

The power of athletes' words

Seiichi HARA* and Seiji INOUE**

Abstract

It is important for athletes to speak for themselves and communicate with words in the sporting world. However, it is extremely difficult to express oneself, let alone to be understood by others. In such a situation, a common vocabulary is needed for the process of mutual understanding. Moreover, the relationship between sport and music is peculiar to rituals and sacred events. The purpose of this study is to describe the capacity of words narrated by athletes. To evaluate athletes' words, a specifically social evaluation of athletes depends on the expression of athletes themselves and of their thoughts. Accordingly, the study examines the concept of "media production," and also focuses on the concept and on cases of "media training" as one method of communicating with words. Furthermore, the power of words is analyzed in the sport model using music as an example. The study finally may conclude that powerful words narrated by athletes are a necessary tool for understanding sport, and then outline possible ways of thinking for the field of sport study.

Key words; Athletes, Words, Media training

1. Introduction

1.1. Problems with the issue

Most people have many opportunities to encounter sport, both through various media and by viewing them in stadiums. This might be via television or radio sport broadcasts, through the internet, in a daily newspaper delivered to the home, or it might be through reading a sport magazine on the train. While various forms of media are vital in connecting people to sport, what position should be taken in order to maintain an ongoing relationship between them? Furthermore, what is the designated role of the sport media? The sport media's function of conveying sport as news accurately and providing opinions, analysis and criticism is important. Additionally, the sport media handles a wide variety of sport related material, such as introducing athletes personally and calling for reform in fields connected to sport.

* Chiba University, Organization for Student Support

** Faculty of Physical Education, Kokushikan University

If the focus is shifted to athletes, there have recently been calls for athletes to represent their sport through their words and actions, in addition to competition. A single statement can end an athlete's career or inspire broad social support; athletes' statements and behavior can set off great changes in the world around them. Top athletes must especially speak and act with an awareness of their positions, influence and of the foibles media. They must also learn how to communicate effectively in addition to enhancing their own individual appeal.

Even now, as media training gradually becomes commonplace, the statements made by Mami Sato and Yuki Ota during the final invitational presentation at the September 2013 IOC Session not only left an impression upon the IOC members in attendance that day but upon all who heard them and was a perfect example to illustrate the power of athletes' words, a criteria which athletes currently are increasingly being judged upon

One might consider the nature of the standards by which society evaluates sport (athletes), and what they might be. Their skill levels (skill in the relevant sport and physical performance) are often mentioned first, but this seems insufficient on its own. In addition, a personal code, philosophy, and ability at expressing feelings through words and actions are all traits demanded of athletes. However, this expressive capacity cannot be learned overnight, and skills at communicating using appropriate language, demeanor, and attitude must be learned through experience and various forms of training. Essentially, athletes must possess sufficient powers of communication.

In discussing statements by athletes, one cannot fail to address the relationship between sport and music. Fight songs and other kinds of music are a constant presence in stadiums and when an individual listens to sport commentary, it is almost a given that he or she will hear a theme song. It is also not coincidental that music has long been associated with religious ceremonies and celebrations. Just as the world is becoming increasingly influenced by athletes' messages (statements and behavior), music as a message through the media takes on a special relationship with regard to sport (athletes). When viewed from this perspective, considering the power of athletes' words may provide a paradigm within which sport studies can be considered.

1.2. Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to conduct an investigation into the power of words as it relates to representations of athletes in the media. It will also attempt to find possible means of instilling confidence and influencing education through evaluation of statements by athletes.

2. Athletes and media training

When examining the relationship between sport and the media, there is a notable focus on balance in the media. Professional sport and other sport that seek high television ratings face many simultaneous issues in the media production. For example, the vast majority of sport "watched" are also "viewed" through the media¹⁾. The excitement of watching sport through the media is a normal part of day-to-day life, and as it is a constant in life, it is necessary to focus on the

relationship between these two phenomena. When considered in the context of media production, media usage by sponsors, and the characteristics and influence of the media, the issues that athletes face in adapting to an environment where they must speak and behave with an awareness of their individual positions become apparent.

The athlete and the sport itself are ultimately the stars of sport broadcasting. If the media maintains its current stance, then sport must make changes. Specifically, media education is often mentioned in this context as a concrete measure to be taken. Those involved in the each sporting industry (athletes, coaches, staff, and PR personnel) are experts and specialists on it. It is important that their outlooks and the messages they wish to communicate are conveyed to the media and received by viewers, listeners, and readers. Naturally, the media seeks remedies to similar issues. Accordingly, it is important for athletes to learn the techniques and mentality required to efficiently communicate their ideal personal images. This is also equivalent to boosting one's charisma, learning the power of words, and becoming a role model. As a result, this plays a role in raising the value of both the individual athlete and the sport itself.

The concept of media training is generally said to have become widespread in the 1950s and at the start of the era of television. This is represented in the US presidential election process, in which appealing to the masses via television has become an important factor. America's 35th President, John F. Kennedy entered the stage as this new age of television began. Kennedy of the Democratic Party and Richard M. Nixon of the Republican Party engaged in the first televised debate during the closely-fought 1960 presidential election. The impact of those debates is said to have decided the race.

Yajima²⁾ indicated the following on the episode:

First, consider the two men's suit colors. Kennedy wore a dark grey, against Nixon's light grey. As televisions at the time were in black and white, lighter-colored clothing faded into the background, leaving an impression of weakness. Furthermore, as the televised debate was held in the evening, Nixon's beard had grown in visibly, and it is said that he refused to use television makeup. Additionally, he injured his knee on the way to the studio and appeared sickly and unhealthy in general.

Despite Nixon's advantage in the polls immediately before the debate, the situation had reversed after the debate. This gave Kennedy the advantage, and he went on to win the election by a narrow margin. The importance of media training has become widely acknowledged since this event.

The effects of media training illustrated above have often been said to have been strangely reproduced in the 2008 US Presidential Election campaigns of Democrat Barack H. Obama and Republican John S. McCain. In essence, Obama's superior social grace is seen as having brought about his victory. In examining the content of the debates and his speeches, he can be seen skillfully mixing 'report talk' with 'rapport talk' (both concepts will be explained below) and not only charming the citizens of the United States but also of Japan.³⁾

Deborah F. Tannen⁴⁾ provides us with the concepts of report talk and rapport talk. The former is a style of speaking intended for conveying information, and protects one's status as an expert/professional while communicating one's knowledge and information to the listener. In contrast, rapport talk is a style intended for forming close relationships and does so via sharing empathetic experiences and thoughts with the intended audience. This ability to combine both these skills is being increasingly demanded due to the belief that rapport talk, the elegant words that motivate people, is effectively interspersed with report talk. However, this context also provides a clue when one considers the problems athletes have when giving statements.

In addition to the obvious industry and organizational executives and PR officials who participate in it, media training is conducted for athletes, entertainers, doctors and anyone in a field that interacts with the media. This training is commonplace in Europe and the US and has become significant in Japan in recent years. The number of individuals and organizations incorporating media training as part of risk management programs is on the rise.

Media training is not training for a particular event. Ultimately, it establishes fundamental communication skills, trains individuals to communicate messages clearly and effectively and allows them to present things in a positive light. In essence, by improving communication skills through media training, individuals are able to deal with the various kinds of people around them effectively even when not dealing with the media.

Media training is beginning to permeate the fields of politics and standard businesses, but is it necessary to introduce it to the field of sport? Currently, as sport are becoming an irreplaceable part of modern lifestyles, the value and influence of top athletes' images is rising dramatically. In this regard, top athletes now fill a more significant role than ever before. Specialized media training organizations have existed across the US for more than 30 years, originally established as 'sport related businesses.' Media training is implemented by many universities in the NCAA or which otherwise directly tie to the professional level, and is not just for top olympic athletes or those in the four major professional sporting competitions. The National Football League (NFL), Major League Baseball (MLB), National Basketball Association (NBA) and other professional sport leagues are popular in the US but are rivaled by college sport. American football and basketball are particularly popular and games are broadcast on national networks thus resulting in massive revenue for universities.

According to a 2010 poll⁵⁾ by American market research firm Harris Interactive, college football popularity was almost on par with MLB popularity. College sport are seen as symbolic and as heightening school spirit. During football season, campus stadiums come alive with both students and local residents in massive events. College sport, centered on football, provide major revenue via ticket sales as well as enormous television licensing fees which contributes greatly to colleges' revenues.⁶⁾

Aware of the influence of college sport, managers meticulously implement brand strategies to maximize their effectiveness. school colors, uniform designs and team names are standardized over the university, and great care is taken to achieve a visual effect that promotes the college.

Furthermore, to eliminate the risk that a certain piece play or student athlete damaging a college's image, colleges look to specialized media training firms and liaise with agents for risk management.

The high demand for media training makes it clear that proficiency in a chosen sport is not enough for an athlete. Top athletes gradually become more closely tied to the media and receive more opportunities for interviews. Additionally, their opportunities to interact with sponsors and individuals with no direct connection to sport increase. Under these circumstances, an attitude that says that an inability to communicate one's thoughts verbally prevents one from being called a top athlete is taking root in the US. In other words, a sense that the power of words is important to athletes is commonplace.

In Japan, athletes addressing the media in their own words with proper manners can be seen recently in cases like those of Ryo Ishikawa and Ai Fukuhara. Beijing Olympics fencing silver medalist Yuki Ota's behavior serves as another excellent example. He actively utilized precious time with the media and succeeded in gaining widespread support. Response on the matter from the business sector has been unequivocal. It is, in essence, "we believe that athletes who have clear goals and can tell us about them in their own words are useful members of organizations... Despite being a medallist, as long as he has been in the company, he has been held to the same standards as everyone else. He currently works with us, and is paid according to how well he does his job." ⁷⁾ This is just one example of how athletes who can express themselves in their own words are valued by society.

When they use the media skillfully in this manner, it can aid athletes in conveying their messages to their intended audiences. However, the majority of Japanese athletes are comparatively behind those of Europe and the US in terms of dealing with the media. Although recently, the NPB (Nippon Professional Baseball), J-League and other professional sport teams and individuals have gradually begun to embrace media training.⁸⁾ For example, in recent years, the Yomiuri Giants have begun to implement media training for draft picks using a former announcer from Nippon TV. Even so, these courses are referred to as both "media training" and "media strategies," and the majority are said to be closer to being conducted like seminars than to training.⁹⁾

Recently, the J-League has introduced training sessions through the Career Support Center and is actively adopting media training. Zetterlund had the following to say on the atmosphere of the J-League's enthusiastic embrace of this phenomenon.¹⁰⁾

At its inauguration, the J-League was for corporate teams before it became a league for professional teams, and many of its players had already received employee training before. However, the number of teams increased to 32, and as time passed, as we looked at our relationship with society. We felt that there was a detachment forming between what people in the game and in society wanted from sport and we were worried that there were significant problems in handling the media.

Regardless of the intensity of the efforts that are made, differences can be seen between teams in

how media training is incorporated. Moreover, some media focuses on individual athletes and even tends to gather information on private lives for gossip-show style reporting. These circumstances drive a wedge between sport and the media and have caused an increase in the number of athletes that feel skepticism and enmity towards the media. However, it is evident that the power of the media is required for the growth and development of sport. From a sport perspective, the media must be understood and opportunities to interact with the media must be seen as productive uses of time.

As sport diversify, unpopular sport tend to be discarded rapidly. In order to develop a particular sport and to improve its value, a strong awareness of the influence of the media and its effects on athletes and the sport that they compete in is required of both the athletes themselves and others involved in the sport. By receiving media training, athletes are able to inspire interest in a sport or an athlete as an individual in those with no knowledge of sport. Also, handling the media appropriately can become an element of an athlete's personal brand strength. In addition to receiving recognition as a top athlete, this allows athletes to increase awareness of their value beyond their sporting prowess. In this way, athletes who can become role models worthy of respect are in demand.

3. Athletes and words

When the subject of athletes and words is raised, media training is usually directly opposed to athletes' words. More specifically, athletes' expressions arise from the untrainable sensation and excitement that they experience within their own bodies. It is often said that words are unnecessary in sport, and that sensation alone is enough. Anyone watching the last London Olympics would surely feel this. The energy of life acts as a statement, clearly showing itself as a message. When listening to an athlete speak immediately after competing, regardless of whether he or she has won or lost, his or her entirety is compressed into words. A brief statement can express the true nature of athletes and sport.

This article on statements by olympic swimmer Kosuke Kitajima is of particular interest.¹¹⁾

At the London Olympics, he said, "frustration is frustration. I didn't win the gold, but I swam my best," while selecting each word carefully. Kenta Aoshima, a sportswriter, offered the following analysis on the matter: "even though he wanted to scream with all his heart, he likely could not."¹²⁾

Kosuke Kitajima previously stood out for making comments like "feels awesome" at the 2004 Athens Olympics and "can't say anything" at the 2008 Beijing Olympics. While many athletes make statements of joy and gratitude, these statements represent their bodies' physical sensations. Why do medalists' statements resonate so strongly? This could be because these are shouts born of the body, from someone fighting as hard as he or she can while believing in his or her own capabilities. Statements from athletes encapsulate the entire variety of experiences the athlete has labored at. It

could be said that decoding statements by athletes on a major stage like a world championship or the olympics is another perspective from which to consider the appeal of sport and athletes.

In modern society, the media has constructed an environment where sport must make statements, and athletes must speak within that environment. More specifically, this environment seeks to make athletes into speakers. Athletes are required to understand the pressures of exposure to the media and to make statements. Furthermore, they face a major issue in effectively using the statements they make during their own performances.

For another perspective on the problem with athletes and words, athletes and music can also be considered as a theme. Chants of support are common throughout the soccer stadiums or Europe and South America and even in Japan each team has a theme song. National anthems play when athletes enter the stadium during FIFA World Cup games and international matches. In addition to this, "Take Me Out to the Ball Game" plays during the 7th inning stretch, in MLB stadiums, while theme songs and individual batters' theme songs play in Japan. Even when watching sport broadcast on television, each station plays its own theme song as the program begins. This is particularly evident during the olympics and the FIFA World Cup. Sport and music are packaged perfectly together.

The NHK (Japan Broadcasting Corporation) theme song for the 2008 Beijing Olympics, "GIFT" by Mr. Children, was a rare case of a song where lyrics were composed before the song's music. This is uncommon, as the creation process for a singer-songwriter begins with production on a track, and lyrics are usually added later. In response to a question of "who did you write this song for?" in one magazine interview¹³⁾, "GIFT" singer-songwriter Kazutoshi Sakurai responded with, "rather than try to create a song that would inspire athletes, I thought mostly about normal people giving it their all in their everyday life and how to reach those people."

As far as it concerns this song, the title "GIFT", contains another hidden meaning beyond the self-evident one. On viewing the song's lyrics in full, one's attention is drawn to sporting values that transcend mere excitement over a medal's color or the simple fear and joy that are related to winning a medal. Ordinarily, both in the olympics and otherwise, sport theme songs focus entirely on inspirational messages to athletes like "victory," "do your best," "give it your all," and "don't give up." However, "GIFT" is not aimed solely at athletes, and moreover incorporates expressions that apply to normal people and everyday lives. For the listener, this song allows easier emotional investment by superimposing personal past experiences, or even future ones, onto support for athletes. It speaks to the message of "music as a statement" and the mystery of the power of words.

Olympic theme songs are distinguished by drawing inspiration from sporting activities firstly and also by the awareness of athletes in their composition with a strongly implied message of support to the athletes who compete in the olympics. Another distinction is how the song's creator draws inspiration from personal experience and everyday life and how the song is conceived of with normal people in mind, drawing attention from those uninvolved in sport otherwise and thus expressing the uniqueness of the olympics as an event. While the olympics are unique, when seen through the media images of athletes at work while their families and staff support them are tied to

the song, and these images linger in memory along with the sport itself.

As for the connection between athletes and music, Japanese national soccer team captain Makoto Hasebe provides a concrete example in his *Kokoro o Totonoeu*.¹⁴⁾

Use the power of music. There is a mysterious power to music. The melody and voice are important but I listen to the lyrics closely. While a song might soothe me at one point, at another point it could inspire me to action. I know the melody and lyrics don't change, but I feel completely different things from it when listening to it under different circumstances... I always have music around me. I will maintain peace of mind and keep fighting along with the music that inspires me.

For athletes, music is a mirror that reflects the self, and it would not be excessive to say that they express their thoughts and feelings through music. It is said that music is the most familiar and primal form of expression for humans, but as an expressive behavior, it is intimately tied to the feelings and circumstances of each individual. Also, as music emulates speech, it expresses human emotion and events in everyday life. In this way, music is something that athletes can grasp as a form of statement.

Similarly, the description of Homare Sawa's *Yume o Kanaeru* is of particular interest.¹⁵⁾

Fundamentally, words are a means of communication for expressing our thoughts but I think they can be the opposite as well. Basically, what you say every day seems to take root in your mind. Words become thoughts, are reflected in action, and cause results. It may just be a sort of self-suggestion, but fairly certain about it.

In these words from an athlete, one can catch glimpses of not just her view on sport, but also of the fact that it arises from ideals. To evaluate an athlete's words is to convert that athlete's environment and ideals into words, find a common language between this and society, and express it. The power of words opens the way for athletes to refine, shape, and influence themselves. In this regard, playing sport could truly be called an intellectual activity.

4. Conclusion

In modern society, the media has constructed an environment where sport must make statements, and athletes must speak within that environment. Additionally, their fans and the general populace are starting to call for athletes to take on speaking roles. It is desirable for athletes to understand characteristics of the media and its influence as well as their own position when speaking and acting. More specifically, it is desirable for athletes to heighten their personal charm and cultivate their powers of communication. Athletes must learn an awareness of the pressures of exposure to the media and how to make statements via media training. In contrast, the physical statements of

athletes also provide another perspective in finding the essence (charm) of sport.

For athletes, "words to impart" gained from media training must be made their own, and they must be aware of the pressures of exposure to the media in making statements. Also, when athletes fuse "imparted words" with personal refinement and ideals via "music as words," their vocabularies expand, and they can connect with fans and the general public. This shows one end of the possibilities of the power of athletes' words. From a methodological perspective on Sport Studies, it is evident that "music as words" through the media holds a special relationship with sport. When considering this issue, focusing on the power of athletes' words and considering the issue of sport and music provides a vital perspective for the future course of Sport Studies.

Reference

- 1) Abe, K. *Supotsu no miwaku to media no yuuwaku-shintai/kokka no karutyuraru sutadizu*. [Sport fascination and temptation of media : Cultural studies of a body/a nation]. Sekaishissha, p.11, 2008. (in Japanese)
- 2) Yajima, H. *PR kaisha no jidai -media katsuyo no purofeshonaru* [The time of PR company-Professional utilization of media]. Toyokeizaishinposha, p.132, 2006. (in Japanese)
- 3) Azuma, S. *Obama no gengokankaku hito o ugokasu kotoba* [Obama's language sense-words that move people]. Nipponhososhupankyokai, p.124, 2009. (in Japanese)
- 4) Tamaru, M. and Kaneko, K. (Japanese translation). *Wakari aenai riyu-otoko to onna ga kizutuke awanaitame no kuchi no kikikata*. [You Just Don't Understand : Women and Men in Conversation. Ballantine]. Kodansha, 1992. (in Japanese)
- 5) <http://www.harrisinteractive.com>
- 6) <http://www.sportsmediachallenge.com/>
- 7) http://www.works-i.com/works_navi/sports/3_morinaga/morinaga.html
- 8) <http://www.jsmt-sports.org/>
- 9) Zetterlund, Y. *Supotsu to media toreningu*. [Sport and media training]. Nihon Daigaku Kokaikoza Siryo, 2009.
- 10) Zetterlund, Y. *Ibid.*2009.
- 11) *Asahi Shinbun (yukan)*. 2012.7.30.
- 12) Aoshima, K. *Medarisuto no kotoba wa naze kokoro ni hibikunoka?* [Why does medalist's words appeal to mind?]. Foresutoshuppan, 2012. (in Japanese)
- 13) <http://www.barks.jp/feature/?id=1000041810>
- 14) Hasebe, M. *Kokoro o totonoeru-Shori o taguriyoseru tameno 56 no shukan* [A heart is arranged-56 habits for gather hauling a victory]. pp.146-149, Gentosha, 2011. (in Japanese)
- 15) Sawa, H. *Yume o kanaeru-Omoi o jitsugensaseru tameno 64 no apurochi*. [Fulfill a dream.-64 approach to realize thought]. Tokumashoten, 2011. (in Japanese)