



PROJECT MUSE®

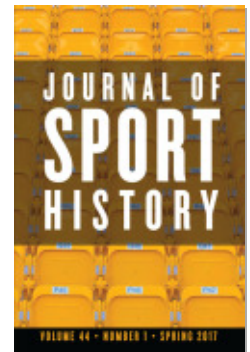
---

Allen Guttman, Cross-Disciplinary Champion of an Interdisciplinary Field

William W. Kelly

Journal of Sport History, Volume 44, Number 1, Spring 2017, pp. 80-85 (Article)

Published by University of Illinois Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/651090>



# Allen Guttman, Cross-Disciplinary Champion of an Interdisciplinary Field

WILLIAM W. KELLY<sup>†</sup>  
Department of Anthropology  
Yale University

*With erudite scholarship, lively writing, and daring leaps across topics, eras, and disciplines, Allen Guttman has earned a champion's laurels in global sports studies. This essay is an appreciation of but one of his many accomplishments, his weaving together the multiple strands of Japanese sporting practices into a historical tapestry of indigenization and sportification. His coauthored book with Lee Thompson, Japanese Sports (2001), is an original contribution to our understanding of modern Japan and an influential argument about sports globalization.*

KEYWORDS: Japan, global, sports, Guttman

If Allen Guttman were an elite athlete, he would be a decathlon champion for his remarkable expertise over so many disciplines and topics. As an elite scholar, he has even exceeded that analogy! His eleven books about sports have covered a staggering range of historical periods and sports-related topics: lucid narrative and ground-breaking analyses of athletes, organizations, venues, and spectators; of sports at the metropole and through their global extensions; of the sports erotic and the sports artistic; and more. He is equally comfortable in the primary sources and the secondary literatures of multiple languages. The interdisciplinary field that is sports studies is blessed with many fine scholars of enormous

<sup>†</sup>All correspondence to [william.kelly@yale.edu](mailto:william.kelly@yale.edu)

accomplishment, but no one has displayed such sustained erudition across so many topics. He is indeed our cross-disciplinary champion.

I first encountered Allen Guttmann fifty years ago, before either of us was drawn to sport studies. I was a nineteen-year-old sophomore in 1965 at Amherst College, which had a fairly lengthy compulsory curriculum in those days. As sophomores, we were required to take a year-long sequence in multidisciplinary American studies. This was still a fairly recent scholarly rubric that had come out of Harvard and gained some intellectual growth in the 1950s, but Amherst was one of the few liberal arts colleges at the time to develop such a department; the full department faculty joined in teaching the sophomore class this mix of history, literature, and social science. Guttmann had joined the Amherst faculty in 1959, and his contributions to the sequence were his original specialty in American thought and literature. Our lectures were at 8:30 in the morning in a large lecture hall with rather uncomfortable wooden seating; but attendance was noted, so most of us made it regularly, albeit sometimes in pajamas. I remember well his quite precise and thorough commentaries on various American authors, although I always wondered what he must have thought as he conveyed such scholarly insight to rather ill-mannered teenagers, alternately fidgeting and yawning in our seats.

As many readers know, Guttmann continued those interests in his writing and his teaching over his long and distinguished five-decade career at Amherst, even as he began his sports studies, inspired he has often said by his sabbatical in Germany in 1968. He has hinted that his colleagues did not appreciate his turn to sports scholarship. Perhaps. I do not know, but I do suspect that coming of age as an intellectual in the emerging nexus of American studies must have inspired his capacious and eclectic approach to sport—a willingness to treat literature, popular media, commercial products, even art and music as necessary evidence as well as more conventional historical archives and to analyze sports in their fuller social and cultural contexts.

I was not to encounter Guttmann for three decades after I graduated from Amherst. I went on to become a sociocultural anthropologist of Japan. Like most social scientists, I tended to overlook leisure, especially sports, as a consequential area of life, and my own research and writing focused on more “serious” issues in Japanese society of the 1970s and 1980s. It was not until the early 1990s that I realized the profound force that sports had on schooling, gender, metropolitan political economies, the mass media, corporate life, and nationalism in twentieth-century Japan, the topics that had commanded my attention and filled my syllabi. How could I have missed sports?

When I turned to the sports studies literature, I was surprised to discover that my former undergraduate teacher was a pre-eminent figure in the field, and his books quickly become central to my education. I realized, for instance, that Guttmann’s *From Ritual to Record* (1978) was both a stunningly original analysis and provocative to fellow specialists, but, to a Japan scholar, it was absorbing. These very questions of Weberian-style rationalization were fundamental to the Japanese experience in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as well as to debates among historians of the nation’s political and economic transformation.

And, I later realized, as I was beginning to take sports in Japan seriously, Guttmann himself was engaging with the history of Japanese sport. *Japanese Sport: A History* (2001),

the masterful overview of sport history in Japan that he wrote with his collaborator Lee Thompson, is the best we have in English.<sup>1</sup> Like all of his writings, it is lively, comprehensive, reliable, and highly informative.

His turn to Japan was perhaps partly influenced by Amherst's institutional ties in Japan and certainly by his wife, the very fine literary historian of Japan, Doris Bargen, herself unusually wide-ranging across historical epochs and perspectives. An additional motivation may have been that Japan presents an especially instructive case to the sports historian. If the modern organized sports that emerged in Great Britain and the United States from the mid-nineteenth century spread largely through imperial, mercantile, and military circuits, Japan presents the rare instance where such sports arrived and thrived in a resolutely independent new nation that modernized (and militarized) quickly in its own terms to rival the West. Japan already had elaborate physical cultures of plebian wrestling (sumo) and elite martial training (the so-called martial arts). It is, thus, a provocative case to assess one of the core debates of global sport studies: should we understand the "ludic diffusion" of Anglo-American sports (as Guttmann himself phrased it in his *Games and Empires* [1994]) to be cultural diffusion or cultural imperialism, commanding local adoption or encountering local resistance or local adaptation?

Japan is especially rich in historical depth, in archival sources, and in significant scholarship done by Japanese historians and sport sociologists over more than a half century. The great value of Guttmann's collaboration with Thompson is that it brought these two trajectories into analytical focus—the lineages of indigenous Japanese sports and the introduction and incorporation of a wide range of Western sports, including baseball, soccer, swimming, gymnastics, skiing, golf, and tennis. And it describes the history of physical education in the school system, the emergence of amateur and professional sports leagues, the involvement of business and the media in sports promotion, and Japan's century-long participation in the Olympics.

*Japanese Sports* thus takes the analytical form of two intertwined "narratives," the vicissitudes of long-standing Japanese sporting practices and the introduction of Western sports, set in a larger context of Japanese history. The specific fates of individual sports prove to be surprising and varied, but the authors also draw some general patterns and larger lessons. Time and again, the particular sports' histories demonstrate that Japanese "modernity," whatever else it is, is a composite of pre-existing practices that have been deliberately and strategically "traditionalized" even as they are "modernized" (for example, rationalized and "sportified") and that Western forms have been aggressively incorporated and domesticated, especially by embedding in a spiritual idiom. The authors admit that the concept of "modernization" was frequently disparaged in social theory (and it still is fifteen years later), but they demonstrate that it still can be useful in thinking about and conceptualizing sports. What they show is that sports emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and proliferated as a dynamic tension between the modernizing imperatives of record keeping, rule making, classification, bureaucratization, and the traditionalizing impulses of nationalist sentiment. Thus, plebian wrestling became Grand Sumo, and military training exercises became martial arts, while some aspects of baseball were imbued with samurai-like injunctions and recreational golf became an exhausting Japanese corporate ritual of business sociality. Here, as elsewhere, "traditional" and "modern" were not a temporal divide but simultaneous processes of nation-state building.

Guttman had already expressed skepticism about the global promotion of Anglo-American sports as imperial technology in *Games and Empires*. While this was sometimes the case, circumstances and motivations were often too diverse to reduce these pathways of diffusion and incorporation to a single explanation. To him, more important than the means and motivations of entry are the subsequent local histories of sports, and he closes his 1994 book by quoting approvingly Jay R. Mandle and Joan D. Mandle's position that "what is important is not where a cultural form originated but what happens to it upon its arrival."<sup>2</sup>

That is certainly the message of the Guttman and Thompson account of sports in modern Japan. What the reader comes to appreciate is how sports were implicated in three master trends of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Japan. The first was the rapid development of a national—and nationalized—education system that was pyramidal in school ranking and that measured advancement by objective, quantifiable exam results. As in Great Britain, many sports began in the elite boys' schools and were carried upward to the new universities and then downward through the secondary and even primary levels of the national system by the early twentieth century. As this happened, priority sports were winnowed (baseball, in particular, emerged as the most favored school sport), and school authorities endowed these sports with personal character building as well as school reputation-making functions.

Sports were also key in the rapid and extensive commercialization of the mass media and metropolitan entertainment from the turn of the twentieth century, in the form of large-corporate control of the news and leisure industries. Newspapers and urban transport companies promoted both spectator sports and recreation through stadiums and other sport facilities and constant event sponsorship.

Finally, sports were shaped by a rising nationalism and a powerfully felt political, economic, and military rivalry with the Western powers. These pressures impelled Japan into the Olympic movement, introduced sports as a technology of imperial rule in Japan's own colonies, and gave a nationalist tinge to some aspects of sports, especially baseball.

These same vectors continued to influence the Japanese sportscape in the latter half of the twentieth century, following Japan's defeat in World War II. The postwar education system was further standardized and even more measured advancement by objective, quantifiable exam results. Physical education and school sports clubs were drawn into ever-wider frameworks of guidelines and competition. Television and daily sports newspapers, generally linked in media conglomerates, massified the popularity of professional and high school baseball and sumo from the 1950s onward. Japanese corporations developed the most extensive programs of company sports teams in the world and used the teams (employees but often recruited for their sports abilities) to further aims of employee socialization and morale, company reputation, and product sales. In the absence of government training facilities, corporate sports programs provided the core of Japan's Olympic athletes (particularly in swimming, volleyball, judo, track and field, and the marathon). Corporate sports provided the only genuine opportunities to women for elite sports training and competition. And the militaristic and imperial nationalism of the earlier decades transformed into an economic nationalism of GNP growth and a cultural nationalism of Japanese cultural particularism. This brought sports to the fore, especially through Olympics participation and hosting, as crucial soft power, decades before political scientist Joseph Nye popularized the concept in the 1990s.

The portrait of sports in modern Japan that Guttman and Thompson depict in their book revealed the multiple, intersecting lines of development and the manifold sites and forms of participation and spectatorship. There is a danger that this may be read merely as thick description, but below the surface, I think, is a profound point about Japan sports and about sports scholarship. It should not surprise us that, in a very short time, sports manifested themselves in Japan in such disparate experiences and such varied political-economic locations. But there was a tendency of the most powerful interests—educational authorities, political elites, and corporate powers—to focus rather narrowly on those sporting forms best serving those interests—thus, media attention to sports and levels of sports they promoted, educational pedagogues emphasizing certain ideologies of sacrifice, team play, deference that confirmed their claims to sports authority, and the selective celebration of certain sports and sport teams that were imagined to best embody certain national virtues. Baseball is the prime example for Japan, becoming the single center sport for much of the twentieth century and being molded to express the needs and interests of the mass media, the school system, major corporations, and the nation itself as the primary sports idiom for United States–Japan relations. However, this occludes a vast penumbra of sports experiences that are not so aligned to the agendas of power, which is why the more capacious account of Guttman and Thompson is a salutary perspective on what sports have actually meant to Japanese and for Japanese society.

Center sports often determine—and deform—sport studies as well, and this is a lesson of the book for sport scholars. I would hazard the speculation that most of the academic literature on sports focus on single sports (and often in single countries)—baseball in Cuba or cricket in the Trobriand Islands or soccer in Argentina or basketball in China. Of course, there is important work that is comparative, synthetic, and more broadly theoretical. However, if you look at the table of contents of our major journals or glance at the titles on our office bookshelves, by and large, you will see single-sport studies (as I myself do). As responsible scholars, we do not directly claim that our arguments about, say, baseball in Japan or soccer in England, can be extended to the practices of other sports in that society, but I think it is the subtle, unintended, cumulative effect of disproportionate attention to major forms of dominant sports. The scholarship on sport in Japan is as overwhelmingly tilted to baseball as the national media are fixated on its major forms (high school and professional). However, if we are to be true to an emphasis on the construction of sportscape in different parts of the world, we should look at that sportscape in its full dimensions and not just on the trajectory of a single sport, however dominant it becomes. That, in the end, is the major accomplishment of Guttman and Thompson. It brings perspective to our understanding.

And this leads me back to what I most admire about Allen Guttman as a sports scholar and why I would analogize him to a decathlon champion had he not gone on to produce yet an eleventh book! A decathlete champion is more than the sum of his or her accomplishments in each event. Rather, in the commitment to a well-rounded excellence, the decathlete demonstrates the cardinal significance of balance (which is not to be confused with moderation). Guttman, too, as a sports scholar, has honed his gifts for research, formulation, and communication to document and demonstrate the true breadth of the

pleasures and problems, the rewards and the costs, of the human sporting experience across time and place.



## NOTES

1. Allen Guttman and Lee Thompson, *Japanese Sports: A History* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001).
2. Allen Guttman, *Games and Empires: Modern Sports and Cultural Imperialism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 187. The original source is Jay R. Mandle and Joan D. Mandle, *Grass Roots Commitment: Basketball and Society in Trinidad and Tobago* (Parkersburg, IA: Caribbean Books, 1988), 20.