Some Thoughts on Factors Supporting Popularity of Sport

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スポーツの人気を支える要因についての考察

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要 旨

スポーツは、個人の健康・体力の保持増進に役立つのみでなく、人びとに楽しそや喜びを与え、明るく豊かな社会の形成にも寄与するものである。このようなスポーツを肯定し正当化する観念・思想が普遍的にあったからこそ、スポーツは今日まで人びとの間に浸透し、継承され、それ自体発展してきたわけである。現代社会においては、多くの人びとが直接自分で実践するにせよ、間接的に見たり聞いたり読んだりするにせよ、スポーツの関わりを持って生活している。人びとにとって、まさにスポーツは人気のある文化であるといってよい。本研究では、プロスポーツもアマチュアスポーツも視野に入れて人びとの間接的スポーツ参与に焦点を当て、スポーツの人気を支える要因について社会学的観点から考察することとした。ここで取り上げた主な要因は、「スポーツの構造的特性」、「スポーツファン」、「選手のスポーツ技術」、「スター選手」とおよび「マスメディア」であり、またこれらの要因を用いてスポーツ人気の説明モデルの構築を試みた。

Introduction

People’s involvement in sport has become diversified in recent years. In the theory on socialization into sport, Kenyon (1970) discussed primary sport involvement and secondary sport involvement. The former means playing sport directly and the latter being involved in sport indirectly. Secondary sport involvement was divided into two types, namely, involvement as consumer and that of producer. This study focused on secondary sport involvement as a consumer.

Why do people watch sport matches at a stadium or on TV? Moreover, people sometimes listen to sport and read about sport on the radio, in newspapers and journals. Needless to say, watching, listening to and reading about sport matches are interesting and attractive for these people. It can be said that sport is popular culture for them. In the present study, some factors supporting the popularity of sport were discussed from a sociological point of view and the explanatory model for the popularity of sport was shown.
Factors supporting the popularity of sport

(1) Structural characteristics of sport

First of all, the popularity of sport depends on the structural characteristics of sport itself. General speaking, as Gillet (1977) pointed out, modern sport has three elements such as play, competition and physical activity. Sport is played or watched outside of people’s ordinary life and it has a play element originally. The essence of play is fun. As for the competitive element, it is attractive for people to watch which team will be a winner or who will be the most excellent player.

There are many kinds of sport events in the world. Each sport event has its own rules and manners concerning the facility, equipment, player’s action, number of players, way to play, and so on. Sport is sometimes considered the mirror reflecting the history and culture of the society. In other wards, each sport event has own historical, cultural and social background. Then, it is natural that the popular sport event is different from one country to another. For example, baseball is very popular in such countries as the USA, Japan, Korea and other Asian countries. However, it is not popular in Europe or African countries. Similarly, football is very popular among American people and mass media deals with it a lot. However, football seems unattractive for other nations. Meanwhile, it will be pointed out that soccer is one of the exceptions, and it is more and more internationalized in recent years. Now, soccer is a very popular sport among people in the world. In any case, the popularity of sport is related to its structural characteristics that have been formed historically.

(2) Existence of sport fans

There are all kinds of sport fans. One is enthusiastic and has a lot of information about his/her favorite sport team and individual player, the other is an outward fan. Hirai (1999) defined a sport fan as a person who has a definite interest in sport and takes some action in consequence without reference to a sport event, its technical level, team and individual player. According to this description, there are two significant points about sport fans: one has an interest in sport and the other takes some action as a fan. In other words, it can be said that sport fans are committed to sport as consumers. They invest time, money and energy more or less for watching, listening to and reading about sport. Needless to say, sport fans support the popularity of sport basically. The more the sport becomes popular, the more the sport fans increase. One of the requirements for becoming a major sport is that the sport has a lot of fans. Especially, professional sport can not be formed without them. Nowadays, professional sport matches and other related events produce sport fans through mass media.

In recent years, as for soccer and baseball stadiums, many fans have been showing some kind of performance as one body for cheering the home team. Particularly, as for professional baseball, the private cheering parties have begun to control the actions of the fans from the latter part of the 1970s. There are several patterns of cheering. The players play a match with the cheering of the fans from the stands.

(3) Sport technique of the player

Sport technique refers to the way to play in order to achieve some specific object. The player acquires various techniques only by practicing sport activity. One of the most important factors supporting the popularity of sport is that the level of the player’s sport technique is high.
The All-Japan Men’s Volleyball Team got a gold medal for the first time at the Munich Olympic Games held in 1972. Before the Olympics, the popularity of this national team was tremendous and a large number of enthusiastic fans besieged the gymnasium so as to watch their practice. The greater part of these fans were junior high school and high school girls. In the past, such a phenomenon was never seen in amateur sport. Kanazaki (1973) conducted an investigation among these fans and reported that the most attractive factor of this team was their first-class technique of volleyball. In this way, one of the reasons why people go to the stadium or gymnasium to watch a sport match is that the player’s sport technique is first-class in not only the professional sport but also in the amateur one. It is necessary for the player to acquire high-level sport technique to become a professional. The number of spectators who go to the stadium is related to the team’s results in the matches backed by players’ excellent sport technique. Do people visit the stadium expressly to watch the sport match if the level of the players’ technique is not so high? Nobody will be eager to watch their match, much less their practice.

4) Existence of star players

The popularity of the player is firmly linked with that of sport event he/she plays. Namely, the existence of a star player is indispensable to the popularity of his/her sport. Especially, this point applies to professional sport. We can easily find the star players in professional sport, for example, David Beckham in soccer, Ichiro Suzuki and Hideki Matsui in baseball, Tiger Woods in golf, Kobe Bryant in basketball, Roger Federer in tennis, etc. Sport fans go to the soccer stadium, baseball stadium, golf course, basketball court and tennis court to watch not only these kinds of sport matches but also their play.

For example, David Beckham, famous soccer player in the world, transferred to Los Angeles Galaxy in 2007. Since then, Major League Soccer in the USA has become more popular. His transfer obviously influenced the popularity of MLS to some extent.

The star player must have first-class ability to play sport. However, the player who has excellent sport technique is not always to become a star. The star player will be produced in accordance with not only first-class ability, but also his/her face, figure, physique, personality, way of action, and so on. The sport team to which a star player belongs is quite popular, and this fact influences the popularity of the sport.

5) Influence of mass media

Mass media and sport have been historically correlated with each other. If TV stations do not televise any sport matches and newspapers do not deal with the topics of sport, then sport will never become popular among people. For example, two kinds of National High School Baseball Championship have been held at Koshien Baseball Stadium in Japan. These championships have a long history and are very popular. Nowadays, Koshien Baseball Stadium is the object of adoration among high school students who play baseball. These two championships are held under the auspices of newspaper publishing companies; actually, one is the Asahi and the other is the Mainichi. These companies have been giving an account of the results of the baseball games and other topics related to the championships and selling the newspapers. After all, these championships are the means of newspaper companies’ strategies. Similarly, TV stations televise such popular professional sport as baseball, golf and soccer, and get advertisement rates from the sponsors. The greater part of sport fans are involved in sport through mass media. The popularity of sport
An explanatory model for the popularity of sport

Up to this point, several factors influencing the popularity of sport have been discussed. Figure 1 shows the model for explaining the popularity of sport. Firstly, sport fans watch a sport match at a stadium directly or through TV indirectly. They are also involved in sport through other media such as radio, newspapers and journals. It is pointed out that the existence of mass media is a significant factor to influence the popularity of sport. Mass media offers the topics of sport matches and players for people, and then, it produces star players and fans. Sport fans have various subjective and objective backgrounds such as sex, age, educational career, occupation, sport experience, sport consciousness, life environment, and so on. These backgrounds would influence their action as sport fans.

In the next place, the interest or attraction of a sport match for even general people essentially depends on the structural characteristics of sport itself. Therefore, this factor is also useful to produce many sport fans. Finally, the players with high-level sport technique and personal popularity enhance the attraction of the match and support the popularity of the sport, too. Especially, as for professional sport, star players are needed to improve and maintain its popularity.

Temporary popularity of sport

Here, we can pick up two cases about the temporary popularity of sport, specifically, handball and women’s softball. General speaking, these two sport events are not so popular in Japan.

In the case of handball, the preliminary matches in Asia for the Beijing Olympics were held under the Asia Handball Federation in August for women and September for men in 2007. However, the judgments of umpires among these matches were regarded with suspicion. Handball federations in Japan and Korea sued the International Handball Federation against these judgments. As a result, the IHF decided to hold the
preliminary match over again in Tokyo in January 2008. The AHF was opposed to this decision. For such specific reasons, people paid increasing attention to the preliminary matches between Japan and Korea. In fact, a large number of people watched these matches directly and indirectly. Mass media dealt with this topic every day, and the popularity of handball reached a climax. However, neither men nor women, the All-Japan Handball Team were able to be representatives in Asia for the Olympics. Thus, after the preliminary matches, handball lost its popularity rapidly and returned to a minor sport as in the past.

On the other hand, as for softball, the All-Japan Women’s Softball Team got a gold medal for the first time at the Beijing Olympics held in China in August 2008. Yukiko Ueno, ace pitcher, played an active part in the semifinal and final games. After the Olympics, the Japan Women’s Softball League opened from the beginning of September 2008 in Japan. The great number of spectators who wanted to watch Yukiko Ueno and her team visited the softball stadium. The effect of the gold medal was tremendous. However, the popularity of women’s softball was not maintained so long, and it was also temporary. As time goes on, women’s softball also returned to a minor sport as before.

Like handball and women’s softball in Japan, the popularity of sport might be improved temporarily for particular reasons. However, these phenomena should be understood as the exceptions.

Summary

The popularity of sport is mainly supported by such factors as (1) structural characteristics of the sport, (2) sport fans, (3) sport technique of the player, (4) existence of star players and (5) mass media. These factors do not exist independently but are correlating with one another. In addition, the degree of each factor’s influence on the popularity of sport is diverse. Then, the explanatory model for the popularity of sport is shown by using these factors.

Besides, the author can point out other factors such as the management of the stadium and the function of organizations which promote professional or amateur sport in the community. For instance, as far as the management of the stadium is concerned, discount tickets, holding diverse events, selling sport goods, showing big screen replay of the match, cheering by the cheerleaders, and so on will be effective means to improve the popularity of sport and to increase fans. These factors will be considered in detail hereafter.

Note

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References