

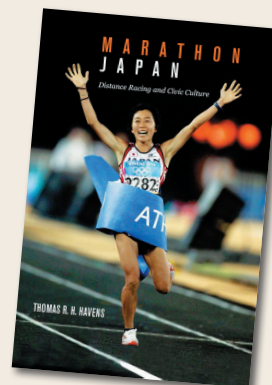
BOOK REVIEW

Marathon Japan: Distance Racing and Civic Culture

By Thomas R. H. Havens

University of Hawai'i Press, 2015
227 pages.

Reviewed by USHIMURA Kei



If you visit Japan from late autumn through winter, you will invariably encounter, up and down the land, multiple marathon races, where not just “elite” runners but a considerable number of general or citizen (*shimin*) runners participate, cheered on by spectators lining the course. The most conspicuous of them is, no doubt, the Tokyo Marathon in February. This is a familiar scene in present-day Japan, but the history of marathons featuring *shimin* runners alongside the elite is not of long standing. It started rather recently, just before the turn of the millennium. In races authorized by the Japan Amateur Athletics Federation (JAAF), the participants’ times count as an official record. Previously, these events were exclusively for athletes affiliated to corporate or university teams, in addition to a handful of invitees from abroad, namely “elite runners.”

In contrast, marathon races offered for elite runners have a century-old history that can be traced back to the Meiji era. Invited by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to participate in the Olympiad in Stockholm in 1912, Meiji Japan held a competition in November 1911 to select two athletes to dispatch to the Swedish capital. One was a sprinter; the other was a long-distance runner named Kanaguri Shizō, a student at Tokyo Higher Normal School where Kanō Jigorō, a well-known educator and judo enthusiast, then served as principal. Although Kanaguri was not able to complete the marathon due to the hot, humid weather on the race day—indeed, it was so extreme that one contestant lost his life—he competed in two subsequent Olympic games in a row (1920, 1924), while teaching his pupils to follow his career with success. He has since been celebrated as “the father of the marathon in Japan.”

After the war, Japan gradually began to produce excellent marathon athletes. Some, like Tsuburaya Kōkichi and Kimihara Kenji, won Olympic medals in Tokyo (1964) and in Mexico City (1968) respectively, whereas others, such as “Mr. Marathon” Seko Toshihiko, and Nakayama Takeyuki, did not, despite the occasionally outstanding records they established. No less noteworthy, of course, is the emergence of female marathon competitors, starting with Sasaki Nanae and Masuda Akemi around 1980, through Arimori Yuko in the 1990s, to Takahashi Naoko and Noguchi Mizuki in the new millennium. Arimori won two medals in consecutive Olympiads (1992, 1996), while Takahashi and Noguchi became gold medalists in 2000 and 2004 respectively. Since Noguchi’s triumph in Athens, however, no

Japanese marathon runner has attained any medal in the Olympics, although several have competed in each of the games. Male runners in particular have been far behind the recent records accomplished by African athletes.

Marathon Japan is an amazingly well researched monograph. Based on the perusal of an extensive number of historical documents and related books, in addition to some interviews with former athletes and coaches, the book invites us into the Japanese tradition and culture of distance races in a chronological order. The author places special emphasis on the process of distance running as it turned from a temporary boom into a permanent segment of Japanese culture.

The book begins its narrative by delineating the history of marathons from the Meiji era on, with constant reference to *ekiden*, long-distance relay races usually performed by more than ten runners in a team. This juxtaposition of marathons and *ekiden* might be intended to lead us to consider the frequent debate on whether the current “plateau” of Japanese marathon runners is attributed to Japan’s obsession with *ekiden*. Behind the controversy lies the prevalent view that distance runners affiliated to corporate or university teams need to give priority to *ekiden*, thus leaving them ill prepared for marathons. Havens seems to concur, citing a comment made by a famous *ekiden* coach: “Claiming that elite Japanese marathoners complete more races than is true of foreigners, Okada [the coach] thinks that running *ekidens* is a major reason runners seldom fail to finish marathons” (p. 169).

No less amazing than the extensive research is the book’s comprehensive approach, which attests to the versatility of its author. In writing “open-participation *ekidens* and marathons have been claimed by ordinary citizens as community events for all, completing the democratization of a sport dominated a hundred years earlier by upper-crust males at exclusive universities” (p. 115), Havens is an intellectual historian. When describing Takahashi Naoko as “running steady ahead, with a gait so economical and with so little bounce that the sole of her shoe was barely visible to runners behind her as her other foot hit the pavement” (p. 116), he proves himself to be an excellent sports writer.

Also noteworthy is the reader-friendly way the author handles each document. For instance, when referring to the specific record of a specific athlete, he discusses it in a manner synchronic as well as diachronic. That is, he evaluates the record not only within the career of the athlete but also within the context of the year the record was established. The reader can accordingly grasp with ease each record the author refers to. When he writes, however, regarding Tsuburaya Kōkichi, the first Japan-born marathon runner to win an Olympic medal, that “Tsuburaya, a second lieutenant in the Ground Self-Defense Force, exemplified the close ties between athleticism and the Japanese military since the 1930s” (p. 15), the author seems to be too insightful, given the fact that the Japan Self-Defense Force is no equivalent for the old Japanese army.

The most impressive and instructive part of *Marathon Japan* is where the author discusses in detail the development of the civic culture of long distance running. In so doing, he puts special emphasis on two female elite runners: Tanigawa Mari and Takahashi Naoko. Tanigawa, not so famous abroad as Takahashi, was an ordinary office clerk, who at the age of 24 took to jogging around the imperial palace and ended up winning international marathons at Tokyo (1991) and Paris (1994). She rose to stardom and “quickly became one of the first-top echelon female athletes to tout the pleasure of running to the general public”

(p. 105). Tanigawa functioned as “the key link between elite distance running . . . and the open-participation marathons for tens of thousands of citizens epitomized by . . . Tokyo Marathon” (p. 107). By contrast, Takahashi Naoko was an elite runner from the start and fulfilled her dream of winning gold. She became a national celebrity. Her “Olympic victory and sunny personality triggered more interest in running, especially among young women, than any other factors during the early 2000s” (p. 117). One might then wonder whether—had it not been for Tanigawa Mari and Takahashi Naoko—the current boom of civic marathons, culminating in the Tokyo Marathon starting in 2007, would have been possible at all.

The narrative is convincing indeed, and yet the author could have added something more. For instance, he could have discussed why no male elite runners, such as Seko Toshihiko, the Sō brothers, and the silver medalist in 1992, Morishita Kōichi, have ignited or contributed to popular marathon running. Also, he could have presented a more concrete suggestion for, or even a solution to, overcoming the current slump of elite runners. The only prescription he presents us is as follows: “Some combination of Noguchi’s self-sparing and Kawauchi’s gentle defiance of convention may be the formula for Japan’s elite runners to follow in taking their metier from its present plateau to the next peak of accomplishment” (p. 140).

Throughout the book, the style is lucid and even rhythmic, sometimes reminding us of the constant moving of long distance racers’ legs. Being a devotee, first as an active athlete then as an enthusiastic fan, of track and field sports for nearly a half century, I can argue with certainty that *Marathon Japan*, providing not a general but an extensive history of marathons plus other events of track and field, is among the best monographs on the topic, including those written in Japanese.

Marathon Japan deals with hundreds of Japanese people and places and, amazingly enough, unlike most other English books on Japan, almost all names are cited and read with accuracy. The meticulous research Havens has attained is certainly impressive. All this reviewer can contribute is, perhaps, to suggest two minor corrections: from Soma Kanjirō to Aijima Kanjirō (pp. 33–34) and from the Katsuta National Marathon in Tokyo to the Katsuta National Marathon in Ibaragi (p. 143).