

# 11 The Pathos of the Soldier-Athlete in Japanese Memories of the Asia-Pacific War

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## Introduction

There is a strong metaphorical association between war and sport. They share the language of victory, defeat, attack, defence, strategy and tactics; and (depending on the sport) of being encamped in opposition/enemy territory, delivering a knock-out blow or putting up fierce resistance. Linguistic overlap exists because war and sport are contests, which Shields and Bredemeier (2011, p. 27) define as:

a specified task that allows for a winner to be determined based on luck, superior performance, or a combination of extrinsic factors and performance. During a contest, two or more parties seek to outperform the other party or parties in an effort to achieve victory.

Another feature of contests is adherence to a set of rules of engagement. Sports have rules, and referees ensure fair play. The Geneva Conventions and the broader movement to codify the laws of war began after the 1859 Battle of Solferino and the American Civil War and accelerated before and after the carnage of the First World War (Solis 2010). However, unless there is a third party with the power and will to enforce the laws of war, the warring parties may commit even egregious war crimes without ‘penalty’ or ‘disqualification’. If sport is ‘war minus the shooting’, then perhaps war is ‘violent sport minus the referee’ – although the de facto spoils of victory are the ability to act as referee in the postwar period regarding one’s own ‘fair play’ during war.

‘Victor’s history’ is often infused with metaphorical associations to the sporting contest. The dominant ‘good war’ narrative regarding the Second World War in the victorious Allied nations is effectively a heroic sporting tale. The sportsmanlike ‘self’ faced a formidable opponent, who took an early lead. Despite having one’s back to the wall and facing foul play by one’s opponent, the sportsmanlike ‘self’ rallied and prevailed against the odds to achieve final victory. This is the classic narrative arc of Allied war history, war stories in victorious nations and heroic

sporting tales. These components come together in films such as *Escape to Victory* (1981), in which a football match between Allied prisoners of war and their German captors becomes a means to escape and to win (morally if not actually – the match in *Escape to Victory* ends as a draw) against a team of cynical foulers helped by a biased referee.

However, this narrative arc works less well in ‘loser’s history’. For Japan there was crushing defeat rather than glorious victory. Individual battles may have been won, but the war was lost. Furthermore, the issue of ‘foul play’, namely responsibility for aggression and war crimes, hangs over all Japanese cultural representations of war. The result is contested memories (Seaton 2007) and the ‘history issue’ (*rekishi mondai*) in Asia (Saito 2017).

The question becomes, therefore, how defeated aggressors can employ sporting metaphors and tropes in their cultural memories of war when the war resulted in the polar opposite to the sporting ideal of victory through fair play. Here, Hashimoto’s (2015) notion of ‘moral recovery’ as a response to the ‘cultural trauma’ of defeat is instructive. She identifies three particular ‘visions of moral recovery’:

The *nationalist approach* calls for overcoming the past by advancing national strength rather than through international reconciliation. [...] The *pacifist approach* espouses an antimilitary ethos and a pacifist creed as part of atonement for the Asia-Pacific War. [...] The *reconciliationist approach* espouses rapprochement in East Asia as atonement for Japan’s perpetrator past.

(Hashimoto 2015, p. 124)

These paths to moral recovery resemble closely the construction of the three main types of hero in Japanese war cinema: nationalistic ‘military heroes’ participating in a noble (albeit losing) war; ‘good Japanese’ facing down villainous militarists in a progressive tale that contains critical representations of Japanese imperialism while still giving Japanese a morally righteous hero to empathize with; and ‘victim-heroes’, whose suffering amidst the carnage of war sends a strong message of peace (Seaton 2007, pp. 152–53).

However, real life does not always make good cinema. Cutting (2016) argues that films tend to follow a narrative format in four acts – set-up, complication, development and climax – perhaps with a prologue and epilogue too. Berndt (2013, pp. 373–74), writing in a Japanese context, notes a similar *ki-sho-ten-ketsu* narrative structure: *ki* is when something happens, *sho* is the elaboration of what happened and *ten* is the entrance of a different element that helps resolve the problem, *ketsu*. Within the Japanese tradition, the resolution might be a heroic success. But in historical tales there is also a long tradition of the ‘nobility of failure’ (Morris 2013). The ‘tragic hero’ is a staple of Japanese cinema

(Standish 2000). The contemporary significance of such tales is also demonstrated by the tourism at sites related to the archetypal modern tragic hero, the kamikaze (Seaton 2019) and the travel/consumption behaviours of some female history fans (*rekijo*) who particularly like historical losers (Sugawa-Shimada 2015).

This chapter examines how Japan as a defeated nation has incorporated sporting stories into war-related cinema. After an overview of Japanese sport during the prewar and wartime eras, there are six case studies of athletes who perished during the war. The first two are non-fiction stories of famous athletes drafted as soldiers whose lives do not fit easily into a satisfying cinematic narrative: Sawamura Eiji (1917–1944) became a national hero in 1934 for an epic pitching performance against a touring team of American major leaguers; and Matsunaga Akira (1914–1943) scored the winning goal in Japan's historic 3–2 victory over Sweden at the Berlin Olympics in 1936. The third and fourth studies feature real athletes who have appeared as named characters in films: Baron Nishi Takeichi (1902–1945) won the gold medal in equestrian show jumping at the 1932 Los Angeles Olympics and appears in the 2006 film *Letters from Iwo Jima*; and professional baseball pitcher Ishimaru Shinichi (1922–1945) died as a kamikaze pilot and appears in the 1996 film biopic *Wings of a Man*. The fifth and six case studies are big-budget, general-release films with fictionalized sportsmen as main characters loosely based on real people: *Sea Without Exit* (2006) features a winning pitcher of the high school baseball championship who becomes a *kaiten* (kamikaze submarine) pilot; and *Kike Wadatsumi no Koe, Last Friends* (1995, hereafter *Last Friends*) features four university rugby players drafted in 1943.

The case studies reveal a recurrent sporting trope in Japanese war cinema. Sportsmen are presented as 'victim-heroes' (and sometimes 'good Japanese'). The film devotes considerable time to character development via depictions of the soldier's life and/or talents away from the military. There are multiple versions of this trope, including the soldier as artist, scholar, lover and athlete. The soldier is presented as refined, wise, loving and/or noble, in stark contrast to the ugliness, senselessness, brutality and immorality of war. Through the soldier's idealized humanity as a fair-playing athlete and through his pitiable suffering as a soldier, the pathos of a precious life lost is created via the agonizing suggestion of what their lives could have been if only there had been peace.

### Sport in wartime Japan

Sports in Japan divide into 'traditional/native' and 'modern/imported'. During the war, these distinctions were also expressed as 'national' and 'enemy' sports. The sports/events in this chapter – baseball, football, the Olympics and rugby – all fall within the latter category of modern/imported/enemy sports.

After the Meiji Restoration (1868), many foreign experts were invited to help with the modernization of Japan. They introduced baseball (Métraux 2016), football (Japan Football Association n.d.) and rugby (Japan Rugby Football Union n.d.) among others. All followed the same pattern. The first matches in Japan were between expatriates, who then taught or otherwise involved Japanese players in their matches, leading to the creation of Japanese clubs and fledgling amateur leagues by the early twentieth century. The first modern Olympics were held in 1896 and Japan first participated in the 1912 Stockholm Games (Japanese Olympic Committee n.d.). By the early twentieth century, Japan had emerged as a major imperial power in Asia. This growing political strength was mirrored in Olympic performances. Japanese athletes won their first Olympic golds in 1928 (men) and 1936 (women). By the 1930s Japan (more accurately, the Japanese empire) was a leading Olympic 'nation'. It came fifth in the medals table in 1932, winning five out of the six golds available in men's swimming. However, Japan's national football, baseball and rugby teams did not make a significant impact on the world sporting stage until the 1990s.

The earliest move towards the professionalization of sport (apart from sumo, Japan's oldest professional sport) was in baseball. Newspapers and major corporations employed sportsmen who played as 'amateurs' in corporate teams, although high school and university leagues gained the earliest popularity (Frost 2010, p. 155). Tours by professional Major League players from the United States, the first of which was in 1908, also boosted professionalization in Japan. The 1934 tour, which included the legendary Babe Ruth, played against a combined Japanese team which thereafter became Japan's first professional team, now the Yomiuri Giants. Around half a million people turned up to welcome the American all-stars on their arrival in Japan, demonstrating the popularity of the sport (Babe Ruth Central n.d.). The Japanese teams were trounced by the Americans, but the momentum was created to establish Japan's first professional baseball league in 1936. By the 1930s, therefore, Japan had the beginnings of professional baseball, although football, rugby and Olympic sports remained amateur, with the main rivalries between high school and university teams.

In 1936 came the surprise decision to award the 1940 summer Olympic Games to Tokyo (Weber 2020, p. 67). The 1940 winter games were also awarded to Japan, with Sapporo as the host city. By this time, tensions were already high in East Asia. The 1931 Manchurian Incident and the creation of the puppet state of Manchukuo precipitated Japan's withdrawal from the League of Nations in 1933. Sport became embroiled in geopolitics, such as when Japan tried to get Manchukuo invited to the Far Eastern Championship Games in 1934 in the face of strong opposition from China (Sakaue and Thompson 2021). Domestic politics was in turmoil, too, with the assassinations of leading politicians

during the 15 May Incident in 1932 and the attempted coup d'état of 26 February 1936. Then, full-scale war in China began in 1937. The Olympic Movement espoused peace, but 'the IOC ultimately became an unwitting conspirator to the imperialist project of Japan' (Collins 2007, p. 3). In the end, Japan chose to forfeit both summer and winter games rather than end its war in China (Collins 2007, p. 5).

The National Mobilization Law of 1938 put the economy on a war footing, but patriotic commercialism was allowed. Continued consumer and cultural life acted as 'a "safety valve" to allow the masses to vent and dissipate popular discontent in order to consolidate war support' (Uchiyama 2019, p. 20). Sport commensurate with the war effort could continue. The government promoted 'healthy leisure' (*kenzen goraku*), such as hiking and skiing, from the 1930s (Uchiyama 2019, p. 13). In 1938 Koizumi Chikahiko, minister of the newly established Health and Welfare Ministry (*Kōseishō*), exhorted the necessities of physical and mental mobilization. *Kokubō kyōgi* (national defence competitions) were introduced that turned athletics and swimming education effectively into military training (*Sensō to 'maboroshi no Orinpikku'* 2019).

Sport also provided propaganda opportunities. Athletes in the military, such as Sawamura Eiji, became celebrity soldiers. Patriotic stories about their service featured in the press (Yamagiwa 2016). In 1940, when Japan celebrated the 2600th anniversary of the mythical creation of the imperial line (Ruoff 2014), the professional baseball teams went on a one-month tour of Manchuria and played games in four cities. Not only was it a commercial success, but there were also strong imperialist overtones, including a benefit match for the Kwantung Army in the capital Shinkyō (Changchun) with a patriotic speech given by the head of the Japan Baseball League (*Nihon yakyū renmei*) (Yamagiwa 2016, pp. 113–21).

In 1941, the high school baseball championship sponsored by the *Asahi* newspaper was cancelled, although the Ministry of Education arranged a replacement tournament in the summer of 1942. This tournament is not counted in the history of the championships and is known as the 'phantom Koshien' (Baseball Hall of Fame 2021).<sup>1</sup> By 1943, the war situation had deteriorated. Sporting events were curtailed or 'camouflaged' as military fundraising events (Yamagiwa 2016, p. 199). There was a backlash against 'enemy' sports, particularly baseball (American), rugby and football (British). Directives in 1943 discouraged such sports in favour of Japanese traditional sports, and the use of English loan words (such as *sutoraiki* for 'strike' in baseball) was banned (NHK Special Shuzaihan 2020, pp. 90–91). With much amateur sport taking place in universities, the 1943 decision to extend the draft to university students was a further blow to domestic sport. For example, almost no rugby was played from 1943 until after the war (Japan Rugby Football Union n.d.). However, other forms of 'native' physical exercise, especially the martial arts like kendo, were promoted at schools to help make

all boys into future soldiers. Sumo tournaments, meanwhile, ‘stayed nearly immune to the war’ until May 1945, when American air raids killed some wrestlers. Even then, however, the tournaments were only moved outside rather than cancelled (Havens 1978, p. 150).

In sum, in Japan sport played its archetypal role in a nation at war. It prepared the people for combat by keeping them healthy; it promoted people psychologically for contest; and as a spectator sport it maintained morale as a ‘safety valve’. Sporting events nurtured the assumption that the war was going well. Conversely, their cancellation, particularly from 1943, signalled that the war was not going well. Sport was also used for propaganda and fund-raising purposes. And while ‘enemy’ sports faced crackdowns, approved ‘native sports’ continued, despite the hardships, until defeat in August 1945.

### **Japan’s fallen athletes**

There were many athletes among the 2.3 million Japanese soldiers who perished during the Asia-Pacific War. A total of 37 Olympians died (NHK Special Shuzaihan 2020, pp. 10–11); the cenotaph for professional players at the Baseball Hall of Fame (Tokyo Dome) has 76 names engraved on it (Figure 11.1); and the monument to baseball players who died in the war (Senbotsu yakyūjin monyumento) lists 167 high school, university and club players (Baseball Hall of Fame 2018, pp. 264–69). There were countless fallen soldier-athletes from other sports, too.

The following six case studies of soldier-athletes divide into three pairs.<sup>2</sup> The first two soldiers have ‘inconvenient life histories’. They are famous athletes who died as soldiers, and their life histories do not fit a usable cinematic narrative structure. The second two have ‘usable life histories’. They are soldiers whose stories have been represented in broadly accurate ways within cinema. The final two have ‘fictionalized life histories’. These sportsmen in blockbuster Japanese war films have histories crafted specifically to work as cinematic narratives. The contrasting uses and usability of these soldier-athletes’ stories reveal much about the anatomy of the soldier-athlete trope.

#### ***Inconvenient life histories: Sawamura Eiji and Matsunaga Akira***

Since 1947, the Sawamura Award has been given to the outstanding pitcher in Japan’s professional baseball leagues. It is named after Sawamura Eiji, who shot to fame in 1934 as a 17-year-old pitcher. That year, a Major League team toured Japan. The closest Japanese teams came to being competitive was when Sawamura restricted the Americans to a solo home run in a 1–0 victory (Frost 2010, p. 163). Sawamura became a national hero and went on to become a star pitcher for the Yomiuri Giants in the



Figure 11.1 *Chinkon no hi* (Cenotaph) to professional baseball players who died in the Asia-Pacific War.

Source: Author's photo.

first two seasons of the Nippon Professional Baseball League. Then he was drafted into the army. He served two tours, the first in China from 1938, and the second in the Philippines from 1942. After each tour, he returned to the Giants, albeit with decreasing effectiveness as a pitcher. He retired from baseball before the third time he was drafted. In 1944, he was killed when his troop ship was sunk en route to the Philippines (Fitts 2012).

In 1955, a film was made about Sawamura's life: *Fumetsu no nekkyū* (*Immortal Fireball*).<sup>3</sup> 'Focusing on Sawamura's relationship with his girlfriend and later wife, Sakai Yūko, the film told a story of star-crossed lovers set against the backdrop of professional baseball and military tensions' (Frost 2010, p. 182). Since then, Sawamura's life has been the subject of various books, novels and documentary programmes, but no other film.

It is revealing that the 1955 film was made as a romance. This suggests fundamental difficulties in dramatizing Sawamura's story as a war and/or sporting tale. As a pitcher, his glory days spanned 1934–1937, and he did not attain those levels again during his two returns to baseball after military service. As a soldier, the intensity of his earlier service years is not matched by the circumstances of his death. Rather than meeting a heroic or 'meaningful' end, he was killed in transit at sea by an enemy submarine

he never saw. Both sporting and soldiering stories are anticlimactic. It is understandable why the filmmakers in 1955 focused on his romantic life.

Second, Sawamura's war experiences are mired in moral complexity, and his status as a baseball hero is compromised by his actions as a soldier. When Sawamura's military record is examined, a judgement becomes necessary regarding his war conduct and responsibility. He can be presented as a victim of circumstances. Frost (2010, p. 182) discusses a children's book and a fictionalized account of his life that 'create a distinct impression that Sawamura did not want to fight the Americans'. But this contradicts Sawamura's own wartime writings, which expressed his hatred of the enemy and wholehearted support for the war effort (Fitts 2012; Frost 2010, p. 175). *Soldier Sawamura Eiji* (Yamagiwa 2016) is an example of a more critical book in Japanese depicting Sawamura's life in the military. For example, Yamagiwa (2016, p. 94) describes how Sawamura seemed to fit in well to military life. But, Robert Fitts (2012) says plainly what most Japanese accounts avoid saying: Sawamura's unit was involved in two of the Japanese military's most notorious atrocities, the Nanjing massacre (the worst of which was over before Sawamura was drafted) and the Bataan Death March. While Sawamura's personal involvement in atrocity is unknown, it is inconceivable given his unit's history that Sawamura was unaware of the atrocities perpetrated in the name of the cause he so vocally espoused.

Sawamura's war record, therefore, triggers competing interpretations of both his and Japan's war responsibility. To preserve him as a national baseball hero, the safest path is simply to look away from his service record. This is what is done in the Baseball Hall of Fame, and at the end of each baseball season, when the award given to baseball's best pitcher bears the name of a soldier who fought in China and the Philippines. Such 'inconveniences' in Sawamura's story demonstrate not what the cinematic soldier-athlete is, but rather what he cannot be: a soldier with a suspected war record whose experiences and/or death do not fit a tried and tested narrative arc commensurate with 'moral repair' (Hashimoto 2015) or an archetypal hero in Japanese war cinema (Seaton 2007).

The story of the second athlete, Matsunaga Akira, fits a similar template. His story does not follow a usable narrative arc, and the political circumstances surrounding his sporting achievement and war service generate contested memories. His story has not been adapted for cinema, although he has featured in non-fiction reportage. Matsunaga is the hero of Japan's finest pre-1945 footballing hour. He scored the winning goal in Japan's 3–2 come-from-behind victory over Sweden at the 1936 Berlin Olympics. Japan's first major victory on the world footballing stage is commemorated in a corner of the Japan Football Museum, where the team is also inducted collectively into the Hall of Fame.

However, the miracle was not repeated. Japan's Olympic dreams ended in the next match with an 8–0 drubbing by Italy. Then Matsunaga



joined the army in 1937.<sup>4</sup> He enlisted somewhat reluctantly, it is believed, because he told his family he did not want to go to war and spoke of his desire to play football in Europe. From 1938, he served with the 230th Shizuoka infantry regiment. The unit was stationed in Guangdong and after the outbreak of the Pacific War took part in the assault on Hong Kong. Thereafter the unit went to the Dutch East Indies before arriving in Guadalcanal in 1942. His unit members remembered him as a kind soldier who looked after the men in his command and who was always wanting to play football. He died in combat in unknown circumstances in January 1943 (NHK Shuzaihan 2020, pp. 93–103).

Matsunaga's story, as told in the NHK *Special War and the 'Phantom Olympics'* (2019) and the accompanying book (NHK Shuzaihan 2020), is of an archetypal victim-hero. But, a broader 'inconvenience' in Matsunaga's story lies in the politics of Japanese football during the imperial age. The Berlin Olympics were dominated by the issue of race. On one level, the Japanese team was treated in a derogatory and stereotypical way by the German media (Law 2009). On another level, race and ethnicity issues existed on an intra-empire level within the team representing the Japanese *empire* in Berlin. The Japanese 'national' football team in 1936 was not drawn from the best players across the nation, as national squads are selected today. The national team was built around a club team core. Furthermore, it was not 'national' in that the multi-ethnic Japanese empire of the mid-1930s could select Koreans, Taiwanese and other peoples in Japanese colonies as imperial subjects to represent Japan (Gotō 2002, pp. 43–47). For example, the 'Japanese' who won gold and bronze in the men's marathon, Son Ki-jōng and Nam Sūng-nyong, were from Korea (Atkins 2021, p. 2).

In controversial circumstances, most members of the football squad finally selected were from Waseda University, despite dominance of the selection tournaments by Korean peninsula teams. E. Taylor Atkins (2021, p. 15) writes:

Surely ethnic discrimination and Japanese nationalism were factors in JFA's refusal to build a national side around a KFC [Kyōngsōng (Seoul) Football Club] lineup. As in other areas, Koreans were 'Japanese' when it was convenient, but not enough so to represent the Empire on the world stage.

Football, therefore, remains a symbolic element within Japanese-Korean tensions stemming from the colonial period. Before Korean independence, football matches were a chance to beat the colonizers, and Korean teams did so regularly (approximately three-quarters of the time, according to Atkins' [2021, p. 5] calculations). After independence the rivalry continued. When Japan and South Korea jointly hosted the FIFA World Cup in 2002, 'Japanese fans rooted enthusiastically for their hosting partners but

were mystified and hurt that Korean fans did not reciprocate. Apparently ignorant, misinformed, or oblivious to their shared history, many Japanese struggled to understand Korean resentment' (Atkins 2021, p. 22). The lack of this colonial dimension in the Japan Football Museum's exhibits, NHK's documentary and book (although it is discussed in Gotō's 2002 history of the national team) reveals why many Japanese would 'struggle to understand Korean resentment'. Actually, the 'miracle of Berlin' is not simply a Japanese sporting triumph followed by personal tragedy for Japanese players. It is an emotionally charged moment in Korean national footballing history, too. Consequently, any Japanese film about football at the 1936 Berlin Olympics has the potential to be a flashpoint in Korean-Japanese relations and the 'history issue' in East Asia.

In summary, these first two case studies have highlighted two constraints in the depictions of soldier-athletes in Japanese cinema. The first is the lack of a usable narrative arc in many soldier-athletes' life histories. The second is the way in which loser's history and issues of war/imperial responsibility problematize athletes' life histories on both individual (Sawamura) and collective (Berlin Olympics) levels. To use a sporting analogy for the 'history issue' in Asia, after Japan's defeat the victims of Japanese aggression gained the ability to act as moral referees in the postwar period. They stand in judgement over the defeated aggressor's war conduct and scrutinize cultural production related to the war. They are always ready to whistle for 'foul play' or to adjudge representations as having 'strayed offside'.

### *Usable life histories: Nishi Takeichi and Ishimaru Shinichi*

The next two case studies are of actual soldier-athletes who have been represented in war films that purport to be broadly historically accurate. However, a key difference is that the first example, Baron Nishi Takeichi in *Letters from Iwo Jima*, is a supporting character, and the second, Ishimaru Shinichi in *Wings of a Man*, is the central character.

There is always an element of fictionalization in historical films – the exact words said by historical figures are usually unknowable; scenes are compressed or edited to make them appealing and comprehensible to cinema audiences; and historical figures always acquire some of the characteristics of the actors playing them (Rosenstone 2000). Nevertheless, there is a basic assumption that historical film should be broadly truthful, even if it is inaccurate on certain levels of detail. There is a large online discussion community (for example, the YouTube channel History Buffs, and the authors of Wikipedia pages, including those in Japanese) that engages in fact-checking and discussion of cinematic (mis)representations of history. Furthermore, when the characters or their relatives are still alive, there can be moral and legal imperatives to gain prior approval for the way in which historical figures are depicted.

Baron Nishi Takeichi was the gold medalist in equestrian show jumping at the 1932 Los Angeles Olympics. He was also known as a socialite in America and counted actors and celebrities among his friends. But he competed in the Olympics as an officer of the Imperial Japanese Army. His military career continued throughout the war years, and in March 1945 he was on the island garrison of Iwo Jima. Nishi appears as a supporting character in *Letters from Iwo Jima*. Despite being directed by Clint Eastwood, this is effectively a Japanese film. It has a script based on a Japanese book and an all-star Japanese cast speaking mostly in Japanese. The film is not a biopic of Nishi, but rather focuses on the commander on Iwo Jima, Kuribayashi Tadamichi (played by Watanabe Ken), and an ordinary soldier called Saigo, whose importance is immediately signified to a Japanese/Asian audience by him being played by Ninomiya Kazunari of the mega-star boy-band Arashi.

Nishi is portrayed as dashing and humane, but ultimately as a loyal Japanese soldier. We first meet him riding his horse on the beach, and a mutual love of horses is the basis for his early rapport with Kuribayashi. After the battle begins, Nishi treats a wounded American soldier with kindness and tells him about his Olympic success and celebrity friends in California. However, Nishi is ultimately a loyal Imperial Army officer. Blinded in the fighting, he takes his own life rather than be taken prisoner.

His life history taken in isolation would, once again, not easily make a convincing cinematic biopic. Instead, *Letters from Iwo Jima* follows a conventional narrative format centred on whether the low-ranking (and fictional) soldier Saigo will make it home alive and see his new-born daughter. Saigo's story follows the four stages of set-up, complication, development and climax. By blending a character study of soldier-athlete Nishi into a narrative structure built around another character, the film can represent Nishi's story from Los Angeles to Iwo Jima in brief but relatively truthful terms. The exact circumstances of Nishi's death are unknown, and other parts of his character might have been semi-fictionalized. (Baron Nishi's Wikipedia page in English discusses both these points.) But the key conclusion from *Letters from Iwo Jima* is that the soldier-athlete's story can be included in cinema with only minor modifications if the narrative structure necessary for a satisfying cinematic experience has been built around another central character's story.

Perhaps the best example of a real-life soldier-athlete whose life story works as cinematic narrative is Ishimaru Shinichi. This has little to do with his life history as a baseball pitcher. Instead, it is because he was a kamikaze pilot, and the kamikaze film is one of the most established and successful subgenres of war film in Japan. The special attack (*tokkō*) or suicide tactics used by the Japanese military continue to fascinate historians and popular culture producers to an extent that far exceeds their significance in battle. Only around 4,000 pilots perished in suicide missions, a tiny fraction of Japan's war dead. But dozens of kamikaze films

and dramas have been made, and there is an established tourist trail of kamikaze sites concentrated in southern Kyushu for people interested in this history to visit (Seaton 2019). The kamikaze film works because it follows the established arc of set-up, complication, development and climax. There is an ordinary young man in wartime Japan; he volunteers or is drafted, and becomes a pilot; the commanding officer calls for volunteers to be a special attack pilot; for some reason, the young pilot resolves to become a kamikaze (often the death of someone close to him); after heart-rending farewells to loved ones, the pilot flies his mission. Underpinning the story is a conservative story of self-sacrifice for family and community with deep power to induce ‘affect’ (a visceral, bodily response – see Sakamoto 2015) and the emotion of *kandō*. The Chinese characters for *kandō* are ‘feel’ and ‘move’, so it usually translates as ‘being moved’. However, as Jaworowicz-Zimny (2018) has argued, *kandō* has nuances of pride, nostalgia and patriotism. Kamikaze films are commercially successful in Japan because they are tried and tested ways of generating affect, a cinematic *kandō* experience and pathos.

Within the kamikaze genre, having the pilot as a soldier-athlete serves a particular narrative purpose. It enhances the ordinariness, decency and humanity of the young man who the audience knows will die at the end of the film. Others patterns include the soldier-artist (such as the pianists who play Beethoven’s *Moonlight Sonata* before flying their mission in the 1993 film *Summer of the Moonlight Sonata*) and the soldier-scholar (usually university students in films such as *Last Friends*, discussed below). The soldier-lover is also ubiquitous in the genre.

These tropes converge in the real-life story of Ishimaru Shinichi. He was a kamikaze pilot who flew his mission on 11 May 1945 (as depicted in the film, he was probably shot down before making his attack – see Hayasaka 2014, pp. 206–09). Before that, however, he was a professional baseball player. He joined the Nagoya-gun team, where he played alongside his older brother, Tōkichi, and became their ace pitcher. On the advice of his brother, he also continued studying at university, which protected him from the draft. He was known for his pure love of the game and often played baseball with local children despite being a star of the fledgling professional league. However, in 1943 university students lost their draft exemption and Shinichi joined the navy, eventually volunteering as a special attack pilot. Just before his mission, he played a final game of catch ball with a unit member who had been a catcher.

Ishimaru’s story was novelized by Ushijima Hidehiko (1994), which was then adapted into an independent film, *Wings of a Man* (Kamikaze images n.d.). While not going on nationwide cinematic release, it gained endorsement from the Ministry of Education, a sign it is officially considered appropriate for viewing on DVD in schools. It has three notable production values. First, despite being released in 1996, the film is made in black and white, giving it a newsreel atmosphere. Archive footage of

events such as the Tokyo air raids is included relatively seamlessly into the film. Second, the film feels more like a personal eulogy to the characters than a commercial film or objective history. Bill Gordon (n.d.) writes, ‘The two central characters, Shin'ichi [*sic*] and Keiko, each seem to possess an ideal personality with no faults. Indeed, except for a few obviously malevolent military officers, every character in this film seems to have a charming personality’.

The third feature is the role of romance (also a feature of *Immortal Fireball* about Sawamura Eiji). *Wings of a Man* epitomizes the soldier-lover trope. Early in the film, Shinichi falls in love at first sight with Keiko, who has moved to Saga (Ishimaru’s home prefecture in Kyushu) from Tokyo. She notices his clumsy attempts to strike up conversation. Thereafter the romance grows over the course of an hour of the film but around six years in terms of the story. Keiko watches Shinichi’s games at high school and sees him off at the station as he leaves to join his professional team in Nagoya in 1941. When they meet again in Tokyo he gives her a broach, which she is wearing at her job in a factory when there is an air raid. Keiko’s father tacitly gives his blessing for their marriage, simply by asking Shinichi over a drink at their home to ensure he comes back alive. But then Keiko is killed in an air raid. Her dying words are ‘Shinichi-san’ as her photo of him burns in the inferno.

The entire romance plays out at the level of suggestion rather than declaration, and eye contact rather than physical contact. Having lost the two loves of his life, Keiko and baseball, the impression at the end is that Shinichi flies his mission almost as an act of personal release rather than as a military operation to kill the enemy. The narrative arc is a human drama about unrequited love as much as a war film. This is a common feature of war-related entertainment, where war as a backdrop heightens the emotional stakes of the romance, and the unpredictability of war facilitates unexpected plot twists (Sugawa-Shimada 2022).

The combination of the soldier-athlete and soldier-lover tropes adds sensitivity and intimacy to Ishimaru’s character. His story sounds quite different when these tropes are not used. Ishimaru is the final biography in Hayasaka’s *Baseball Players Who Fell in Battle*, which has a nostalgic, conservative tone. In the introduction, referring to the memorial at Tokyo Dome (Figure 11.1), Hayasaka (2014, p. 2) writes, ‘Today, the souls of the seven players in this book are enshrined at Yasukuni Shrine, which is just a short distance from Tokyo Dome. I wonder if the sound of bat on ball and the cheers of the crowd reaches them’. His chapter on Ishimaru (Hayasaka 2014, pp. 184–209) does not mention Keiko. Ishimaru is presented as an ace pitcher who volunteered for the military. Regarding his motivations for volunteering as a special attack pilot, a comment to his older brother is cited: ‘I must protect my country by throwing away myself’ (p. 198). Hayasaka interprets this as meaning Ishimaru wanted to protect his home

region (*kokyō*), family and future generations of Japanese (p. 199). Ishimaru may have been a pitcher, but he volunteered, served and died as a soldier.

The contrasting styles of Hayasaka's non-fiction writing and the film in telling Ishimaru's story clarify the key effect or function of the soldier-athlete trope. By adding a non-military dimension to his character, it softens and humanizes the soldier. In terms of Hashimoto's (2015) 'moral repair', it shifts the narrative from nationalism towards pacifism. In terms of cinematic heroes (Seaton 2007), it shifts the character from a military hero to a victim-hero. And it shifts the whole film from war action to human drama. Furthermore, the trope of the soldier-athlete may be combined with the tropes of the soldier as lover, artist or intellectual. Sporting prowess is just one device by which filmmakers can adjust the construction of a leading character and by extension the ideological stance of the whole film.

### *Fictionalized life histories: Namiki Kōji and Matsumura Hiroshi*

The final two case studies are examples of how the soldier-athlete trope has been utilized in fictional film. Neither of the characters are real people, although they are inspired by testimony by students drafted in 1943 and published as part of the *Listen to the Voices from the Sea* collection, which is a leading work of anti-war writing in postwar Japan (Seraphim 2006, pp. 135–55). They are in big-budget war films and played by A-list stars of Japanese stage or screen, whose presence automatically signifies them as characters eliciting the audience's empathy. Commensurate with the conclusions from the previous case studies, the soldier-athlete trope pulls the character away from being a military hero and towards being a victim-hero.

The 2006 film *Sea without Exit* starred leading kabuki actor Ichikawa Ebizō. The main character is Namiki Kōji, a pitcher who won the Koshien high school baseball championship and was attending Meiji University when he was drafted. He enlists as a kaiten (suicide submarine) pilot. Namiki does not go on his mission. Instead, he dies just before the end of the war when his submarine sinks in a training accident. His body is discovered a month after the war ends when his submarine washes up on the shore after a typhoon.

This plot is based on an actual incident. The real kaiten pilot was Wada Minoru. He went to Tokyo Imperial University (today the University of Tokyo) and was not a champion high school pitcher. There is a monument to Wada on Nagashima Island in the Seto Inland Sea where his kaiten washed up, and his story is told in the Kaiten Memorial Museum on Ozu Island, Yamaguchi prefecture, the location of the kaiten base. While the selection of his writings available in English (Quinn and Yamanouchi 2005, pp. 86–95) contains numerous literary and scholarly references,

it does not mention baseball at all. Namiki's sporting prowess is a fictional plot element introduced for dramatic purposes in preference over a more historically accurate (but perhaps less empathetic) soldier-scholar trope.

Baseball is a recurrent theme throughout the film. Towards the beginning, Namiki and his friends discuss Sawamura Eiji and the cancelled 1940 Olympics in a café; he has a baseball with him in the kaiten cockpit on training missions and when preparing an actual attack (which is aborted at the last moment); he becomes friends with a mechanic, who had listened to Namiki's winning pitching performance in the high school baseball championship on the radio; there are various scenes in which the characters talk while playing catch ball; and at the end of the film, the mechanic as an old man in the present day throws Namiki's ball into the ocean from the pier where missions were launched. The film closes with scenes of the modern-day high school baseball championship. All these sporting references help the audience to connect and empathize with Namiki. There is also the trope of the soldier-lover in Namiki's relationship with Minako, including a clichéd scene in which Minako rushes to the station to say a final farewell. While these are all familiar elements of the kamikaze genre, *Sea without Exit* is less conservative and more pacifist than many special attack films, particularly *The Eternal Zero* (2013) and *For Those We Love* (2007). The pathos of the soldier-athlete focuses the film's message on the tragic waste of young lives more than the service and sacrifice of young patriots.

The same is the case for *Last Friends* (1995). This was the highest-grossing war film released to coincide with the 50th anniversary of the end of the war (Seaton 2007, p. 160). By sharing its name with the famous testimony collection on which it is loosely based, and also a 1950 film (although there is no plot connection between the 1950 and 1995 films), *Last Friends* is part of a key 'franchise' within progressive-leaning war representations in Japan. The main characters are all university rugby players. At the beginning of the film, they are practising rugby in the present day before the narrative slips back to the drafting of university students in 1943. This is another common feature of Japanese war films: time slips or flashbacks are used to create parallel narrative arcs in the present day and during the war. This device further bolsters the humanizing function of the soldier-athlete trope via the suggestion they are of our generation – like the people we might have known at high school or university. Of the four friends, Akutagawa becomes a kamikaze pilot. His story within the film follows the standard kamikaze story template described above. Tsuruya, meanwhile, becomes a conscientious objector and spends the film on the run in Japan after refusing to report for duty following receipt of his draft papers. After being drafted, Aihara and Katsumura meet again on a transport ship to the Philippines. Katsumura is an officer (who leaves behind a distraught bride – the soldier-lover trope again) and Aihara is an enlisted soldier. They share a brief moment

reminiscing about rugby before being interrupted by a disapproving officer. Their ship is torpedoed and they are washed ashore. Aihara is wounded and admitted to a field hospital. Katsumura, meanwhile, witnesses the brutalities of war. While requisitioning provisions, his unit massacres local villagers and they torch the village. 'Hey, Mr. Student. When we get provisions from local people, we do it our way', sneers the archetypal evil military officer as he wipes blood off his sword and boots. As the village burns behind him, Katsumura asks rhetorically, 'How is this liberation from white people?' Through his (albeit futile) resistance to Japanese atrocity, Katsumura establishes himself as a 'good Japanese' character through whom the audience can channel a critical interpretation of the war while still identifying with a moral Japanese hero. Katsumura's line is a direct challenge to nationalist history in Japan, which uses the liberation of Asia from western colonialism as the affirmative moral justification for Japan's 'holy war' (*seisen*). However, at the end of the film with their situation hopeless, Katsumura opts to end his war in a final dash for the try line. With grenades in a bag tucked under his arm like a rugby ball, he dashes to an enemy position and dives in as if scoring a spectacular try. Meanwhile, Tsuruya has miraculously survived the A-bombing of Hiroshima. He calls his three friends back, and in a dreamlike sequence they arise from the dead. Back in the present, the four friends meet again and play rugby with other characters as the closing credits roll. They would just have been ordinary sport-loving students if it had not been for the war ...

## Conclusions

In this chapter, the trope of the soldier-athlete has been positioned as a narrative device in Japanese war cinema that helps push cinematic narratives towards pacifism, and characters towards being victim-heroes. The 'good Japanese' character Katsumura in *Last Friends* shows that sporting tropes can also be used in films containing progressive depictions of Japanese aggression and atrocity. However, as Seraphim (2006, p. 298) has argued, even this film 'failed to challenge the dominant narrative of Japanese wartime suffering, despite the politically correct inclusion of scenes depicting Japanese aggression'. Overall, in Japanese war cinema sport connects mostly to messages of pacifism and victimhood. Sporting imagery is less useful to nationalists, whose main focus is the heroism and bravery of Japanese soldiers, or to progressives, whose main focus is condemning Japanese aggression and atrocity.

In the final sentences of the book *Chinese and Japanese Films on the Second World War*, Del Bene (2015, p. 173) writes:

Today's Japan is by no means a warmongering country dominated by nationalism. Except for a vociferous revisionist minority, the general



public interest in the representation of the war, with its burden of violence and suffering, is more likely a sort of collective exorcism of fears than the prelude to the resurgence of a militaristic Japan.

Sport as a narrative device in Japanese war films does not underpin or reinforce nationalism, as it can easily do in the cinema of victorious nations or in the crowds at present-day sporting events such as the Olympics or World Cups. In Japan's 'loser's history', sport is typically appropriated to strengthen antiwar messages and promote peace. While laudable as an ultimate message, this victim-hero narrative arc nevertheless rests on considerable whitewashing of the historical context. The historical record demonstrates that in the 1930s and 1940s sporting policy sustained imperial practices, sport contributed to the physical/patriotic training of future soldiers, and athletes were often active and enthusiastic 'players' in Japan's wars. But, postwar cinematic depictions of Japanese soldier-athletes largely eschew these proactive contributions to war and empire, preferring instead to present sport as an apolitical pursuit that affirms the basic decency and victimhood of youthful athletes caught up in historical events way beyond their control. While soldier-athlete characters appear in a relatively small subset of Japanese war films, they are also used in television dramas to similar effect. For example, NHK's 2019 historical (Taiga) drama *Idaten* (a year-long drama about Japan and the Olympics depicting the period 1912–1964 – see Pratama 2021) had a fictional archetypal soldier-athlete called Komatsu Masaru, who was a long-distance runner drafted into the army, leaving behind a dutiful wife and young child on the home front. In a country still deeply divided over its wartime past, sport is often used in Japanese war cinema as a device aiding 'moral recovery', albeit not through pride and patriotism, but rather through pacifism and pathos.

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## Notes

1. *Maboroshi no Kōshien*: Koshien stadium is in Nishinomiya (Kobe, Hyogo prefecture) and is where the high school baseball championship continues to be played to this day.
2. Online materials relevant to the case studies in this chapter are available at: <https://war-memory-tourism.net/cultural-memory/sport/>.
3. This film is not available on DVD in 2021 and is the only film discussed in this chapter that I have not been able to watch in preparation for writing this chapter.

4. Matsunaga was one of four members of the Berlin team who died on military service during the Asia-Pacific War: one other was killed in battle, one died in a training accident and one succumbed to illness in 1946 while interned as a prisoner of war (POW) in Siberia after the war (NHK Shuzaihan 2020, pp. 10–11).

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