The Approaches of Japanese Professional Sports toward the Civil Publicness and its Problems:
An Analysis on its Role as the Common Sector

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The aim of this study is to explore "where in Japanese professional sports lie the seeds that can contribute to the formation of 'civic public sphere.'"

The concept of "civic public sphere" (*bürgerliche Öffentlichkeit*) is, needless to say, one coined by Jürgen Habermas. It refers, first and foremost, to the formation of will and public opinion (*öffentliche Meinung*) grounded in civic deliberation and debate, which serves as the basis for negotiating with public authority. The concept of "citizen" (*Bürger*), viewed historically, derives from the private property-owning individual (*Privatmann*) who drove the modern revolutions in Europe. However, as elaborated in the new preface to Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (written in 1990), the contemporary civic public sphere presupposes a "civil society" (*Zivilgesellschaft*) composed of "voluntary associations and groups that exert influence on state policy and economic systems." In other words, the "citizen" is a member of the "deliberating public" — one who voluntarily organizes associations and groups and seeks to exert influence on state policy and economic systems. It is evident that when Habermas formulates the civic public sphere in this manner, he has in mind the achievements of a series of civic movements in post-1970s Europe — the peace movement, feminism, ecology, the Eastern European revolutions, and so on.

Why, then, is it necessary in the contemporary era to interrogate the "civil society" and "civic public sphere" of which Habermas speaks? The sociologist Anthony Giddens, who also served as an advisor to British Prime Minister Tony Blair's administration, points out, for instance, that when governments guarantee generous welfare benefits, the proportion of citizens who choose welfare over work tends to rise, thereby placing strain on public finances. In the context of sport, this may parallel the problem of sports clubs that rely on government subsidies and are unable to achieve financial independence. Conversely, if everything is left to the principles of the market, even organizations that are socially necessary will be forced into collapse if the market does not require them. Without public subsidies, not only would many sports clubs be unable to survive, but they would be compelled to dissolve. In short, in contemporary society, rather than depending on government funding or corporate welfare programs, each of us is pressed to think about "public" matters as our own concern.

Arising from the above awareness of the problem, this study situates the state and local governments as the "public sector," corporations as the "private sector," local residents as the "community sector," and non-profit organizations that aggregate the opinions of local residents and negotiate with other sectors as the "commons sector." Focusing on professional sports — which allow us to interrogate the relationship between "corporations" and "citizens (local residents)" that has been underdeveloped in

conventional Japanese sports research — this study has explored, with particular attention to the role of professional sports as a "commons sector," where in Japanese professional sports the seeds that can contribute to the formation of civic public sphere lie, and what impact this ultimately has on actual society.

Chapter One examined Major League Baseball in the United States, demonstrating that the countless affiliated teams spread across the country provide local residents with "spaces of sociality," and that because local residents sustain their communities through these stadiums as "spaces of sociality," corporate-operated professional teams receive generous governmental support. Furthermore, in Germany's Bundesliga, the provision of a mere "space of sociality" is transcended. Even in cases where corporations operate professional clubs, through a system in which member dues collected by the club and naming rights revenues accrue to the non-profit legal entity, the revenues of the professional club are channeled back to the comprehensive community sports clubs in which local residents participate. Simultaneously, through a mechanism granting voting rights to the non-profit legal entity that aggregates and represents the voices of its member residents, local residents actively participate in the management of professional clubs and in addressing regional issues.

Japan's first professional sports league — professional baseball — was formally organized at the founding general assembly of Nippon Professional Baseball in 1936. Under conditions of structural transition from primary to tertiary industry and changing urban demographics, professional baseball was organized in subordination to the commercial objectives of newspaper companies — which had grown rapidly as profit-seeking enterprises, particularly under the influence of Shoriki Matsutaro of the Yomiuri Shimbun — and railway companies, who sought corporate promotion, expanded newspaper circulation, and increased passenger traffic through lineside development. The spectators, for their part, embraced professional baseball as one form of sightseeing entertainment, in the same popular spirit as cherry-blossom viewing.

After the war, Japanese professional baseball expanded from eight to fifteen teams at Shoriki's proposal, prompted by his shock at Japan's overwhelming defeat in exhibition games against American teams. Taking advantage of this expansion, a professional team was born in the regional city of Hiroshima. The Hiroshima Baseball Club, Co., Ltd. (1949–1956), established by Tanigawa, a bureaucrat from Hiroshima who had drawn inspiration from the community-wide support seen in collegiate American football games, with the aspiration to "create a team sustained not by corporate publicity but by the advantages of place and people," was founded on the model of recruiting small-scale investors — a method connected to what would later become the "shareholders' association" (*mochikabkai*). The Hiroshima Carp, operated by the Hiroshima Baseball Club, was warmly known by the affectionate names "prefectural team" (*kenmin kyūdan*) and "hometown team" (*kyōdo kyūdan*) — notably not yet "citizens' team" (*shimin kyūdan*) — and was strongly supported by the people of Hiroshima as a symbol of recovery from the atomic bombing. The Hiroshima Baseball Club's supporters' association (an informal organization) included many local residents, and donors were issued share certificates,

granting them considerable influence even over player scouting and managerial appointments. In other words, a form of participatory management analogous to Germany's non-profit legal entities had been realized. However, Matsuda Koji, the second-generation president of Toyo Kogyo, who held the conviction that "the Carp, the sole consolation for the atomic-bombed citizens of Hiroshima, must never be allowed to collapse," put forward a proposal to "bankrupt the financially struggling Hiroshima Baseball Club and establish a new company." This proposal was accepted, leading to the establishment of Hiroshima Toyo Carp Co., Ltd. in 1956 (Matsuda assumed the presidency in 1962), and the supporters' association was dissolved in exchange for managerial stability.

The Hiroshima Carp, long ridiculed as a weak team, won their first league championship in 1975. Around the same time, the designation "citizens' team" (*shimin kyūdan*) became widespread and took root broadly, against the backdrop of the growing currency of the term "civic movement" (*shimin undō*) from the 1960s onwards. From that point, the Hiroshima Carp came to be narrated as a citizens' team, alongside the story of postwar reconstruction centered on "Hiroshima (universal peace)" and the branding of the "Red Helmet Corps." This narrative of a citizens' team united with the peace of "Hiroshima" was again amplified through the media during the period when the revenue structure of professional baseball shifted from the "broadcasting rights business" to the "facility business," and when the Hiroshima Carp achieved three consecutive league championships through the performances of talented players acquired under the stable management enabled by the construction of Mazda Zoom-Zoom Stadium Hiroshima and the popularity of "Carp Girls" (*Kāpu Joshi*). Prior to this, through the vogue of civil society theory, "citizen" had already come to circulate widely as a "comfortable word."

Chapter Two discussed the achievements and challenges of the J.League's reform of Japanese professional sports. The J.League, a professional football league, was established not for commercial purposes but with the aim of creating a rich sporting environment in Japan, cultivating sports culture, and raising the level of football — an initiative driven from within the football world, centered on Kawabuchi and Kinomoto, who had distinguished themselves as representative Japanese footballers and had also been involved in the administration of the Japan Soccer League, the J.League's predecessor, as opposed to the corporate-led model of professional baseball.

In his pursuit of "liberation from corporate sport to civic sport," Kawabuchi envisioned the management of the J.League and professional clubs through a "trinity" of "corporations, government, and citizens." He aimed to stabilize club management not by having a single corporation own the shares of a professional club, but by distributing ownership among multiple corporations, with the host municipality holding a portion of shares. This strategy proved effective: subsequently, local governments came to hold shares in a considerable number of the operating corporations of professional clubs. On the other hand, however, the discussion regarding the relationship with local residents — whom Kawabuchi had envisioned as one of the three principals of the "trinity" — did not deepen. Kawabuchi highlighted the following example to illustrate the difference from Germany: "There was someone who served as the organizer of a mothers' volleyball group, and when she told

someone that it was time for her to step down, that person said she would quit the group if she had to take over. That is a typical Japanese example. There's hardly anywhere to learn that someone needs to take charge, and that doing so is important — or rather, there are too few such opportunities. So it's natural that people come to find it rewarding to do things for others, and that's where it gets cultivated most. Japan is really bad at that. People are fine as long as they're OK themselves, and even if someone else looks after them, they don't want to look after others." These words suggest that Japan too needs spaces where local residents (*residents*) can engage as citizens (*citizens*) with a sense of personal stake — analogous to the role played by non-profit legal entities in Germany in the realms of politics and economics. At the same time, Kawabuchi regarded the realization of democratic elections by local residents, as in FC Barcelona's model, as "quite impossible" in Japan. Rather, he saw the dispersed shareholding model and the election of club presidents through shareholders' meetings as the concrete and realistic direction for "liberation from corporate sport to civic sport."

The philosophy of community-rootedness modeled on Germany, constructed under Kawabuchi's leadership, was inherited by subsequent iterations of the J.League. For instance, in the J.League's current social engagement initiative known as "Sharen!," activities are promoted in which "the J.League and J.Clubs collaborate with local people, corporations and organizations (both for-profit and non-profit), local governments, and schools" to address "social issues and shared themes." These activities, through "collaboration among three or more partners to create shared value," are expected to contribute to "securing the sustainability of local communities, building relationships and fostering learning, and rediscovering the value of each stakeholder." This ideal of "collaboration among three or more parties" closely approximates the intent of this study's proposed framework of pursuing inter-sector collaboration within the social system. However, even within Sharen!, Japanese non-profit organizations (NPOs) are treated as distinct from public instruments of local residents. Unlike their German counterparts, Japanese non-profit organizations lack the systems to aggregate and represent the voices of local residents and negotiate with other sectors, and it can hardly be said that this function is being fulfilled. As a result, in community contribution activities as well, the faces of local residents tend to remain invisible, and the current situation risks being perceived as nothing more than a receptacle for professional clubs to secure administrative support.

The J.League, launched under a new philosophy, triggered a massive boom at its inception, but the prosperity did not last long — signs of decline appeared as early as the third year. Player salaries, however, did not decrease, and as wages disproportionate to declining revenues strained club management, six years after the league's start, in 1998, the forced merger of Flügels into Marinos — triggered by the withdrawal of the sponsoring company Sato Kogyo — was carried out. Criticism of the J.League was severe. For all its aspirations to break free from corporate logic, the club was ultimately compelled to disappear by that very corporate logic. During this period, in order to avoid "a second Flügels tragedy," the J.League began exploring the introduction of a licensing system to scrutinize the financial health of operating companies and, if necessary, deny league membership.

However, this was blocked by corporate logic shielded behind independent stock company structures, and implementation was shelved at that time.

Following Flügels, the next club to face a financial crisis was Bellmare. When Bellmare confronted the crisis of its parent company, Fujita Kogyo, withdrawing from operations, it dissolved the existing operating company "Bellmare Hiratsuka Co., Ltd." and established a new entity, "Shonan Bellmare Co., Ltd.," overcoming its financial difficulties through funds and facility usage rights left by Fujita Kogyo, combined with a "shareholders' association" (*mochikabkai*) method of publicly soliciting shareholders from the general public. As if to validate Kawabuchi's words — who had pointed out that an electoral system like FC Barcelona's was "quite impossible" while viewing dispersed shareholding as realistic — the attempt to create a civic club through Yokohama FC's *socio* model (a membership-based electoral system) collapsed, while Shonan Bellmare's attempt through the shareholders' association model succeeded. Subsequently, this shareholders' association model was adopted by multiple clubs that lacked a strong parent corporation.

YSCC, guided by the principle of community contribution, has actively engaged in promoting health and sports activities among local residents, and with a consciousness of public benefit, obtained NPO legal status in 2002. Furthermore, in 2019, when the top team began playing in J3, the organization obtained corporate legal status (as a joint-stock company), which is required for promotion to J2. Currently, the NPO operates comprehensive community sports clubs including futsal, basketball, tennis, and badminton, while the joint-stock company oversees the top football team. Under this structure, the joint-stock company provides approximately one million yen annually in support to the NPO. In other words, a structure has been established in which the revenues of the top football team are channeled back into local sports activities. Moreover, as exemplified by health classes that originated from the voices of local residents, YSCC has achieved grassroots-based "community rootedness." Yet even so, local residents are not directly involved in management or operations. As a result, in negotiations with government authorities as well — as evidenced by the failure to secure administrative support for the health classes — the NPO's negotiating power remains relatively limited.

Chapter Three examined the case of Giravanz Kitakyushu, which differs from Bellmare — where an NPO was established by a corporation — and from YSCC — which is operated through a partnership between an NPO and a corporation — in that Giravanz started as an informal organization, obtained NPO legal status, and then transferred its rights to a joint-stock company in the course of professionalization. This case is examined because within Giravanz's social contribution activities, one can observe the reality of the commons sector functioning as a coordination hub among various sectors, while local residents actively participate as agents in planning and management.

Giravanz traces its origins to "New Wave Kitakyushu" (the name of the football team), formed in 2001 following the disbandment of the Yawata Steel Football Club and the Mitsubishi Chemical Kurosaki Football Club, both of which had been active in Kitakyushu. The team was operated by an informal organization called the Kitakyushu Football Club. The person centrally involved in establishing this

organization was Hara Kenichi, who at the time was serving as a middle school football coach in Kitakyushu while also working in the secretariat of the Kitakyushu Football Association. Hara recalls that he was able to clarify the problems with school club activities through participation in management workshops organized by the government, which at the time were promoting the development of comprehensive community sports clubs modeled on Germany under the auspices of the Ministry of Education. In parallel, he says that a sense of rivalry toward Avispa Fukuoka, based in Fukuoka city, as a citizen of Kitakyushu, led him to establish the Kitakyushu Football Club. It was in 2004 that Hara worked to obtain NPO legal status for the Kitakyushu Football Club. Advised by the government to obtain NPO status in order to facilitate club support through the designated administrator system, he acquired the new NPO legal status, resigned from his teaching position, and aimed for professionalization while drawing on support from Kitakyushu City.

The role originally expected of NPOs within the civic public sphere should not be primarily the procurement of economic support. Non-profit organizations are expected to provide an environment in which local residents can find meaning and purpose in life — in other words, pursue self-realization — in a socio-economic space governed by principles different from those of corporate economic logic, thereby cultivating active, democratic citizens who take responsibility for the "public." The importance of such a role for non-profit organizations can be seen in Kitakyushu in the case of NPO Step Kitakyushu (*Suteppu Kitakyūshū*), which is deeply involved in Giravanz's social contribution activities. The predecessor of Step Kitakyushu was an informal organization called "The Association to Support Children Who Don't Go to School" (*Gakkō ni Ikanai Kodomo wo Shien Suru Kai*), established by local residents themselves to address the challenge of school refusal (*futōkō*). The initiative launched by three local residents quickly grew to two hundred participants. At a time when approaches to and understanding of school refusal were still undeveloped, the association energetically worked to open free spaces that served as havens for children and to hold lectures deepening public understanding of school refusal. These activities were initially regarded by the government — including the Board of Education — as "suspicious," and were conversely criticized as spoiling children. The parents of school-refusing children, rather than relying on the government, continued their activities by pooling annual membership fees of 2,000 yen and meeting participation fees of 300 yen. Their efforts included tough negotiations with the Board of Education, such as demanding the withdrawal of a pamphlet on guidance for school-refusing children issued by the Board of Education on the grounds that it risked generating bias — such as the implication that "the problem lies with the family."

Over time, as the issue of school refusal gained broad social recognition and it became clear that the attitude of schools in treating school refusal as a problem was mentally driving many children into crisis, the stance of the Board of Education began to shift. Eventually, as awareness grew of the way the problem of social withdrawal (*hikikomori*) was placing pressure on national and municipal finances, in 2009 — when the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare requested that all prefectures and designated cities establish "Hikikomori Support Centers" — Kitakyushu City approached "The

Association to Support Children Who Don't Go to School" with a request to establish an NPO that would fulfill the role of a support center, leading to the birth of Step Kitakyushu. In the *New History of Kitakyushu City* (*Shinshū Kitakyūshū Shishi*) published by Kitakyushu City in 2018, it is explicitly stated that "school refusal must be approached with the understanding that it can happen to anyone," and "The Association to Support Children Who Don't Go to School, Kitakyushu" is introduced under the section on "community-based activities."

Nevertheless, within Japan's social system, both financially and customarily, the power of the public sector — namely, local governments — is strong, and the presence of NPOs is relatively limited. For instance, the budget allocated to Step Kitakyushu is disbursed by Kitakyushu City as contracted project fees for the "Kitakyushu City Hikikomori Support Center." The weakness of NPO foundations is problematic not only because of the strain on public finances as pointed out by Giddens, and the lack of agility in addressing regional issues as noted in this study, but also because it risks reducing the negotiating power of local residents vis-à-vis government and corporations, and ultimately leading to governance failures at the systemic level — such as those seen in the negotiations between "The Association to Support Children Who Don't Go to School" and the government. There is a need for institutional design that enables NPOs to function as organizations independent of government — including a review of preferential tax treatment and grant structures — so that they can more readily obtain support from corporations and other sources.

As described above, this study has examined three clubs, in particular those known as "civic clubs," among the professional clubs born from the institutionalization of new professional sports brought about by the establishment of the J.League. While each club collaborates with an NPO, the nature of each relationship is distinct.

The awareness of the problem concerning civic public sphere that this study presupposes — as stated at the beginning of this conclusion — arises, above all, from an attitude of seeking to explore in what sense sport can contribute to the social problems of contemporary society. By organizing and disseminating the "proactive, active, and solidary participation of local residents in regional issues" described above, it is not at all impossible for Japanese professional sports to play a meaningful role in the formation of "civic public sphere."

The problems of contemporary society surrounding civic public sphere, as presupposed by this study, can be directly understood as problems of sport as well. For instance, just as in the case of welfare in the social welfare state, if government subsidies are made generous, sports clubs that depend on subsidies and are unable to achieve independence will emerge. That said, as repeatedly emphasized, neoliberal approaches leave many problems unresolved. Sports clubs with a public character cannot survive without support from government and community. Even for professional sports teams and clubs, as long as they use stadiums and arenas managed by local governments, sustainable management without support and cooperation from government and the community is difficult. However, in a Japan that still carries the habits of "reverence for authority" (*kanson minpi*) and "selfless public service"

(*messhi hōkō*), it is no easy task to transform sports clubs that have been operated according to governmental intentions into organizations led by local residents. This study originates from precisely such awareness of the problem.

As one solution to this problem, focusing on the function of the "commons sector," this study has explored where in Japanese professional sports the seeds that can contribute to the formation of "civic public sphere" lie. Its conclusion — that by organizing the "proactive, active, and solidary participation of local residents in regional issues," as seen in the cases of professional clubs, Japanese professional sports can become one opportunity for the formation of "civic public sphere" — seeks to position local residents (*residents*) as citizens (*citizens*) with a sense of genuine personal stake within the public sphere, and to pursue a mode of sustainable management — not the ephemeral management of dubious sustainability driven by media-directed temporary publicity and revenues, such as the celebrity-ification of athletes, events unrelated to sport aimed at drawing crowds, and branding through the words "citizens' team/club" — but rather a management of lasting durability, made possible by establishing a structurally sound foundation with sporting excellence at its core.