Learning in likely places

Varieties of apprenticeship in Japan

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16 Learning to swing: Oh Sadaharu and the pedagogy and practice of Japanese baseball

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Anatomy of a swing

Hitting a baseball at the professional level is one of the most difficult accomplishments in all of sports. A batter, standing just over sixty feet away from a pitcher, has about four-tenths of one second to focus on the ball coming out of the pitcher's hand at up to 100 miles per hour and to swing his bat at the precise speed and angle to get it to an exact position at just the moment when he can make contact and strike the ball such that it will elude the nine players positioned to field it.[1] Even the very best professional hitters can fail to hit safely seven out of ten times.

And of all hitting, the most dramatic, the most celebrated, the most difficult, is the home run – the long ball hit in fair territory between the two baselines far enough to carry over the distant outfielders and beyond the 300- to 400-foot fences. It requires great physical power, but that power must be applied with split-second timing and with the precise coordination of eyes, shoulders, arms, wrists, hip, and legs.

The world record for the most home runs in a professional career is held by the greatest Japanese power hitter of all time, Oh Sadaharu. Oh's career statistics show him to be fully the equal in talent and physical prowess to the greatest American hitters – Ty Cobb, Babe Ruth, Ted Williams, Mickey Mantle, Hank Aaron. In twenty-two professional seasons, Oh came to bat 9,250 times in 2,831 games. He hit safely 2,786 times for a .301 lifetime average. He will be most remembered, however, for his lifetime total of 868 home runs, a world professional record that far surpasses the American record, Hank Aaron's 755 career homers, which had itself replaced the long-standing record of the legendary Babe Ruth (714).

Oh accomplished this with one of the most distinctive swing styles in all of baseball history. In what fans and journalists tagged as the flamingo,

or scarecrow, stance,[2] the left-handed hitting Oh would raise his front, right leg as the pitcher was winding up, and balance quietly on his back, left leg while awaiting the delivery. He would then step forward on to his front leg at the moment of ball release to swing the bat.

In principle, hitting a baseball requires a combination of translational and rotational energy. As the physicist Robert Adair explains, pushing off and stepping from the back leg to the forward leg translates power forward "into the pitch"; then, using the forward leg as a fixed pivot, the hitter transfers that momentum by rotating the arms, hips, and legs when swinging the bat off the shoulder and around to make contact (Adair 1994: 62–71). Over the years, however, individual hitters have enacted these principles in an enormous range of stances – for example, by planting the feet various widths apart and in different configurations in the batter's box, by stepping forward in distinctive timings, by bringing the bat across the plate with a downswing or with an upswing or with a level swing, and so forth.

Yet even among such a wide variety of hitting stances, well known to fans, Oh's flamingo perch was highly unusual. The great Mel Ott was among a very few American pros who also lifted the forward leg while awaiting the pitcher's delivery. Even here, however, there were two crucial differences that make Oh's case an instructive one for this volume on situated learning. The first was the spiritual idiom in which Oh cast his swing – in discourse, the way in which he talked about the elements and rationale of the swing; and in practice, the way in which he trained often by swinging a sword or a *kendō* stick in addition to a baseball bat. This would appear to mark his stance as distinctively "Orientalized." One might find support for this in the subtitle of his 1984 English-language autobiography, *A Zen Way of Baseball* (Oh and Falkner 1984).

Oh's swing was acquired through a long and difficult learning process. He was a powerful hitter from his earliest efforts on neighborhood and schoolboy teams. But on breaking into the pros, he fell into a prolonged slump that very nearly ended his career. It was only saved through the intervention of a mysterious baseball *sensei* named Arakawa Hiroshi, a coach–master who put him through an arduous three-year pursuit of a totally new hitting style – and a radically new spiritual philosophy of hitting, indeed, of playing baseball. It was only at this point in his career and through the sustained encounter with Arakawa-*sensei* that Oh learned and perfected his trademark flamingo stance. It was this physical and spiritual make-over by Arakawa that then carried Oh for almost two decades

to a team success unparalleled in Japanese pro baseball history and to an individual accomplishment that will surely remain a world record for some time to come.

This chapter focuses on both of these extraordinary features of Oh's swing – the learning process and its representational form. My premise is that all levels and all kinds of sports are, centrally, sites of learning, instruction, practice, mastery, and judged performance. And the situated, instrumental, and physical nature of sports activities mark teaching and learning in settings quite different from more conventional classroom pedagogies. Playing sports requires much less transmission of abstract knowledge than the inculcation and embodiment of mind–body skills. Sports are practices, and learning sports is like learning pottery, carpentry, shamanic healing, or farming. Sports thus fall squarely within a notion of learning as situated activity – learning, as Lave and Wenger put it, as "legitimate peripheral participation in a community of practice." They comprise one more "likely place" in the topos of this volume.

Each of these elements of Oh's life – his unique swing, his struggle, and the world record it brought him – is well known and much celebrated by Japanese fans. Oh himself has written a number of autobiographical accounts, and a voluminous sports journalism, book-length commentaries, and television portraits have made his biography familiar to several generations of post–World War II Japan.[3] Not only is the framework of his life story conventional, but its themes are also familiar; it is a life story periodized as stages and dramatized as adversity overcome and success gained through relentless effort. Both the achievements and the disappointments are of properly heroic proportions. Indeed, it may be so familiar to a Western sports fan as to be surprising, given the common foreigners' image of Japanese baseball as a dull game of many ties played by faceless clones overtrained into mediocre performances. Perhaps the one element that would appear to mark Oh's story as stereotypically "Oriental" is that it pivots on his baseball swing and his guided pursuit of a perfect body dynamics through a singular spiritual attitude. But what I argue in this chapter is that this image is quite deceptive. Oh's learning to swing was paradoxically both more idiosyncratic and more generic than "Oriental." His was not a paradigmatically Japanese approach to baseball pedagogy and practice. In its particulars, his experience was highly unusual for Japanese baseball; in its more general features, it was not unlike the transmission and honing of skills throughout sports. First, however,

let us place the swing within his career and within the community of practice that is Japanese baseball.

Oh's life within Japanese baseball

It is hard to exaggerate baseball's popularity in twentieth-century Japan. The sport has been played in Japan for 120 years, since its introduction by U.S. physical education teachers in the 1870s and its adoption as a club activity by the premier school of the time, the First Higher School. Baseball spread downward through the public school system and upward to universities in the first decades of this century. Only in the 1930s was the first professional league organized by a powerful newspaper owner, Shōriki Matsutarō, whose own team, the Yomiuri Giants, dominated the league for decades and recruited Oh when he turned professional in 1958.

Baseball is played by more Japanese than any other sport, in schools, colleges, company leagues, and adult community leagues, as well as the professional major leagues. The pro level is organized into two leagues of six teams each, the champions of which meet at the end of a 140-game season in the Japan Series. Eleven of the twelve teams are owned entirely by major corporations; each team has a twenty-five-man playing roster and a thirty-five-man reserve squad.[4] In its amateur and professional forms, it is watched by more Japanese than any other sport. I am tempted to add that more is probably written about baseball than any other sport in Japan, although I have no basis for this claim except many hours of browsing bookstores and newsstands.

The popularity of baseball, therefore, assures and is assured by its central place in the educational system, the corporate world, and the mass media. The life of one of its genuine superstars offers many lessons for understanding this sport and its manifold significance in twentieth-century Japan. Here I focus on those aspects of Oh's case that illuminate the nature of teaching and learning in sports.[5] Still, because his learning of the flamingo stance is so situated within the longer contours of his career in baseball, it is appropriate to approach that learning experience through a brief introduction to his life in baseball.

1940–1956: Sandlot days in Tokyo

Oh was born in Tokyo in 1940 and thus entered elementary school just as the war ended and the Allied Occupation was beginning.

The streets of Tokyo were bomb-ravaged but also baseball-crazy. This was a sports fever that extended well back to prewar days of school ball and tours by visiting American pros. Babe Ruth and other American greats had played exhibitions here in the 1930s, and they remained popular heroes. Kids like Oh roamed their neighborhoods, gathering in the open spaces for pickup games with whatever they could fashion into bats and balls.

However, Oh was not entirely like the other neighborhood kids; he was – and is – Chinese. That is, his father was from Taiwan and had Chinese citizenship. He married a Japanese woman and moved to Tokyo, where they operated a noodle shop in the old downtown ward of Sumida. He was imprisoned for a year during the war and, Oh later learned, tortured during that time on suspicion of being a Chinese agent.

Playing ball in the neighborhood, Oh showed considerable talent, and by his teen years he was sought after by ward teams, school teams, and even by adult leagues. He often highlights one particular memory as consequential, a practice game at dusk on a local riverbank field in late November 1954. A local resident stopped by to watch, well known to the kids as Arakawa Hiroshi, then playing for a pro team. After sizing up Oh's pitching and hitting, he called the boy over and suggested casually that Oh might hit better if he switched from a right-handed to left-handed stance. Oh did, and he promptly hit a long double off the outfield fence. Arakawa nodded approvingly, and Oh remained a left-handed hitter for the rest of his life.[6]

1956–1958: High school standout

Two years later, Oh entered Waseda Commercial High School, the private feeder school for the university of the same name and one of the premier baseball factory schools in Japan. This wasn't a straightforward matter of recruitment. It was a second chance for Oh; he had failed by one point the entrance examinations for the public school that his father intended for him. He was one of some 200 freshmen who showed up for the Waseda baseball team when the school year began in the spring of 1956. Almost all of them stood around the entire year raking the field, washing the uniforms of their upperclassmen, carrying their equipment, and chanting cheers nonstop. Few of them even got to touch a baseball, except when retrieving an errant foul. One of those exceptions was Oh, who was pulled from the freshman crowd and

immediately won a place on the pitching staff. This, too, he later discovered, he owed to Arakawa, who had put in a word with the coach and manager; it turned out that Arakawa was an alumnus and unofficial scout for Waseda.

Within three months, he was living every schoolboy's dream of appearing with his team in the summer national baseball tournament at fabled Kōshien Stadium.[7] He had a wild up-and-down experience, pitching a no-hit, no-run game to get Waseda into the tournament, and then helping to win the opening game with a ninth-inning bunt, before his pitching fell apart in the second-round game, which eliminated the team.

His second season was even more turbulent. Waseda High was selected for the 1957 national invitational tournament, held in the late spring at Kōshien. Practicing frantically to get in shape for the tournament, which began soon after the start of the school year, Oh developed intensely painful blisters on his throwing hand. As he pitched the early games at Kōshien, the blisters became so infected he could barely grip the ball. Following the tournament by radio at home in Tokyo, his father learned of his son's ailment and left immediately for Osaka. That night, he came secretly to Oh's bedside in the team dormitory and quietly applied a special balm of ginseng root and Chinese wine; he left immediately afterward to return to Tokyo to open his noodle shop the next morning. That next day was the championship game, and Oh started as pitcher for the fourth game in as many days. The balm had the desired effect, and the pain subsided for much of the game. In trouble at the end, he gutted out the final inning for the victory – in front of 60,000 spectators and a nationwide broadcast audience.

But the thrill of victory was quickly replaced by the anger of discrimination and then, the following year, by the agony of defeat. That summer, the Waseda team was chosen to represent Tokyo in the National Athletic Games; Oh was soon informed that he would not be able to participate because he was not a Japanese citizen. The following year, 1958, was Oh's third and final season, and Waseda was again invited to the spring Kōshien tournament. Oh pitched and won the first game but lost the next game, and the team went home. That summer, they reached the final game of the Tokyo regionals, seeking to qualify again for the summer Kōshien tournament. On August 3rd, Oh found himself pitching against another powerhouse, Meiji High School, in fabled Jingu Stadium. The game went into extra innings, and an attack of nerves caused him to blow a 5–1 lead in the bottom of the twelfth inning. Oh later claimed that "In

a lifetime of playing baseball, that was the toughest defeat I ever experienced" (Oh and Falkner 1984:60).

1959–1962: Disastrous early years with the Yomiuri Giants

Despite the Jingu fiasco, Oh was widely regarded as the top high school prospect, and that winter he was drafted by both the Hanshin Tigers and the Yomiuri Giants. Although they had just lost the Japan Series for the third time in a row, the Giants were still the preeminent professional team. Oh also preferred to play in Tokyo rather than in Osaka, the Tigers' home. Giants fans were delirious. Oh was joining the year following their signing of Nagashima Shigeo, the best college player in history, and the combination of the top high school player and the top college player on the same team electrified fans all across the country. The coup sold tickets, but as important to Yomiuri, it also greatly stimulated television and newspaper sales.

The pair burst onto the scene in one of the most memorable games in Japanese baseball history: the "Emperor's Game" on June 26 of Oh's first season.[8] It was so named because Emperor Hirohito, reputedly an avid baseball fan via print and broadcast media, was attending his very first baseball game. The contest pitted the Giants at home against their arch-rivals, the Hanshin Tigers. The early lead bounced back and forth, with Nagashima homering in the fifth inning. The Tigers regained the lead, but Oh hit a seventh-inning home run to tie the score. Then even more dramatically, Nagashima hit a bottom-of-the-ninth inning *sayonara* home run to win the game for the Giants. This was the first time Oh and Nagashima had homered in the same game, an *abekku* pair of home runs (from the French, *avec*) by a duo soon to be dubbed the "O–N cannon."

However, Oh's story continued to play unpredictably, and difficulties soon surfaced behind this early acclaim. The Giants had quickly decided that Oh should drop pitching to concentrate on hitting, but despite all the fanfare, his first years as a hitter were rough. He struck out often and went through one slump after another. His rookie season batting average was an abysmal .161. He quickly developed a taste for heavy drinking and late-night carousing at Ginza bars, which only compounded his downward fall. The fans were harsh, playing on his name (Oh, or Wan in Chinese, means king) to tag him *sanshin Oh,* the "strikeout king." The Giants were having serious reservations about keeping him.

1962–1965: From "strikeout king" to "home run king" under Arakawa

The boy wonder of high school baseball was spiraling downward toward disaster when fortune intervened in the spring of 1962, once again in the form of Arakawa-*sensei.* Without even knowing their past connections, the Giants hired Arakawa as the team's new batting coach, specifically charged with the "Oh problem." Over the next three years, Arakawa saved Oh's career with his quirky philosophical formulas. In Oh's story, Arakawa-*sensei* is Fate personified.

Arakawa had had an undistinguished career in the Pacific League, but he was a keen student of the game, especially batting. He developed a theory of batting that was based on down swinging, believing it to be the shortest and most efficient motion in moving the bat around and through the ball plane. Arakawa had also begun to study Zen as a player and became a devotee, although a somewhat bemused one.

He demanded of Oh at that first spring camp: "If you really want to make it as a pro, you will do exactly as I say for three years!" (Oh and Falkner 1984:115). Oh was amenable; he immediately realized that Arakawa's down-swinging style offered help toward his major problem, a "hitch." This was his habit of pulling his bat back momentarily, just at the instant of the pitcher's release; in so doing, he lost the fraction of a second necessary to swing fully and make contact.

Almost immediately, though, Arakawa went beyond his customary advice and proposed a radical solution to the hitch:

> Arakawa-san at that point assumed a batting position from the left side, then carefully raised his right leg so that he was standing on one foot. "You see," he said, "standing in this position, if you hitch, you will fall flat on your ass." (ibid. 117)

Oh thought he was joking, and it wasn't until much later that they returned to what became Oh's trademark, one-legged stance. In the meantime, though, Arakawa proceeded to lead Oh on a tour of Japanese spiritual Ways. "The real problem we were facing," Arakawa informed Oh, "was to apply the Japanese psyche to an American game" (ibid.).

Arakawa began to share with Oh some of the results of his study of Zen and quickly moved on to *nō* drama. Arakawa had pored over Zeami's fifteenth-century treatise, *Kadensho,* believing that its pronouncements on stage movements might offer some hints for baseball stances. Then, just as Oh himself was starting to study *Kadensho,* Arakawa abruptly announced that it was "time to move on" (ibid. 118). Now, it was *kabuki*:

The movements in it, he said, even though more exaggerated than those in *nō*, are delicately balanced on the transition from "motion" to "rest." I was to meditate on this constantly and seek to apply the image as best I could whenever I strode to the plate. Meanwhile, Arakawa-san said, he would delve into all the literature he could on *kabuki* in an effort to further this line of approach. (ibid. 119)

This Way-of-the-week was not whimsical but rather followed Arakawa's own peripatetic search for sources of inspiration. Arakawa's search for *kabuki* insights in fact led to a different path. Late one night, Arakawa showed up at Oh's rooms quite excited about a book he had just discovered by the great *kabuki* actor Kikugoro. In it, Kikugoro disclosed that he had found great inspiration in the martial art of *aikidō*, especially its stress on *ma*, the space in between. Kikugoro related his visit with the founder of *aikidō*, Ueshibe Morihei, at the latter's small *dōjō* training hall in the Shinjuku district of Tokyo. This is also what Arakawa and Oh did.

Arakawa told Oh that *aikidō* would be of immense value in learning to "eliminate *ma* and absorb the opponent," but he refused to let Oh actually practice it ("I can't afford to let you get hurt"). Instead, on their regular visits to the training hall, Oh would watch Arakawa get pounded in practice by Master Ueshibe, and he would then have to listen to Arakawa's lectures about the *aikidō* philosophical basis in "agape" or love and the need to strip oneself of opposition.

Oh was a dutiful student but did grow impatient with the seeming gap between *aikidō* and baseball, indeed, between all of these philosophical excursions and their application to his baseball difficulties.[9] And he continued to flounder as the season began in 1962. The down swinging compensated in part for his hitch, particularly for outside pitches, but pitchers around the league soon learned that they could get him on a tight inside pitch.

Matters reached a (perhaps apocryphal) peak one rainy day in late spring at the Giants coaches' meeting before a game with the Taiyō Whales at the Taiyō Stadium in Kawasaki. It was held to deal with the "Oh slump," and Arakawa faced loud criticism from the other coaches. He came out of the meeting and went directly to Oh, announcing that drastic measures were required. He ordered Oh to try the "flamingo" stance he had suggested some time before. The muddy field prevented practice, even in the warm-up circle, so when Oh came to bat and assumed the one-legged stance, the crowds were stunned – and then began hooting derisively. He proceeded to slap out a single, and then, two innings later, a home run. Returning to the Giants home park two days later, Oh belted another home run.

This was not a fluke; his hitting did improve dramatically, despite continued misgivings about Arakawa's explicit spiritualizing. He hit twenty-five homers after the mid-season All-Star Game break and finished the season with a league-leading thirty-eight home runs. It finally seemed as if Oh had broken the jinx and was ready to meet the team's expectations that had worn thin over his first three pro years. He even began to think about eventually breaking Babe Ruth's home run record.

Such optimism was premature. In retrospect, Oh came to see that 1962 season as simply the beginning of the next phase of his maturation as a hitter. In an important sense, the story of Oh's subsequent career was the struggle initially to understand the flamingo stance and then to perfect it.

For this, he found *aikidō* essential, particularly in its emphasis on centering one's balance on the body's "one point" and on waiting. *Aikidō* thus provided both the technique and the idiom for comprehending and formulating a batting stance and attitude toward hitting. A good example of this was Oh's adopting, from this time on, an unusual way of holding the bat – tipping it back toward the pitcher. But there was even more:

> It turned out that Arakawa-san had all the while been making his own plans. These had little to do with my having won a title or two. His mind was already in the future. "You are ready now," he said, "to really acquire the Body of a Rock." I suggested that this was what I had been striving to achieve all season, but he replied that there was far more to what we were doing than simply gaining balance. "Immovable Self-Discipline comes only when you master the use of *ki*. And this you have only just begun to do." To that end, he said, we were now going to turn to the use of the Japanese sword. (ibid. 151)

Thus they moved from *aikidō* to *kendō* and what was to be a two-year concentration in how sword handling could further improve his bat handling. They began with fifty straight days at a *kendō* practice hall in Tokyo during the 1962–1963 off-season. Once again, Arakawa practiced its techniques, which included numerous footwork and sword-handling patterns, several of particular relevance to the baseball swing. Of particular importance was *kendō*'s insight into hand and wrist actions at the moment of cutting. The conventional baseball view was that, for maximum power, the hitter twisted the wrists at the moment of ball contact. *Kendō* taught that the twist should come just *after* contact. Practicing with the sword on tubes of bound straw, Arakawa realized that rotating the wrists on initial entry caused the sword to move up through the straw; twisting the wrists just after entry produced a straight, smooth traverse. This coincided with his own thinking on down swinging, and he put Oh through interminable practices of this motion.

As always, Arakawa kept spiritualizing the act of hitting – framing it as an action of physical balance and inner poise, as a gathering of one's *ki* energy – but arduous repetition was at the core of *kendō* training. Throughout the accounts of this period of Oh's life, Arakawa appears as a psychologically acute coach, with a genius for understanding and manipulating the body and spirit of his student to extract maximum effort.

All the practice began to pay off. Oh had a solid season in 1963, and the Giants won the league title and the Japan Series. He did even better in 1964, finishing with fifty-five home runs, a single-season record that still stands today. Throughout this period, in the off-season, he continued his *kendō* training (although Arakawa always prohibited him from engaging in actual contact with *kendō* sticks), and by late 1964, his three-year apprenticeship was complete. He had emerged, in his own mind, as a Master Batsman:

> I had reached the point where I simply lived to hit. How can I say it without sounding foolish? I craved hitting a baseball the way a samurai craved following the Way of the Sword. It was my life. (ibid. 175)

Still, Oh did not hide his disappointment that his record was not well recognized by the public. In 1964, the Tokyo Olympic year, the Giants didn't win the league pennant, and, most disheartening to Oh, his teammate Nagashima's marriage was given much wider media coverage.[10] It was also at this moment that Arakawa brought his constant tutelage to an end. Again the rationale was cast in a spiritual idiom. He explained to Oh that Oh had now progressed through the first three of what are said to be the four stages in martial arts training: He had mastered the first stage of technique (*gi*), the second stage of skill (*jutsu*), and the third stage of art (*gei*). Only the fourth remained: *dō*, or the Way itself. And that was to be Oh's own day-to-day, season-to-season quest for batting excellence.

1965–1974: The Giants' V-9 glory years

Oh continued to consult with Arakawa throughout his career, but the focus of Oh's story shifted at this point to his place on the team – and what a team it was becoming! One couldn't construct a better sports gloss on national history than the Giants' nine-year reign as consecutive champions of Japanese baseball. In the aftermath of the Tokyo Olympics, during the boom years of Prime Minister Ikeda's "double-your-income" policies, through the national crises of the Nixon shocks, right up to the first oil crisis of 1974, the Giants were a lightning rod for national prestige and patriotic pride. They were Japan's Team.[11]

The Giants were led by their two stars, Oh and Nagashima, their popularity assured by the backing of the Yomiuri companies, by then the most powerful news and entertainment organization in the country. They were managed by Kawakami Tetsuharu, who had been known during his player years as the "god of hitting." As manager, Kawakami quickly became famous for a style of authoritarian leadership called "managed baseball" (*kanri yakyū*). He demanded iron discipline, arduous practices, stolid teamwork, a conservative playing strategy, and *no foreigners.* The Giants had been the first team in the early days of pro baseball to hire a foreigner, the famous White Russian pitcher from Hokkaido, Victor Starfin. Then, after World War II, they were the first team to again hire a foreigner, the Japanese-American from Hawaii, Wally Yonamine. Now, under Kawakami, they deliberately "purified" themselves, becoming the first team to proclaim itself all-Japanese.[12]

From 1965 through 1973, the Giants won nine consecutive Japan Series titles, totally dominating the league and thoroughly reshaping the image of professional baseball. With the enormous power of the parent media company behind them, they projected a player image and a playing style that was coordinated, committed, and relentlessly efficient. They were a resonant metonym for the Confucian capitalism that foreigners and Japanese themselves were then reevaluating in a new positive light as the culture's unique accomplishment.[13] The Giants emblemized Japanese baseball – or at least what most Japanese at the time wanted to imagine it to be – and in so doing condensed professional baseball into the Giants' image.

1974–1988: The later years of individual records and manager woes

One of the obvious ways in which a life story diverges from the life it narrates is the story's emphasis and pacing – its variable richness. To create coherence and causality, a narrative will attend carefully to some moments of a life while passing lightly over others. In a life story that pivots on a swing, it is no surprise that Oh's story lingers disproportionately over those years, especially the three years under Arakawa's tutelage, 1962–1965. This creates a tempo that reminds me of the characteristic *jo, ha, kyū* rhythms of *nō* drama (see Rimer, Chapter 2, this volume): the opening statement, the stately thematic presentation, and the fast wind-up. Thus, in Oh's story, what is fully the second half of a thirty-year professional career as player, coach, and manager is actually

treated very briefly as an inevitable coda to the long struggle to find a unique, and uniquely successful, swing.

The watershed year for the Giants as a team was 1974. They failed to win the league pennant, and their championship streak came to an end. Nagashima retired after seventeen seasons to take over from Kawakami as the Giants manager. This, Yomiuri management hoped, would revive the team fortunes, but in fact the Giants never regained their dominance of the Central League. For Oh, however, it was the moment when he began to bear down on the American career home run records. He won the triple crown that year for the second season in a row (a remarkable feat that no American player has yet accomplished) and pushed his home run total to 634.

In the meantime, at the beginning of the season, Hank Aaron had finally surpassed Babe Ruth's career total, hitting his 715th on April 8th. The Yomiuri newspaper capitalized on the publicity by bringing Aaron over to Japan after the season for a home run derby between the American and Japanese champion. Aaron won, 10–9, but it marked the start of a long-distance friendship between the two players and drew further attention to Oh's race to overtake Babe Ruth and Hank Aaron.

Three years later, on September 3, 1977, the thirty-seven-year-old Oh finally surpassed Aaron's total, hitting an outside sinker into the Korakuen stands for his 756th homer.[14] Then, over the final three years of his career, with his reflexes slowing and the team floundering, he pushed his total up over the 800 mark. With little more to prove, and uncomfortable about his declining powers, he retired after the 1980 season. (Even his retirement press conference was upstaged by Nagashima, who chose the following day to announce his own retirement as manager.) Oh remained with the organization as coach and assistant manager.

It was in the early 1980s that a last wave of biographies, broadcast documentaries, and Oh's English-language autobiography appeared. Most therefore do not even address his final five years with the Giants, from 1983 to 1988, when he was elevated to manager.[15] Like Nagashima and Fujita Motoshi before him, he had little success in resurrecting the team's fortunes. The players and coaches were sharply factionalized into a small minority who supported his efforts and the majority who remained loyalists to Nagashima. Oh finished his five-year manager's contract in 1988 and assumed the role of a polite but rather diffident elder statesman of the game within Japan. Recently, however, he has been lured out of retirement to begin managing a brash upstart team in the Pacific League, the Fukuoka Daiei Hawks. With even greater media fanfare, Nagashima

had been returned in 1993 as the Giants' manager, and the press and fans eagerly anticipate a Japan Series that will pit the former teammates against one another.

Pedagogy and practice

This essay is predicated on the proposition that sports are situated, instrumental, and physical practices. People learn sports as they learn most skills and dispositions in life outside of schools – through, as Lave and Wenger put it, "legitimate peripheral participation in a community of practice." Sports are indeed a "likely place" for practicing practice.

And yet part of the significance of Oh's case is the ways in which it fits within but also stretches this rubric of legitimate peripheral participation. Its distinctiveness is apparent in a number of elements of the pedagogical relationship of teacher-master and learner-student.

- Regarding the "master": The relationship of Arakawa-*sensei* ("master Arakawa") and Oh-*senshū* ("player Oh") was predictably asymmetric, with Oh showing continuing deference to and gratitude for the guidance of Arakawa. However, Arakawa was hardly a master in the sense of *aikidō* founder Ueshibe or the Zen monastery abbot who taught and disciplined Victor Sōgen Hori (1994) – or even the old naval quartermasters whom Edwin Hutchins describes (cited in Lave and Wenger 1991:73–76). As we have seen, Arakawa himself had been a rather mediocre player and could claim authority only by virtue of his personal insights into batting dynamics and training psychology. Moreover, as one of the Giants' batting coaches, he was not even particularly high in the team hierarchy.
- Regarding the "student": Oh was very much the student-learner in the relationship, putting himself under Arakawa's direction and guidance. He was, however, hardly a novice of the game when he did so but was already a nationally known professional in a prolonged and highly publicized slump. Oh did in fact become a master, but in the sense of becoming an accomplished star of hitting and not in the sense of himself becoming an effective teacher of hitting. He has had such ambitions, which he has attempted to fulfill, with little apparent success, as coach and manager after his playing days.

- Regarding the "teaching" and "learning" between them: Coaches do just that; they coach "from the sidelines" and are beyond performing. Thus Oh's training under Arakawa was not in the nature of an apprenticeship to a practicing swordsmith or potter or elementary school teacher or other position in which the teaching is in doing centrally and the learning is in watching and waiting to the side. There was some observing, especially when Arakawa forbid Oh to engage in actual *aikidō* or *kendō* mock combat. More frequently, though, the roles were reversed, and Arakawa coordinated and monitored the prolonged drills that he demanded Oh practice over the years. The content of the teaching and learning – batting – was itself contradictory; it is an absolutely fundamental baseball skill, but in Oh's case the aim was remedial and corrective. Furthermore, although swinging the bat is a basic, physical motion, Arakawa's teaching was rationalized in quite esoteric philosophical idioms. Indeed, there was a good bit more talk-teaching than one finds in many peripheral learning settings.
- Regarding the "community of practice": The prolonged (re)-training under Arakawa was under the auspices of the Giants team and went on in the midst of Oh's continuing to play at the center of the lineup during the three seasons. And yet, it was also a rather private training, usually done at sites apart from the Giants' ballpark or other team facilities – in Arakawa's home, at Ueshibe's training hall, and so forth. The team left Arakawa and Oh to their own devices and gave them considerable latitude in designing their routines. It was a most peripheral learning!

These and other features of Oh's case raise some intriguing questions about its significance for our appreciation of learning in sports settings. How unique were the features of Oh's arduous acquisition of swinging from the flamingo stance? How common were they to training in Japanese baseball? How common were they to the general learning experiences of baseball players and other sports performers?

To be sure, foreigners and Japanese alike most commonly take Oh's story at face value, as a condensation of a uniquely Japanese-style baseball. His career, as he and Arakawa put it, was the consummate application of "the Japanese psyche to an American game." By this understanding, Oh's has been a distinctively Japanese life struggle of overcoming adversity and accomplishing success only through sustained sacrifice, total dedication,

and indigenous spirituality. He is a true warrior in the Way of Baseball. In fact, to Robert Whiting, Oh embodies what he calls the Code of Conduct for Samurai Baseball, whose articles include harmony, modesty, and self-effacement; loyalty to the team and absolute obedience to managers and coaches; and hard work, sacrifice, and fanatical training.

As I suggested at the outset, I find this image to be quite misleading.[16] Of course, *nō* drama, *aikidō*, and *kabuki* are indubitably Japanese religio-aesthetic ways, and there was an undeniable fanaticism to Oh's regime and his willingness to entrust his rehabilitation to the quirky formulas of Arakawa. However, Oh's story is quite unique in the biographical annals of Japanese baseball. Teams do occasionally employ Zen meditation techniques and the media love to cover the ceremonial blessing that many teams receive at a Shinto shrine or Buddhist temple at the start of a new season or before a final series. I have found nothing, though, in individual biographies or team histories that remotely approaches the Arakawa–Oh story.

Moreover, Arakawa's employment of such spiritual idioms and practices was complex. On the one hand, he appears to have been quite opportunistic. Arakawa led Oh down these well-trod paths to religious enlightenment, but from the outset, he warned Oh of his very pragmatic, irreverent, and instrumental ambitions:

> "The goal of Zen is to become void of desire," Arakawa told Oh, "but can a man attain such a high goal? What a baseball player looks for is how to get a base hit – how to smash the ball – and the farther the better. How can a pro ever be void of such a desire?" (Oh and Falkner 1984:113)

Arakawa had no intention of using the spiritual Ways to empty Oh of selfish desire. Quite the opposite, they were calculated means of *enhancing* that personal drive and individual accomplishment. And yet, however peripatetic and idiosyncratic, the spiritual journey was not entirely cynical and manipulative. Perhaps it might be best characterized as the pragmatic application of metaphysical principles and attitudes toward the perfection of physical form and mental concentration.

A second aspect of Oh's case also belies an easy characterization as "samurai baseball." I refer here to the difficulties of channeling self-actualization into the grooves of group objectives. Japanese organizations' suppression of individual initiative and selfless commitment to group objectives have always been stereotypic pieties mouthed by corporate flacks and accepted at face value by outside commentators and critics. In fact, however, postwar large organizations have always been defined by the continual tensions between the variable talents and motivations of

individual members and the multiple (even inconsistent) aims of the hierarchically structured group. Group harmony, hierarchical authority, and individual motivation have always coexisted uneasily in Japanese organizations, like organizations everywhere.

This was certainly the case with the Yomiuri Giants, despite their carefully polished image of "managed baseball." Indeed, it was well known that despite that phrase, manager Kawakami actually stressed individual effort to the players. As Oh himself explained:

> "Kawakami baseball" was generally thought of as team-oriented rather than individual-oriented. But that really was not it. Of course Mr. Kawakami stressed harmony among us. He purified himself at a Buddhist retreat before he took over as manager.... But it was his approach to the game that distinguished him most. Play with greed for victory, he taught, and this he most peculiarly emphasized as an individual thing. One strove for the highest individual goals possible and did so relentlessly.... We had an obligation to the team, but this obligation was best fulfilled by learning to use ourselves individually to the limit.[17]

Self-sacrifice, one might say, is a rather more complex disposition than that of a cardboard samurai – and rather more like definitions of effort familiar to athletes in the United States and elsewhere. Part of the fascination of Oh's story is precisely the longstanding engagement between a player with one of the most unique perspectives on his own performance and a team with one of the most pronounced public images for regimented collective effort – and the drama of how the team and the player reconciled themselves to one another and were altered by the encounter.

In sum, there is much reason to question those interpretations of Oh's case that treat it as a synecdoche for Japanese spiritualized and selfless behavior. At the same time, it is equally unsatisfying to bracket it as a fascinating curiosity even for Japan, and so unique as to be uninstructive. Despite its obvious distinctiveness, there are several elements of Oh's case that do speak directly to the nature of learning in sport-as-situated-activity, and it is with this that I wish to conclude.

Learning-practice theorists are surely correct that there are obvious differences between formal classroom teaching and situated learning. However, they are also astute enough to realize that it is not helpful to map this distinction onto a contrast of talking and doing. There is a great deal of quite necessary and didactic talk in sports practice and performance. There are rules, techniques, and strategies that must be explained and tested and diagrammed as well as drilled and executed. There are playbooks and rule books to memorize, "skull sessions" to attend, and hours

of video to watch and analyze. In this way, the forms and reasons for sports actions are made explicit – in order to become implicit. Indeed, much of sports performance would appear to fall into a gray zone between automatic action or reaction and calculated deliberations.[18]

Sports also have a capacious concept of preparation-as-practice. Oh was already the best known and most highly regarded high school athlete in Japan when he joined the Giants and fell into his slump. Yet his three years under Arakawa were spent on an absolute fundamental of the game. His (re)learning to swing was not without parallel to my eight-year-old daughter's learning to swing this year under her softball team coach. The physical and mental skills that enable sports activity must be continually honed and often reshaped. There is little useful distinction between learning and (re)learning, between training and (re)training.

Finally, learning (in) sports is generally a mix of the prescriptive and the novel. Repetitive drills and supervised practice give a highly managed character to sports routines, as we have certainly seen with the Yomiuri Giants. And yet the drive to survive and to win, to excel and to exceed current thresholds, puts equal value on experimenting, on taking risks, on a search for a new style. Oh, like athletes generally, tested limits by testing conventional wisdom and current techniques.

Sport performance in contemporary society is so public, so institutionally elaborated, so readily quantifiable, so easily critiqued and appreciated by athletes and spectators alike, that it is no wonder that it is carefully framed, rule-governed, and made predictably patterned. And yet the anxiety and the anticipation of what will happen in the next instant can never be allayed. The power of sports performance is precisely in the tension between the ever-suspenseful moment of uncertain outcome and the narrative and statistical webs of signification in which these moments are suspended. Oh's learning to swing in his irreplicable way only enhanced the pleasurable tensions in his performance for a generation of Japanese fans.

Notes

1. This is the time lapse of a fast ball thrown at an initial, "muzzle" velocity of ninety-eight miles per hour (see Adair 1994:28 and 35).
2. Oh's position was also tagged a scarecrow stance (scarecrows placed by Japanese farmers in their fields are one-legged, in the belief that they don't need to walk).
3. Written and broadcast material on Oh, like any Japanese baseball star, is voluminous and wildly variable in partisanship, reliability, and detail. My sources for this essay have included several Oh autobiographies, especially in English (Oh and Falkner 1984)

and Japanese (Oh 1981) (see also several Chinese versions, e.g., 1986, which I have not been able to use for this manuscript); a recent volume of Oh's essays and recollections (Oh 1993); a 1978 television documentary (NHK 1989); and commentary and journalism in English (Whiting 1977, 1989; Cromartie 1991) and Japanese (Arimoto 1992:169–245; Terauchi 1982; Nagashima and Oh 1993; Chiba 1993).

4. For further details, see Whiting (1977, 1989). The twelfth team, the Hiroshima Carp, is jointly owned by Mazda and the City of Hiroshima.
5. The larger topic of Japanese professional baseball is the subject of my ongoing research. For a rather different use of Oh's life story, see Kelly (in press).
6. This scene is dramatized in animation in the NHK documentary. See also Oh and Falkner (1984:27–29). Arakawa's advice was timely though not profound. As any baseball fan knows, the preponderance of right-handed pitchers, and the advantages of hitting left-handed against right-handed pitching, are obvious incentives to batting left-handed.
7. Rival newspaper companies had started separate national tournaments for middle school, and later, high school teams in the mid-1910s. They became immensely popular, and in 1925, both were moved to a huge new stadium, Kōshien, in the outskirts of Osaka. The Mainichi newspaper chain still sponsors the spring tournament, which is an invitational. The Asahi chain sponsors the summer tournament in August, which brings to Kōshien representative teams from every prefecture that have won regional knock-out tournaments earlier in the summer. In English, see Whiting (1989:239–262).
8. Whiting (1977:98–102) describes the game, although he places it in May.
9. After yet another poor start, Oh found himself walking the late-night streets of Tokyo drenched to the skin from a rainy season downpour, wondering to himself: "The objective of *aikidō* was to strip oneself of opposition, to reconcile oneself with the universe. The enlightened one merges with the universe.... In enlightenment, time ceases to exist. There is the universe, which is everything – sorrow and joy, gain and loss – and there is you. Unfortunately, here was also me, languishing in the rain, struggling hopelessly against myself" (Oh and Falkner 1984:129).
10. The Oh–Nagashima rivalry is much analyzed in Japanese journalism. From the start, though, their relative standing with the parent company and with fans was clear. Nagashima was and remains the most popular player in baseball history. He was anointed Mr. Giants, and Oh realized that as long as Nagashima was on the team, he would always be number one with spectators, fellow players, and the front office. Nagashima's marriage raises also the issue of gender – not only the male exclusivity of this, like most mass sports, but also the invisibility of home life and the marginalization of players' wives. The young Nagashima was touted as Japan's most eligible bachelor. In 1961, his fourth year with the Giants, he announced with great fanfare that he was not getting married until he was at least thirty. He declared he was a "sportsman" and that his muscles and reflexes (*undō shinkei*) would continue to grow until age thirty. He owed it to the team, he said, to channel all his growing energy to baseball until then. This was a sentiment that large corporations encouraged in their young managers (among other ways, by pay and benefit structures that made early marriage financially difficult). Oh, on the other hand, married quite early and very quietly, but as one might expect from a *sarariiman* of the era, his family is virtually invisible throughout his story. The Japanese sports press occasionally mentions his

wife as long-suffering and bitter and his three daughters as openly angry at Oh, but the only real personalities admitted into his narrative are Arakawa and his parents.

11. Matsuzono Hisami, when owner of the Yakult Swallows, once declared that the best possible outcome would be for the Giants to finish first and his own team to finish second! This was a matter of sentiment – he was a longstanding Giants fan – but also corporate business; Yakult yogurt drink sales were said to decline whenever the Swallows defeated the Giants! (Whiting 1989:7)
12. Oh's mixed parentage as well as the mixed ethnicities of several teammates complicated that claim, of course. This is related to the larger concerns of Japanese ethnicity and cultural nationalism in Kelly (in press).
13. Some sense of self-image is conveyed in "Nihonjin to Kyojin-gun," which appeared in 1984 on the occasion of the team's fifth anniversary (Iwakawa 1984a). It reports on a series of interviews with 102 former members of the Giants organization. A partial English translation appeared as "The Mystique of the Yomiuri Giants" (Iwakami 1984b).
14. Aaron had retired at the end of 1976 with 755. The reaction of the American baseball world was largely patronizing. Oh's record was dismissed as incommensurate because he played against inferior pitchers in smaller stadiums. Aaron himself was polite and congratulatory and has avoided belittling Oh's total. In part, this reflects his own struggle. As an African-American, he encountered enormous prejudice as he threatened Ruth's record, and he has remained outspoken about baseball's discriminatory practices in keeping African-Americans out of the front office and managerial positions. Oh has been equally conciliatory toward Aaron. He has always claimed that he would never have reached such a total if he had played in the United States: "But it was my record, and it was baseball's record nonetheless! It was the devotion of a professional's career" (Oh and Falkner 1984:244–245).
15. There was, of course, a voluminous sports journalism about the Giants during those years, dissecting the team woes and Oh's managerial difficulties. In English, the splendid autobiography of Warren Cromartie (Cromartie and Whiting 1991) is valuable on this and many other points because Cromartie played under Oh during those years and came to respect him enormously. Cromartie reports, for example, that Nakahata, the captain and a Nagashima loyalist, would sometimes refer to Oh as "*wan-ko.*" This was a play on the Chinese pronunciation of Oh, *Wan*, like Oh's longstanding nickname, Wan-chan, but *wan-ko* meant "dog." See also my essay on the notorious Randy Bass incident of October 1985, which involved Oh and the Giants, and Whiting's chapter, "Giant Headache," on the series of mutual difficulties between the Giants and the various American players they hired between 1974 and 1988 (1989:161–200).
16. It is also ironic, given Oh's mixed parentage and Chinese citizenship, but again that is taken up in my other essay.
17. Oh and Falkner (1984:196–197). See also Oh (1993:65–68). Kawakami, not surprisingly, represented all sides of the triangular tensions of harmony, hierarchy, and individual pursuit. Like many ex-managers, when Kawakami retired in 1974, he became a much sought-after speaker and writer on the corporate motivational circuit, dispensing such advice to executives as "Most players are lazy. It's a manager's responsibility to make them train hard" or "If your leading salesman opposed you, fire him. For if you allow individualism, it will surely fail!" (quoted in Whiting 1989:74)

18. It is also misleading to dismiss classroom instruction as abstract and disembodied. As any analyst of "hidden curricula" would insist, the lessons of school can be quite directly and physically connected with one's place(ment) in society – the time discipline of bells and periods, the dress codes that put ties and skirts on adult authorities, the desks that orient students away from one another and facing the standing authority, the prevalent grading and tracking, and so on.

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