

Feature Article

Sport tourism in Japan



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1. Introduction

There are various reasons why people travel, and these increasingly include travel to participate in or watch sports. According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization report, the size of the global sport tourism industry was US \$800 billion dollars in 2016, accounting for approximately 10 percent of the global tourism industry.⁽¹⁾ TechNavio reported that the size of the global sport tourism industry is much larger at US \$1.41 trillion dollars and that the market is expected to continue to grow from 2019 to 2023 at a compound annual growth rate of about 36 %.⁽²⁾ In the United States (US), sport-related travel spending reached US \$45.1 billion dollars in 2019 and totaled up to US \$103.3 billion dollars when including indirect and induced spending.⁽³⁾ Moreover, the US sport tourism industry generated close to 740,000 jobs and about US \$14.6 billion dollars in tax revenue.⁽⁴⁾ In Japan, the Japanese government expects sport tourism to generate 380 billion (US \$3.6 billion) yen by 2021.⁽⁵⁾ One of the reasons behind such tremendous growth is the popularity of mega-events, such as the Olympic Games, the FIFA World Cup, and the Rugby World Cup. Many people travel to these events to watch and cheer for their favorite teams and players. Another reason is the increase in mass participation in sport events, such as the Tokyo Marathon and the TCS New York City Marathon.

However, there are numerous types of sporting events, ranging from the abovementioned mega-events and international events to smaller local recurring sporting events. They differ in size, scope, type of sport (e.g., running, football, baseball), nature (participant or spectator sport), number of sports played (single-sport or multi-sport), competitiveness (elite or recreational), temporal characteristics (duration and frequency), participation requirements (by sex, age, religious affiliation, historical roots, disability status), appeal (to media, sponsors, governments), etc. Regardless of the aforementioned factors, sporting events can add extra appeal to a travel destination and bring social, cultural, and economic benefits to an area and its people. Also, those who travel to participate in or watch sporting events receive benefits.

In addition to these events, there are different sport activities (e.g., golfing, skiing, snowboarding, etc.) that people travel to participate in and places where people go to relive memorable moments in sport history (e.g., sport museums, hall of fame museums, the birthplace of a sport, etc.). Overall, these aforementioned events and places are the reasons why people travel and are the focus of sport tourism research. The purpose of this article is to introduce sport tourism and its trends and future in the Japanese context.

2. Definition of sport tourism

The definition of sport tourism has been debated over the past couple of decades. As the term indicates, it is a combination of sport and tourism. Scholars have attempted to define what sport tourism is and what it entails. Some have defined it as having active, passive, and nostalgic elements.⁽⁶⁾ Others have explained it as a trip with sport being either the main purpose or a secondary or incidental purpose.⁽⁷⁾ While numerous others have attempted to define sport tourism, Weed⁽⁸⁾ argued that it is better understood as a concept or experience derived from the interaction of activity, people, and place.

According to Higham and Hinch⁽⁹⁾, sport tourists may be attracted to either spectator events, participant events, active sports, or heritage sport attractions. Spectator events are those events with large audiences watching competitive elite athletes (e.g., FIFA World Cup), while participant events (usually with amateurs) account for the majority of events (e.g., Tokyo Marathon). Active sport attractions appeal to sport enthusiasts and recreational athletes who wish to actively and independently engage in a sporting event (e.g., ski resorts in Nagano). Lastly, heritage sport attractions bring in people who want to experience heritage-based sport experiences or nostalgia (e.g., Baseball Hall of Fame Museum). While the categorization may be simple and straightforward, sport tourists must go through a complex decision-making process to decide where or if to travel. It is also worthwhile to note here that the event itself is only a portion of sport tourism.

3. Sport tourism in Japan

Since the early 2000s, the Japanese government has eyed tourism as an important growth industry to contribute to and revive its stagnant economy.⁽¹⁰⁾ Sport tourism, a relatively new type of tourism in Japan, became widely known to the public following the Liaison Conference for the Promotion of Sports Tourism in 2010. After the conference, the Basic Policy to Promote Sports Tourism was formulated and, to implement policy regarding sport tourism, the Japan Sport Tourism Alliance (JSTA) was established in 2012. At the same time, the Japanese government enacted the Basic Act on Sport, which specifically addressed the role of sport in reviving regional communities, societies, and economies. Furthermore, to realize the basic ideas in the act, the Japanese government formulated the Sport Basic Plan in 2012 and the Second Sport Basic Plan in 2016.

In the Second Sport Basic Plan, sport was designated as one of the key economic drivers to revitalize Japan.⁽¹¹⁾ The Japanese government intended to increase the size of the sport market, which was estimated at 5.5 trillion yen (US \$52 billion) in 2012, to 10 trillion yen (US \$95 billion) by 2020 and to 15 trillion yen (US \$142 billion) by 2025. At the same time, it aimed to promote sport tourism to generate new businesses in regions. The government expected sport activities to increase the number of foreign visitors from 1.38 million in 2015 to 2.5 million by the year 2021. It also aimed to create 170 sport commissions, whose objectives were to revive stagnant regional economies by attracting and supporting sport activities, events, and professional and amateur sport team camps. Overall, the government aimed to grow sport tourism-related consumption from 220.4 billion yen (US \$2.1 billion) in 2015 to 380 billion yen (US \$3.6 billion) by 2021. It is currently estimated at 289.2 billion yen (US \$2.7 billion) in March 2019.

So far, Japan has been successful in attracting and hosting mega-events, especially spectator events. It hosted the Summer Olympic Games in 1964 and will host again in 2021. Sapporo and Nagano were the host cities of the Winter Olympic Games in 1972 and 1998. Japan has also been the host of (or will host) the Asian Games (1958, 1994, 2026), the FIFA World

Cup (2002), the IAAF World Championship (1991, 2007), the Rugby World Cup (2019), the Universiade (1967, 1985, 1995), the Winter World University Games (1991), the World Games (2001), and the World Masters Games (2021), among others.

In regard to participant sports, one of the most popular types of events in Japan is running events. With the rise in health-conscious thinking, more people are running the streets of Japan. The Sasakawa Foundation reported that the number of joggers and runners has doubled in the past couple of decades in Japan (Figure 1).⁽¹²⁾ One key event contributing to this trend was the start of the Tokyo Marathon in 2007. One of the Abbott World Marathon Majors, the Tokyo Marathon is highly popular among the amateur running population. In 2019, there were 330,271 applicants for the general category. This number is 12.1 times more than the allotted capacity of 27,500. Mid-size and small running events have also increased in the past two decades. Takai⁽¹³⁾ reported that the number of running events tripled from 2008 to 2018. Event organizers hope that these events bring not only runners but also their families and friends (and money) to local areas. However, according to the Leisure White Paper⁽¹⁴⁾, there is a sign that the running population is plateauing, or even experiencing a decline. Harada⁽¹⁵⁾ stated that these running events are in the maturity stage of the product life cycle and are a zero-sum game. In this regard, runners have become savvy shoppers who select events that provide the most experiential benefits. Thus, event managers must understand runners' needs and provide benefits that meet their needs.

It is important to note here that running events in Japan depend to an extent on prefectural and municipal government subsidies. For instance, the Osaka Marathon in 2018 received 230 million yen (US \$2.2 million) from the Osaka Prefecture and City government, which is roughly 16 % of its budget.⁽¹⁶⁾ Likewise, the Yokohama Marathon 2018 received 130 million yen (US \$1.2 million) from the Kanagawa Prefectural and Yokohama City government, which is approximately 11 % of its budget.⁽¹⁷⁾ In 2012, Kyoto Marathon's inaugural event experienced a budget deficit of 230 million yen (US \$2.2 million)

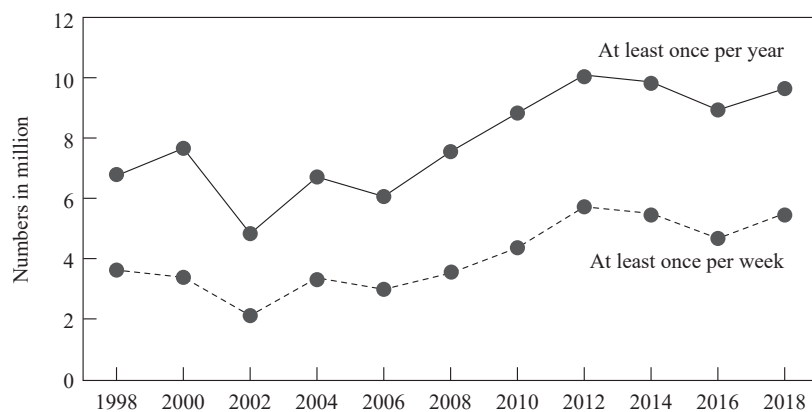


Figure 1: Numbers of joggers and runners from 1998 to 2018

Source: Figure modified from Sasakawa Sports Foundation Report (n.d.) on jogging and running rates.

and had to ask the city government for an additional subsidy.⁽¹⁸⁾ These examples support the assumption that many events are not self-sustaining and that the recent decline in the running population presents risks to these events and their management in the future.

In regard to active sport attractions, Japan also offers numerous possibilities throughout the four seasons owing to its abundant natural resources. Examples include trail running in the spring, river rafting and marine sports in the summer, and skiing and snowboarding in the winter. In addition to various sport activities, participants have the opportunity to visit and experience cultural heritage sites or diverse wildlife in the local area. A prime example would be a tour of Nagano Prefecture, where an individual can go on a tour that includes skiing, watching the snow monkeys, *sake* tasting, and a visit to the Zenko-ji Temple over the course of three days. Harada⁽¹⁹⁾ contended that these cultural activities add on to the experiential value of outdoor sport activities.

Harada⁽²⁰⁾ further classified Japan’s natural tourism resources into four distinct categories: marine resources, mountain resources, suburban resources, and snow and ice resources. Municipalities and local governments can take advantage of these resources to create and offer sport activities. For example, with 6,852 islands, Japan boasts 4,470,000 km² of territorial waters forming part of an exclusive economic zone. In this zone, there are numerous marine water activities, including scuba diving, snorkeling, sea kayaking, sailing, and sport fishing. In addition, Japan stretches 3,000 km from north to south and is predominantly mountainous (75 %), with two-thirds of

its territory covered by forests. Its unique topography means that it has ideal locations for activities such as hang gliding, hiking, trekking, trail running, and zip lining, among others. With respect to sport activities in suburban areas, Mount Takao is a great example. Just an hour train ride from central Tokyo, Mount Takao offers a relatively easy hike to the peak (599 m). The area also has a monkey park, a unique temple, a hot spring bath house, and the Takao 599 Museum. Lastly, snow and ice resources are abundant in Japan, which is known for its powder snow, especially in Hokkaido. Branded as “#japow” (i.e., shortened word for Japan and snow) on social networking services, ski resorts in Hokkaido (e.g., Niseko) attract many foreign skiers and snowboarders. In fact, the number of foreign travelers nearly tripled from 2013 to 2017 to areas where winter sports are available.⁽²¹⁾ According to the survey conducted by the Japan Sports Agency, winter sports are some of the most sought-after activities along with hiking, trekking, cycling, and walking (see Figure 2).⁽²²⁾ Winter sports are also considered to be one of the top choices for foreign travelers during their next visit.⁽²³⁾ In fact, winter sports have been designated as key sport activities along with *Budo* (martial arts) and cycling to increase foreign tourists. The aim of the government is to increase the number of foreign sport tourists (i.e., main purpose of visit to Japan is sport) from 1.38 million in 2015 to 2.5 million by March 2022.⁽²⁴⁾

On the other hand, sport heritage tourism in Japan has received very minimal attention. However, there are various sport-related museums and events that tap into nostalgia. One example is the Museum of Hanshin Koshien Stadium. With

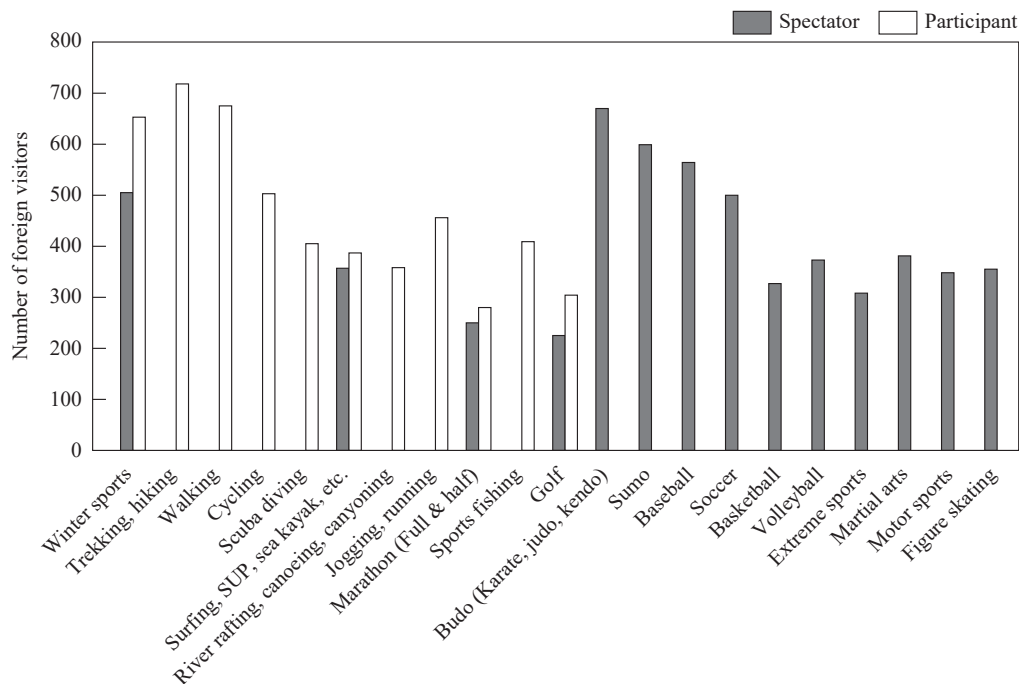


Figure 2: Foreign visitors’ intentions to experience sport as a participant and as a spectator

Note: Countries/regions surveyed were China, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, United States, Thailand, and Australia. Source: Figure modified from Japan Sports Agency’s Overseas Marketing Research Report on Sport Tourism (2018).

over 90 years of history, it is one of the oldest baseball stadiums in Japan. It is home to the professional baseball team Hanshin Tigers and is considered a baseball sanctuary for high school boys. The stadium exhibits numerous goods, images, and videos of famous memorable moments that occurred in the stadium. It also offers a stadium tour where one can visit locker rooms and a bullpen inside the stadium. For those who dreamed of playing at Koshien Stadium as a young high school boy, there is the Master's Koshien tournament that started in 2004. Any former high school baseball player can create a team of former students from their high school and compete in the regional tournament to win a chance to play in the Koshien stadium. The event creates feelings of nostalgia for the past and, at the same time, family and friends travel to watch the teams play at the stadium. Another great example of sport heritage tourism is visiting the birthplace of *karate*, *kendo*, *judo*, or other martial arts founded in Japan. Dubbed as "Budo tourism," the Japanese government is increasingly focusing on bringing foreign visitors to experience *Budo* and its history, spirit, culture, manners, etc., at *dojos* and/or to watch *Budo* in person.

4. Sport tourism research in Japan

Research to support sport tourism activities is imperative to realize the aforementioned goals. Scholars have investigated the phenomenon of sport tourism from various perspectives. As the name suggests, sport tourism research is interdisciplinary and borrows theories from sports, tourism, business, economics, psychology, and sociology, among other fields. Research in sport tourism aims to understand the "why" behind sport tourists' behaviors or, in other words, seeks to answer the following question: Why do people travel to participate in, watch, or feel nostalgic about sports? Thus, research should not only describe sport tourists but also the reasons for their behaviors. Answers to this question can help us understand more about sport tourism and can also assist decision makers.

Ito and Hinch⁽²⁵⁾ conducted a systematic review on sport tourism research in Japan. They identified 52 articles from 1991 to 2016 and found that much of the research has focused on events and active sports. Moreover, most research studies have dealt with sport tourism's impact on socio-cultural aspects and very few on economic or environmental aspects. There was also a dearth of research related to sport heritage, qualitative research, and international comparisons. Lastly, perhaps the most important observation was that most of the research was descriptive and atheoretical in nature. If we are to gain a deeper understanding of sport tourism and build a sound body of knowledge, research must be grounded in theory. As Japan will host the Tokyo Olympics and World Master's Game in the coming years, more research needs to be conducted to understand the unique Japanese sport tourism industry, including its tourists and impact on society, culture, economy, and environment.

5. Future of sport tourism in Japan

Sport tourism is currently a hot topic for prefectural and municipal governments to entice people to travel to their regions. However, the novel coronavirus pandemic has had a tremendous impact on the sport tourism industry. As sport and tourism are non-essential services that involve participants and spectators in a confined setting (i.e., stadiums and arenas), people have avoided sports. In the US, Tourism Economics predicts that 75 million fewer people will travel to sporting events over the 10-month period of March to December 2020, resulting in a loss of US \$20 billion dollars.⁽²⁶⁾ In Japan, professional sport leagues have ceased playing or postponed their seasons due to the outbreak. The Development Bank of Japan predicted that Japanese professional sport leagues had suffered a loss of about 268.8 billion yen (US \$2.5 billion) between March and May 2020.⁽²⁷⁾ As we learn more about the virus, the Japanese government has gradually relaxed restrictions on the number of fans allowed in stadiums from zero (June 19th) to 5,000 (July 10th) to 50 % capacity (September 19th).⁽²⁸⁾ Although fans have returned to stadiums at half capacity at the moment of writing this article, there is no definite plan to return to full capacity. Uncertainty still looms over the pandemic, and professional sports (i.e., spectator sports) will have no choice but to prepare new strategic plans under the new normal.

Another major impact of the coronavirus on sport is the postponement of the Tokyo Olympic Games. The decision was made on March 24th 2020, four months prior to the start of the event. The decision came at a time when the death toll from the virus was on the rise, and numerous National Olympic Committees had expressed concerns over athletes' safety. The Olympic Games are arguably the largest mass gathering event, as the host city invites athletes and coaches from over 200 countries and regions. Tokyo expected international and domestic tourists to travel to the event, adding more people to the already crowded area, not to mention other staff members essential for Olympic operations (e.g., volunteers, security personnel, event organizers, medics, etc.). Despite these challenges, the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Organizing Committee still aims to deliver the best Olympic Games in 2021 and take extra care to prevent a spread of the virus and ensure the safety of all stakeholders.

Participant sports have faced a similar situation. Large-scale marathon events that gather thousands of people have been canceled. Some of these canceled events have decided to move their events online. For example, the Yokohama Marathon 2020, initially scheduled on November 1st, and the Kyoto Marathon 2021, initially scheduled on February 21st, will use a smartphone application to track the distance ran by runners during a designated period. While runners may not be able to run through the ancient city of Kyoto, they can imagine the streets and temples along the way while running elsewhere.⁽²⁹⁾ This solution may help to keep runners attached to the event so that they return in the future. Small-scale regional runs have also been held, reducing the number of runners. In these

events, managers have taken necessary measures to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. Although participant sports tend to be held outside, they still pose a risk, especially when crowds are large.

Also, the travel element poses an additional challenge for the sport tourism industry. The abrupt stoppage of sport events forced sport tourists to stop traveling. Furthermore, governmental travel restrictions and lockdowns, announcement of state of emergencies, etc., have significantly slowed down tourism. Since then, air travel has gradually returned, but not to the previous level before the virus. The current pandemic presents unprecedented challenges for the sport tourism industry that may even require a revision to its business model.

6. Conclusion

The aim of the present article was to provide an overview of sport tourism in Japan, including its trends and future. Recently, sport tourism in Japan has grabbed the spotlight due to its ability to induce people to travel. The growth of sport tourism has mainly been fueled by the hope that it will have a positive economic impact. However, it seems as though the emphasis has solely been on economic impacts, as societal and environmental impacts have taken a back seat. As Ito and Hinch mentioned, there are numerous sport tourism phenomena that we do not have enough information about. Research needs to be conducted to understand these phenomena and whether their impacts are positive or negative. Furthermore, some scholars have questioned whether sport events, mega-sport events in particular, yield the promised economic impact.⁽³⁰⁾ Thus, research on the economic impacts of sport tourism seems necessary. Likewise, more research is needed to understand how sport tourism plays out in Japanese society. For instance, sport tourism may positively affect a traveler's well-being, quality of life, and happiness yet also negatively affect host residents' quality of life. Additional research on these topics will provide local governments with vital information to support sport tourism initiatives, give them legitimacy, and justify the use of public money on sport.

Notes

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