 2018 and 2019 (no gold medals won). By contrast, Japan's recent gold medal breakthrough and group advantage established in two Olympic men's race walk events (20 and 50 kilometres) is noteworthy. However, Japan's longstanding tradition in men's artistic gymnastics and this discipline's strong home advantage suggest that Japan can expect to maintain its gold medal winning capacity at Tokyo 2020.

Success in other sports beyond these five is critical for the realization of Japan's ambition to win 30 gold medals. Following its Olympic gold medal breakthrough in 2016, Japan has established medal-winning competitiveness in all five badminton events and is a genuine gold medal threat for all four non-mixed doubles events. In the case of table tennis, Japan is arguably the second strongest table tennis nation, behind China (Zheng, T. Oh, Kim, Dickson, and De Bosscher 2018). Additionally, Japan finished at least as the runners-up at the three most recent Women's Softball World Championships in 2014, 2016 and 2018, winning the title in 2014. Badminton, table tennis and softball/baseball combined, Japan has the potential to win at least another one to two gold medals.

The expansion of Japan's Olympic (gold) medal portfolio is underpinned by the successful inclusion of a range of Japan-friendly new sports/disciplines in the Olympic repertoire.

First, Japan can participate in all eight karate events. Japan won an average of four to five gold medals at each the 2014, 2016 and 2018 World Championships. Moreover, according to Appendix 1, Japanese sport climbers and skateboarders have become the strongest amid the world's best athletes. With these new Olympic sports, Japan has the potential to win an additional six or seven gold medals at Tokyo 2020.

During the period 2013-2020, Japanese athletes also won gold medals at the World Championships (or equivalent events) in fencing, sailing, shooting and taekwondo, albeit sporadically, and secured podium places in a wider range of sports. Japanese men's and women's tennis players reached the semi-finals of all four Grand Slams in both singles and doubles events, including but not limited to Naomi Osaka and Kei Nishikori's achievements.

In summary, it is almost certain that Japan is capable of winning at least 25 gold medals in Tokyo. It is noteworthy that this statistical summary represents the most conservative evaluation of Japan's competitiveness, and is therefore more likely to underestimate Japan's capacity. Almost all recent Summer Olympic host nations succeeded in significantly increasing (gold) medal tally and winning a certain number of unexpected/unplanned gold medals. While it is inappropriate to conclude that Japan is certain to realize the '30-gold' target, it is clearly within the realm of possibility. Nevertheless, Japan's ambition is constrained by the perennial issue of a narrow source of gold medals.

Japan's Elite Sport Policy Changes Spurred by the 2013 Decision

Winning the right to host the 2020 Summer Olympic Games in 2013 was a watershed in Japan's sport history. A sea change took place on Japan's elite sport landscape and a succession of 'heavyweight' policies were developed. The most representative policy actions were the

establishment of the JSA in 2015 and the release of the *Suzuki Plan* in 2016. In the following sub-sections, the background behind each of these actions will be analysed using some of the key concepts of Kingdon's (1984, 1995) MSF.

The JSA

The establishment of the JSA on October 1, 2015, affiliated to the MEXT, was a defining moment in Japan's sport history (JSA 2020b; MEXT 2020). As an *ad hoc* sport governing body, the JSA is the 'leader of sports administration' (Sasakawa Sports Foundation 2017, 6) and aims to 'promote sports-related policies and to realize a sports-oriented nation' (MEXT 2020). In the following paragraphs, compelling problems and focusing events that generated a policy window which resulted in the establishment of the JSA will be identified.

From the perspective of **policy windows**, compelling problems or events in political streams often trigger policy changes (Kingdon 1995). This explains why these two structural elements are integrated in this section. The creation of this specialized sport-specific government agency was embedded within two significant political events: the publication of the *Basic Act on Sport* in 2011 and Tokyo's successful Olympic bid in 2013 (JSA 2020b). While the IOC's 2013 decision certainly provided another powerful impetus for establishing the JSA, the JSA had been conceived prior to Tokyo's successful bid. Therefore, the Japanese government's policy objective of transforming Japan into 'a sports-oriented nation' (MEXT 2020), highlighted in the *Basic Act on Sport* (2011), warranted and enabled the JSA and Tokyo's bid for the 2020 Olympics. To pursue the 'hosting of international competitions such as the Olympic and Paralympic Games' was a key policy goal identified in Japan's *Sport Basic Plan* issued in March 2012, pursuant to the *Basic Act on Sport* (2011) (MEXT 2012, 6). Therefore, Tokyo's successful

bid in 2013 was a major catalyst rather than initial policy window for the formation of the JSA. Prior to Tokyo's successful Olympic bid in 2013, Tokyo's failed 2009 bid for the 2016 Olympic Games had also boosted sport policy development, namely the *Sports Basic Law* in 2011 (Yamamoto 2012). Tokyo's unsuccessful bid for the 2016 Olympics also sought to stimulate Japan's economy and was a prelude to the city's bid to host the 2020 Olympics (Yuan 2013).

Concerning problem-focused policy windows, the establishment of the JSA was not isolated from the broader Japanese social and political context. This context includes the 2011 Tohoku (Northeast) Earthquake and Tsunami, as well as other economic and social issues (Shimizu 2014). As Yuan (2013) summarized, the central concern was to unite and inspire the nation from these events (Henry and Uchiumi 2001). These events, to some extent at least, were used to justify the *Sport Basic Plan* as part of the 'Activating Japan through Sport' (MEXT 2012) campaign and Tokyo's bid for the 2020 Olympic Games. While the catastrophic earthquake and ensuing tsunami brought the recovery of affected areas into focus, the MEXT and the then Tokyo governor Shintaro Ishihara maintained that Tokyo's bid for the 2020 Olympic Games would be a powerful catalyst for the reconstruction and revival of Japan in the wake of the Earthquake in 2011 (MEXT 2011; Telegraph 2011). The 2011 Earthquake acted as both a policy window further elevating the status of sport including the hosting of sports events and elite sport success, and a focusing event (crisis) in **problem stream** terms.

The JSA's remit is wide-ranging, including elite sport, community sport, international affairs, collaboration amongst relevant government agencies and *ad hoc* Olympic and Paralympic-related functions (JSA 2020b, 2020c; MEXT 2020). Amid all policy areas, international exchanges and cooperation are comparatively distinctive policy solutions

highlighted in the policy stream. These solutions have had significant implications for Japan's improved elite sport performances on the international stage (JSA 2020d).

From the **policy stream** perspective, the JSA's recent *Reinforcing International Information Strategy Project*, or the programme of *Boosting IF Representative Number* has been a particularly noteworthy policy solution because of its relevance to Japan's sport performances and prospective Olympic (gold) medal success. The rationale was to ensure the full potential of Japanese athletes' capabilities on the international stage, which necessitated Japan's increased voice in and active engagement with the IFs' decision-making process (JSA 2020e).

The detailed approaches stated in this policy solution mainly comprised two elements: (1) support for Japanese representation in the governance committees of the IOC and the IFs; and (2) support for cultivating young talent most notably from various NFs for sport diplomacy roles (JSA 2020e). The former aimed at enhancing Japan's policy making power and influence in the IFs and the IOC, while the latter planned to cultivate future Japanese sports diplomats and further advance the globalization of Japanese NFs (JSA 2020f).

The JSA's international campaign has left a positive and indelible **imprint** on Japan's international representation in various IFs. Currently, there are 22 senior Japanese members (at least members of the council or executive committee) working in 21 IFs of Summer Olympic sports. This includes the President of the IF of gymnastics and Vice Presidents of the IFs pertaining to triathlon, table tennis and sport climbing (JSA 2020e).

Japan is having success in new Olympic sports and events. As noted previously, Japan succeeded in adding their traditional sports and potential (gold) medal sources of karate and baseball/softball to the 2020 Olympic repertoire. The inclusion of mixed double's table tennis

event after Japan's gold medal breakthrough at the World Championships in this event, and of team judo event in Tokyo 2020 were additional illustrations of Japan's sport diplomacy.

An equally notable impact of the international strategy as a policy solution is that Japan's strengths in certain sports are not constrained by participation limits. Some Olympic sports restrict the number of events that any single nation can participate in. For example, the limits in weightlifting and taekwondo erode the dominance of China and South Korea respectively. However, Japanese athletes can participate in all 14 judo events, six women's wrestling events and will compete in all eight karate events at Tokyo 2020. The absence of any event number restrictions enabled Japanese judokas to win eight out of the 14 gold medals at Athens 2004 and twelve medals amid the total 14 events at Rio de Janeiro 2016, as well as Japanese women's wrestlers' five-medal (including four gold) achievement in all six events at Rio de Janeiro 2016 (Sports-Reference 2020). A possible explanation lies in the fact that there are two Japanese members in the executive committee of the IF for judo (JSA 2020e).

The Suzuki Plan

In many cases, policy windows are opened by either compelling problems in the problem stream or events in political streams (Kingdon 1995). The *Suzuki Plan*, named after the JSA Commissioner Daichi Suzuki, was an elite sport-focused policy document published by the JSA on October 3, 2016, in the immediate aftermath of the 2016 Olympics (JSA 2020a). The plan sought to bolster Japan's quest for elite sport success at Tokyo 2020 and establish a sustainable support system for elite sport beyond 2020 (JSA 2016a). In the following paragraphs, compelling problems and focusing events that generated a policy window which resulted in the establishment of the JSA will be explored.

From the perspective of **policy windows**, this landmark policy document was issued against the backdrop of (1) the commencement of the Tokyo Olympiad and its concomitant performance expectation and pressure on Japanese elite sport practitioners (a political event-based policy window); and (2) Japan's improved yet problematic (gold) medal performances at Rio de Janeiro 2016 (both a problem in the problem stream manifested by quantified indicators, namely medal performances, and a problem-driven policy window) (JSA 2018).

With respect to the problem-driven policy window, the *Suzuki Plan* clearly referred to Japan's success in only a few sports:

Compared to a total of 13 sports/disciplines at London 2012, only ten sports/disciplines contributed at least one medal at Rio de Janeiro 2016. ... Japan only has a small number of fixed range of trustworthy sports/disciplines to source Olympic medals. The competition with a number of super and major powers in these trustworthy sports/disciplines has remained intense and the reliance on this narrow source renders it very difficult (for us) to achieve a significant increase in the medal tally on the Olympic stage (JSA 2016a, 1).

This problem (i.e. narrow sources and extremely skewed pattern of medal distributions) acted as a powerful 'wake-up call'. The *Suzuki Plan* soon followed. This corroborates Kingdon's (1995) view on the overlap between policy windows and **problem stream** within the MSF machinery.

Six detailed **policy solutions (policy stream)** were identified in the *Suzuki Plan* which formed the policy stream: A. establishing a cohesive system to support a mid- and long-term competitiveness enhancement strategic plan, involving the JSA, JSC, NFs, JOC, the Japan High Performance Sports Centre (JHPSC), Japan Paralympic Committee (JPC) and JSC; B.

consolidating the function of the JHPSC including increased support for sport intelligence, information collection and sport technology, and further promotion of the athlete data centre (JSC 2019); C. increasing support for talent and athlete identification and development most notably the Japan Rising Star Project initiated in 2017 (J-STAR 2020); D. providing *ad hoc* support for female athletes and supporting staff; E. developing and recruiting high-performance sport talent particularly coaches; and F. furnishing bespoke strategic assistance for Tokyo 2020.

Within the **policy stream**, the distinctiveness of F: strategic planning resides in the identification of two periods: solid foundation (2017-2018) and final spurt (2019-2020). The former involved active support for all sports, whereas in the second phase, funding would be aimed primarily at those sports likely to win medals (JSA 2019b). In March 2019, the JSA announced that five sports (i.e. karate, judo, artistic gymnastics, badminton and wrestling) were rated S (first-tiered) and ten rated A (second-tiered) (i.e. swimming, athletics, table tennis, tennis, sailing, baseball, softball, weightlifting, skateboarding and sport climbing) for prioritization (JSA 2019a).

The **impact** of the six aforementioned policy solutions in the policy stream is clearly discernible. Regarding Policy Initiative C that was concerned with talent identification, Japan's establishment of group advantage in women's badminton and table tennis since the Rio de Janeiro Olympiad has been a prime example of the positive impact of this approach.

Concerning Policy E, the impact is illustrated by foreign coaches' substantial contributions to Japan's recent rise in badminton and table tennis. The former South Korean Olympic champion Joo-bong Park's contributions, combined with the role coaches from other leading badminton nations (e.g. Indonesia and Malaysia, NBA 2020a, 2020b) play, is widely

accepted as a fundamental contributory factor of the notable success of Japanese elite badminton most notably in but not limited to women's doubles players in recent year (Asahi 2019b).

Japan's newfound success in a range of sports has manifested and been fuelled by Policy Initiative F in relation to Japan's strategic planning and prioritization approach. Responding to both the issue of a narrow source of Olympic (gold) medals and the performance pressure on home soil in 2020, Japan has actively searched for additional sources of competitive advantage. The most prominent examples included badminton, race walking and table tennis, and the soon-to-be Olympic sports of skateboarding and sport climbing.

For example, badminton started to receive substantial grants from the JSC for athlete development and support in 2015 and was promoted to a priority sport for the Tokyo Olympiad (NBA 2015; JSA 2019a). According to Appendix 1, following the Olympic gold medal breakthrough at Rio de Janeiro 2016, Japanese badminton players have established dominance in women's doubles, and prominence in men's and women's singles and men's doubles, and to a lesser extent, in mixed doubles. In table tennis, Japanese players have consistently secured medals in both male and female events and won a gold medal in the new Olympic event, namely mixed doubles in 2017 (JTТА 2020). Japan has become one of the second strongest table tennis nations on the international stage. Japan's recent dominance in men's race walking including at the Doha 2019 World Championships reflects the strategic prioritization of race walking within athletics (JAAF 2020a, 2020b, 2020c, 2020d). All these examples highlight the positive policy impact of the *Suzuki Plan* in the policy stream.

The Political Stream and The Policy Stream: Criteria for the Survival of Policies

Three elements underpin the **political stream**: the national mood, organized political forces (e.g. party ideology) and government. In government and party terms, the Shinzo Abe government and the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) secured committed support for Tokyo 2020 (Funahashi and Mano 2014). Increasing sport participation and post-earthquake-tsunami economic revival was the key justification. This led to the formation of the JSA and the publication of the *Suzuki Plan*, both aimed at transforming Japan into ‘a sports-oriented nation’ (Yamada 2020). The JSA’s Olympic preparation-specific budget (support for elite sport capacity enhancement only) increased to 10.05 billion Japanese Yen in 2020, 0.9 billion Yen more than in 2017 (JSA 2017, 2020g).

In fact, Shinzo Abe-led LDP government’s consistent support for Tokyo 2020 and an increased haul needs to be understood within the wider political and economic context of Japan. Following a relatively unsuccessful and brief tenure as the Prime Minister between 2006 and 2007, Abe used sport to accumulate popularity and political capital to cement his second Prime Ministership since his return to power in 2012 (Bosack 2019; Mark 2016). The successful bid for and hosting of the 2020 Olympics would provide a ‘fourth arrow’ of ‘Abenomics’ (i.e. the economic policies advocated by Shinzo Abe: the first arrow being monetary easing, the second arrow being fiscal stimulus and the third arrow being structural reforms, Harner 2013), and has been portrayed as a key contributory factor of Japan’s economic reinvigoration and social reform (Ichii 2019; Soble 2013). Thus, Tokyo 2020 and elite sport have enjoyed policy legitimacy and endorsement within the Cabinet, under the more direct aegis of the government.

From the perspective of national mood, public attitude has also been largely supportive of elite sport, in spite of the aforementioned concern over the resource competition with

earthquake-tsunami recovery (Asahi 2019a; Sankei Biz 2013). According to Funahashi, De Bosscher and Mano (2015) and Funahashi, Shibli, Sotiriadou, Mäkinen, Dijk, and De Bosscher (2019), Japanese general public has expressed reasonably high acceptance of elite sport development that underpinned the *Suzuki Plan*. This public support was evident in JSA's (2018) own research that more than three quarters of respondents from the general public had 'high expectations' (JSA 2016b, 13) of Japanese elite athletes' success at Tokyo 2020. Therefore, government, party ideology and mainstream national mood combined, the political stream acted as an impetus behind Japanese government's ever-increasing support for elite sport success.

Within Kingdon's (1984, 1995) MSF, **technical feasibility** and **value acceptability** influence greatly the survival of policy ideas and proposals. These two factors are effective in explaining the policy changes in Japan. Both the JSA and its IF membership/sports diplomacy initiative, and all six policies in the *Suzuki Plan*, were feasible in finance, human resource and technological terms, and further facilitated by increased government support.

Value acceptability is further divided into government attitude and public acceptance. The former is consistent with aforementioned Shinzo Abe government's commitment to supporting Tokyo 2020 (Funahashi and Mano 2014), propelled by the campaign of activating Japan through sport and reviving the nation from the 2011 Earthquake and Tsunami and lack of economic growth. Therefore, the formation of the JSA and the publication of the *Suzuki Plan* accord with the government's desire to transform Japan into 'a sports-oriented nation' (Yamada 2020). The high level of political stability (i.e. Shinzo Abe's continuous Prime Ministership) has further eliminated any chance of policy discontinuities prompted by regime changes. Therefore, in this case, the government attitude element within the criterion of value acceptability is analogous to the government and party ideology dimension in the political stream.

From the perspective of public attitude relating to value acceptability, the largely supportive public mood and reasonably high public expectations also resonated strongly with the element of national mood in the political stream. Thus, the principle of value acceptability is closely associated, if not entirely synonymous, with the political stream (i.e. the elements of national mood and government).

Discussion

A Summary of Main Findings

This research reviews Japan's elite sport competitiveness and medal winning capabilities, and analyses Japan's major elite sport policy changes since Tokyo's acquisition of the Olympic host rights in 2013. The main findings are that (1) Japan's '30-gold' target is not unattainable and it is likely for Japan to exceed the ambition, at least very close to the target, although the narrow source and very skewed pattern of gold medal distributions are a constraint; (2) the JSA and *Suzuki Plan* were technically feasible, resonated with the value of the government and supported by the public and have made positive contributions to Japanese elite athletes' performance; (3) policy changes were prompted or accelerated by both the political event and problem-based policy windows most notably the 2011 Earthquake-Tsunami and other economic and social problems, Tokyo's successful Olympic bid in 2013 and Japan's (gold) medal performance at the Rio de Janeiro 2016 Olympic Games; and (4) the political stream has been pro-elite sport, and the national mood (public attitude) and government have been supportive.

Theoretical Contributions to the MSF

This study has both academic contributions and practical utility. Concerning theoretical value, first, the utility of the MSF in general and its structural elements of problem, policy and political streams and the concept of policy windows for the analysis of Japan's elite sport policy changes is demonstrated. In specific terms, this research attests to the role of focusing events including crises (e.g. the 2011 Earthquake and Tsunami, and perennial economic stagnation) and indicators (e.g. the narrow source of Olympic gold medals) in identifying problems in the problem stream, the importance of a supportive government/ruling party ideology such as political leadership stability and Shinzo Abe government's continuous support for elite sport, underpinned by the campaigns of Activating Japan through Sport and establishing a 'Sporting Nation' (Yamamoto 2012, 277), serving and propelled by Shinzo Abe's political ideology most notably the recovery of Japan and Japanese economy and the concomitant Abenomics (i.e. the economic policies advocated by Shinzo Abe), and his accumulation of political capital, and national mood (public acceptance) in the political stream, and the criteria of technical feasibility and value acceptability for the survival and promotion of policy ideas in the policy stream.

Additionally, the cases of the JSA and *Suzuki Plan* are consistent with Kingdon's (1995) view that policy windows can be opened by either significant problems in the problem stream (e.g. narrow sources of Olympic medals and a skewed pattern of Olympic medal distribution amid sports/disciplines) or marked political events (e.g. the 2011 Earthquake and Tsunami, and Tokyo's successful bid to host the Olympic Games). The 'big' and 'little' (or 'sport-specific') window distinction, espoused by Exworthy and Powell (2004) and Zheng (2017), is also relevant, evidenced in the impact of both political event-centred policy windows that transcend sport (e.g. the 2011 Earthquake and Tsunami) and problem-derived sport-specific windows (e.g.

performances at Rio de Janeiro 2016) on Japan's elite sport policy trajectory. While the performances at the Olympic Games are unpredictable, it is safe to argue that there is evidence of a four-year policy cycle in the case of elite sport and the performances at the Olympic Games, which is likely to prompt policy evaluations, can spur policy change, termination or succession (e.g. the *Suzuki Plan* released soon after and predicated on Japan's performances at Rio de Janeiro 2016). This supports a certain level of predictability of some policy windows, advocated by Howlett (1988) and Zheng (2017).

However, the theoretical contributions are by no means limited to the confirmation of existing research on the MSF. The value of this paper in advancing the MSF literature resides in the observation of a high degree of overlap between the political stream and the criterion of value acceptability within the policy stream, which has not been a feature of existing studies. More specifically, the national mood has been pro-elite sport and the government has been committed to increasing support for sport including elite sport in the aftermath of the 2011 Earthquake and Tsunami, further reinforced by Tokyo's successful Olympic bid in 2013 and the political stability and continuity of Shinzo Abe's tenure and LDP's continuous leadership during this period. These factors, combined with Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's personal political vicissitudes, and policy agenda and pursuit, have not only created facilitative political streams for the introduction and promotion of a succession of elite sport-friendly policies including the establishment of the JSA and the release of the *Suzuki Plan*, but also explained why the government has emphasized and been committed to promoting these policies from the perspective of value acceptability in the policy stream. In brief, value acceptability can be further disaggregated into the endorsement of the government/ruling parties and receptivity of the general public, which accords with the

three central components of the political stream (i.e. national mood mainly reflected by public opinion, and the elements of governments and ruling parties).

Practical Implications

In practical terms, the implications of this research are threefold. First, this research can prompt policy makers in Japan to thoroughly review its elite sport capabilities and policy trajectory, more effectively gauge its (gold) medal winning prospect at Tokyo 2020 and beyond, and evaluate the effectiveness of existing policy and plan for the future.

Second, Japan acts as a useful case for other Summer Olympic host nations to review elite sport policy trajectories before and even after the respective home Olympic Games and reflect on lessons and experiences with respect to deliberate support for elite sport that can create a lasting elite sport legacy (Chen, Zheng, and Dickson 2018).

Third, this research is likely to provide Japan's main competitors at the Olympic Games with timely information on Japan's competitiveness and elite sport momentum and to stimulate them to decide if proactive actions need to be taken to combat the possible market erosion derived from Japan's challenge. China and South Korea are fierce competitors of Japan, because of the longstanding rivalry in many sports, as well as historical (the Second World War and Japanese occupation of the Korean Peninsula) and geographical disputes (Fan and Lu 2012; Heere, Kim, Yoshida, Nakamura, Ogura, Chung, and Lim 2012; M. Oh 2009). Japan is almost certain to outperform South Korea at Tokyo 2020, and if the 30-gold target can be met, then it would not be surprising if Japan threatens or even overtakes China in the gold medal table on home soil.

Conclusions

This research contributes to the literature on public policy in relation to the MSF and elite sport, particularly on Japan's elite sport landscape and sport policy. This study has utility for elite sport policy practitioners in and out of Japan. However, three issues are noteworthy. First, while statistical databases and documents are insightful, future researchers are encouraged to collect data directly using semi-structured interviews and surveys. In doing so, researchers should explore the structural element of policy entrepreneurs. Second, the primacy given to the central level in this study would merit research examining the regional/prefectural level, as Zheng, Lau, Chen, Dickson, De Bosscher, and Peng (2019) advocated. Last, comparative studies that incorporate insights from other Summer and Winter Olympic host nations pertaining to different political, economic, social and cultural features are strongly recommended in the future to overcome the innate limitations with respect to the lack of generalizability that puzzles the single case study approach that characterizes this paper.

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Table 1. A detailed summary of Japanese sport policy-related documents used in this study.

Document Types	Detailed Breakdowns	Notes
1. Policy publications and financial reports from official Japanese sport and related organizations: 10	(1) Japan Sport Council (JSC, 2019): <i>Japan Sport Council: 2019-2020</i> .	
	(2) Japan Sports Agency (JSA, 2016a): <i>A Policy to Support the Enhancement of Elite Sport Competitiveness in the Future (Suzuki Plan) – The Establishment of A Dynamic and Sustainable Supporting System Beyond 2020</i> .	
	(3) Japan Sports Agency (JSA, 2016b): <i>Background Materials (for Suzuki Plan)</i> .	
	(4) Japan Sports Agency (JSA, 2017): <i>Budget for 2017: Main Items</i> .	
	(5) Japan Sports Agency (JSA, 2019a): <i>Prioritized Sports/Disciplines for Tokyo 2020</i> .	
	(6) Japan Sports Agency (JSA, 2019b): <i>Focused Support for Priority Sports/Disciplines for the Final Spurt Phase in Preparation for Tokyo 2020</i> .	
	(7) Japan Sports Agency (JSA, 2020f): <i>Reinforcing International Information Strategy Project (The Campaign of Boosting IF Representative Number)</i> .	
	(8) Japan Sports Agency (JSA, 2020g): <i>Budget for 2020: Main Items</i> .	
	(9) Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology – Japan (MEXT, 2012): <i>The Sport Basic Plan: Activating Japan through Sport!</i>	
	(10) Sasakawa Sports Foundation (2017): <i>White Paper on Sport in Japan 2017</i> .	
2. Internet sources of Japanese and international organizations (online information, data)	(1) Japan Sports Agency (JSA): 6	
	(2) Japan Association of Athletics Federations (JAAF): 4	
	(3) Nippon Badminton Association (NBA): 3	
	(4) Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology – Japan (MEXT): 2	
	(5) Japan Table Tennis Association (JTTA): 1	
	(6) J-STAR: 1	

and news): 19	(7) International Olympic Committee (IOC): 1	
	(8) Sports-Reference: 1	
3. Media releases and commentaries: 8	(1) Asahi: 2	
	(2) The Japan Times: 2	
	(3) Financial Times (Nikkei): 1	
	(4) Sankei Biz: 1	
	(5) Telegraph: 1	UK-Based
	(6) Forbes: 1	USA-based
4. Academic publications: 13	(1) Funahashi, De Bosscher, and Mano (2015); (2) Funahashi, Shibli, Sotiriadou, Mäkinen, Dijk, and De Bosscher (2019); (3) Heere, Kim, Yoshida, Nakamura, Ogura, Chung, and Lim (2012); (4) Henry and Uchiumi (2001); (5) Ichii (2019); (6) Shimizu (2014); (7) Yamamoto (2012); (8) Yuan (2013)	English journal articles by Japanese or Japan-based scholars
	(9) Funahashi and Mano (2014); (10) Yamada (2020)	Japanese journal articles by Japanese scholars
	(11) Fan and Lu (2012); (12) Oh (2009)	English journal articles by non-Japanese scholars
	(13) Mark (2016)	English books by non-Japanese scholars
Total: 50		Excluding theory-related literature

Table 2. Japan's medal performances at the seven most recent Summer Olympic Games from Barcelona 1992 to Rio de Janeiro 2016.

Edition	Gold	Silver	Bronze	Total	Number of Gold Medal-Winning Sports	Number of Medal-Winning Sports
Barcelona 1992	3	8	11	22	2	8
Atlanta 1996	3	6	5	14	1	7
Sydney 2000	5	8	5	18	2	7
Athens 2004	16	9	12	37	5	11
Beijing 2008	9	6	10	25	4	9
London 2012	7	14	17	38	4	13
Rio de Janeiro 2016	12	8	21	41	5	11
Total – Overall	55	59	81	195	8	22
Total – Male	26	33	43	102	6	15
Total – Female	29	26	38	93	6	14

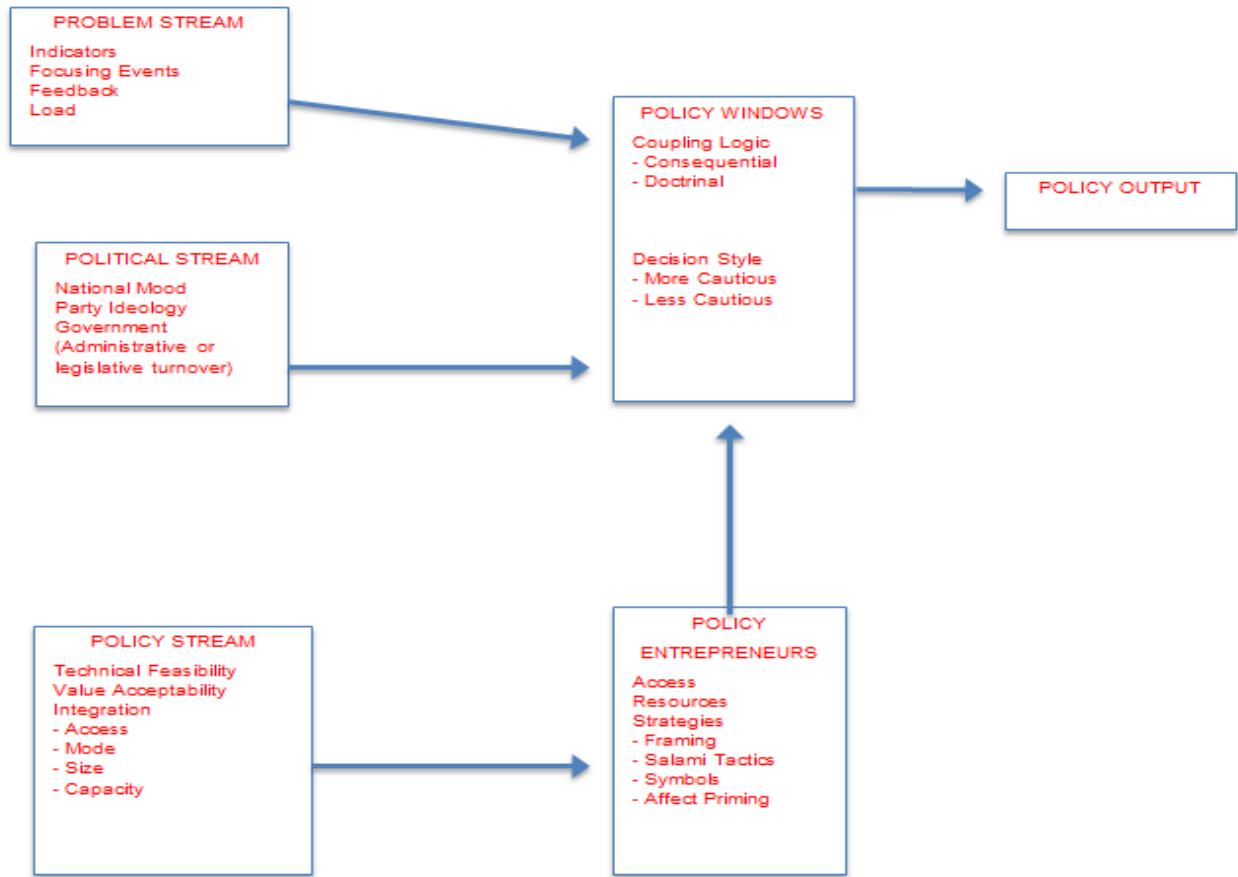


Figure 1. A summary of the multiple streams framework.

Sources: Kingdon (1995); Zahariadis (2007).

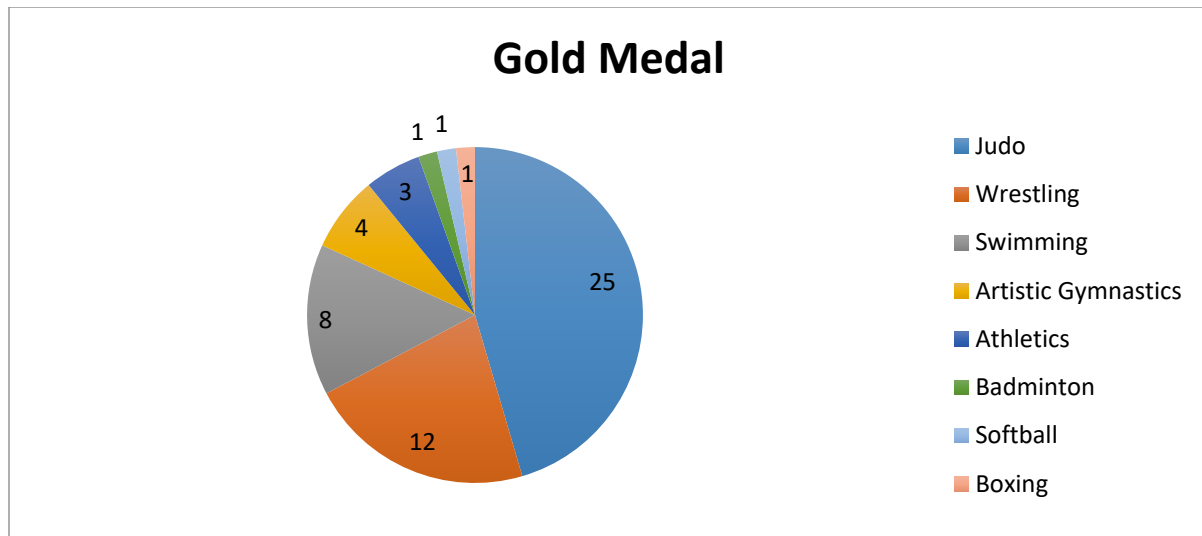


Figure 2. Japan's skewed gold medal distribution pattern amid sports/disciplines: 1992-2016.

Appendix 1. Japan's medal performances at the World Championships for various Summer Olympic sports/disciplines since 2013 and the feasibility of Japan's '30-gold' target at Tokyo 2020.

Tier of Sports/Disciplines	Sport/Discipline	Year of World Championships (or Equivalent)	(Gold) Medal Performances	Gold Medal-Winning Capabilities at Tokyo 2020
‘Top Five’	Judo	2019 2018 2017 2016 2015 2013	16 M (5 G) 17 M (8 G) 13 M (8 G) 17 M (8 G) 11 M (5 G) 9 M (4 G)	Approximately 6-7
	Wrestling	2019 2018 2017 2015 2014 2013	9 M (3 G) 10 M (5 G) 9 M (6 G) 5 M (3 G) 6 M (4 G) 4 M (3 G)	Approximately 4-5
	Swimming	2019 2017 2015 2013	6 M (2 G) 7 M (0 G) 4 M (3 G) 6 M (1 G)	Approximately 2
	Artistic Gymnastics	2019 2018 2017 2015 2014 2013	2 M (0 G) 6 M (0 G) 4 M (3 G) 5 M (4 G) 6 M (1 G) 7 M (4 G)	Approximately 1-2
	Athletics	2019 2017 2015 2013	3 M (2 G) 3 M (0 G) 1 M (0 G) 1 M (0 G)	Approximately 1
Host Nation-Friendly New Sports/Disciplines	Karate	2018 2016 2014	10 M (4 G) 9 M (6 G) 10 M (3 G)	Approximately 4
	Skateboarding	2019 2018 2017 2016 2013-2015	4 M (1 G) 3 M (2 G) 1 M (0 G) 1 M (0 G) 0 M (0 G)	Approximately 1
	Sport Climbing	2019 2018 2014 and 2016	2 M (1 G) 2 M (1 G) 0 M (0 G)	Approximately 1
Emerging Advantages	Badminton	2019 2018 2017 2015 2014 2013	6 M (2 G) 6 M (2 G) 4 M (1 G) 3 M (0 G) 2 M (0 G) 0 M (0 G)	Approximately 1-2

	Table Tennis	2019 2018 (Team) 2017 2016 (Team) 2015 2014 (Team) 2013	3 M (0 G) 1 M (0 G) 5 M (1 G) 2 M (0 G) 2 M (0 G) 2 M (0 G) 1 M (0 G)	Approximately 1 combined
	Softball	2018 2016 2014	Runners-Up Runners-Up Champion	
	Baseball	Unavailable	Unavailable	
Others	Tennis	2013-2019	Naomi Osaka and Kei Nishikori in Women's and Men's Singles + Regular semi-final performances in Men's, Women's or Mixed Doubles in the Grand Slam	Approximately 1-3 combined
	Fencing	2017 2015	2 M (0 G) 1 M (1 G)	
	Sailing	2019 2018	G in Women's 470 and S in Men's 470 S in Women's 470	
	Shooting (World Cup)	2017	6 M (3 G)	
	Taekwondo	2015 2013	1 M (1 G) 1 M (0 G)	
	Synchronized Swimming	2019 2017 2015 2013	4 M (0 G) 2 M (0 G) 4 M (0 G) 0 M (0 G)	
	Boxing	2019 2018 2013-2017	0 M (0 G) 2 M (0 G) 0 M (0 G)	
	Archery	2015	1 M (0 G)	
	Cycling	2019 2018 2016 and 2017 2015 2013 and 2014	1 M (0 G) 1 M (0 G) 0 M (0 G) 1 M (0 G) 0 M (0 G)	
	Weightlifting	2019 2018 2017 2015 2013 and 2014	0 M (0 G) 1 M (0 G) 1 M (0 G) 1 M (0 G) 0 M (0 G)	
	Football (World Cup)	2015	Runners-Up (Women's)	
	Volleyball	NONE	NONE	
	Canoeing Slalom	NONE	NONE	
Total				25-29

Note: This statistical summary represents the most conservative evaluation of Japan's competitiveness.