

*“Athlete-First” in Action: What Japan Can Learn From Germany’s Throwing Team Coaching Culture
 (“Atlet Didahulukan” dalam Amalan: Apa yang Jepun Boleh Pelajari daripada Budaya Kejurulatihan
 Pasukan Lemparan Jerman)*

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ABSTRACT

This brief report offers a preliminary analysis of the idea and public talk around “Athlete-First” in Japan, using a mix of historical and field-based viewpoints. In Japan, the term has been used often since the 2000s, but its meaning is still unclear. It is likely to be used as a slogan for better facilities and support, rather than as a guide for building athlete autonomy. The wider study aims to redefine “Athlete-First” by asking what coaching truly puts athlete growth first, with special attention to the coach–athlete relationship. As a first step, this report analyzes articles in the Yomiuri Shimbun. The findings suggest that the term became widely used during the bid and preparation for the Tokyo 2020 Games, mainly in relation to venues, training sites, and other support conditions. In contrast, discussion of daily coaching practice and long-term development culture remains limited. Next, the study will examine the German sport system and the coaching culture of German throwing teams through newspaper analysis, interviews with national coach Jörg Schulte, and observation of training sessions. This will help clarify how “Athlete-First” can be put into everyday coaching to support athletes’ personal growth and independence.

Keywords: Athlete-First, Coaching Philosophy, Coach-Athlete Relationship, German Throwing Team, Comparative Analysis

ABSTRAK

Laporan ringkas ini membentangkan analisis awal tentang idea dan wacana awam mengenai “Athlete-First” di Jepun, dengan menggabungkan perspektif sejarah dan pemerhatian lapangan. Di Jepun, istilah ini kerap digunakan sejak tahun 2000-an, namun maksudnya masih tidak jelas. Istilah ini cenderung digunakan sebagai slogan untuk penambahbaikan kemudahan dan sokongan, bukannya sebagai panduan untuk membina autonomi atlet. Kajian yang lebih luas bertujuan mentakrifkan semula “Athlete-First” dengan menyoal bentuk kejurulatihan yang benar-benar mengutamakan perkembangan atlet, dengan tumpuan khusus pada hubungan jurulatih–atlet. Sebagai langkah pertama, laporan ini menganalisis artikel dalam akhbar Yomiuri Shimbun. Dapatan menunjukkan bahawa istilah tersebut menjadi semakin meluas semasa proses bidaan dan persediaan Sukan Tokyo 2020, terutama dalam kaitannya dengan venue, tapak latihan, dan pelbagai keadaan sokongan lain. Sebaliknya, perbincangan tentang amalan kejurulatihan harian dan budaya pembangunan jangka panjang masih terhad. Seterusnya, kajian ini akan meneliti sistem sukan Jerman dan budaya kejurulatihan pasukan lontaran Jerman melalui analisis akhbar, temu bual dengan jurulatih kebangsaan Jörg Schulte, serta pemerhatian sesi latihan. Ini akan membantu menjelaskan bagaimana “Athlete-First” boleh dilaksanakan dalam kejurulatihan harian bagi menyokong perkembangan peribadi dan kebebasan atlet.

Kata Kunci: Athlete-First, Falsafah Kejurulatihan, Hubungan Jurulatih–Atlet, Pasukan Lontaran Jerman, Analisis Perbandingan

INTRODUCTION

The term “Athlete-First” is widely used in Japanese sport, especially since the 2000s, yet its meaning often remains unclear. In many public and institutional settings, it tends to refer to improving the sporting environment such as facilities, training sites, venues, and support services rather than to changing everyday coaching in ways that foster athlete autonomy. As a result, there is a gap between the ideal message of “Athlete-First” and the realities of coaching culture, where coaches’ results and reputations may still be prioritized over athletes’ long-term growth.

This brief report is part of a broader project that seeks to redefine “Athlete-First” by clarifying what coaching looks like when it truly places athletes’ development at the center, with particular attention to the coach–athlete relationship. As a first step, the report examines how the term has been framed in Japanese media, focusing on articles in the Yomiuri Shimbun. Preliminary results suggest that “Athlete-First” gained visibility during the bid and preparation for the Tokyo 2020 Games, but was discussed mainly in relation to venues and training environments, with limited attention to interpersonal coaching practice

and long-term development culture. To address this gap, the wider study will compare Japanese discourse with the coaching culture of German throwing teams, using interviews with national coach Jörg Schulte and planned field observation of training sessions, in order to explore how “Athlete-First” can be implemented in daily coaching.

METHODOLOGY

Using the online database of the Yomiuri Shimbun, one of Japan’s major national newspapers, articles with “Athlete-First” in the title were retrieved from 2013, when Tokyo 2020 was awarded, to 2025. All items were examined through content analysis. Under the supervision of a faculty advisor in physical education and sport studies (with a focus on documentary and textual analysis), a coding scheme was developed and the articles were classified by main topic and context of use (e.g., facilities, event management, athlete support, governance). This supervised process was intended to improve reliability and reduce subjective bias in interpretation.



FIGURE 1. coach Jörg Schulte and me

MAIN FINDINGS

The database search identified 58 Yomiuri Shimbun articles whose titles included the term “Athlete-First” between 2013 and 2025. Although the term is widely said to have been used since the 2000s, the

earliest occurrence in this title-based dataset was 2013, when it entered public discussion in connection with violence and harassment scandals in the Japanese judo team. Within the total sample, five articles (8.6%) used “Athlete-First” mainly in a protection frame emphasizing the need to safeguard athletes from

violence, power harassment, and related abuses in sport organizations.

Across the dataset, however, the dominant pattern was a shift from this initial protection-oriented meaning toward a broader, more diffuse usage tied to environmental and logistical improvement. The largest category was “environment” (43 articles, 74%). Of these, 34 were directly linked to the Olympic Games, especially the bid and preparation period for Tokyo 2020. In this category, “Athlete-First” functioned primarily as a label to justify or promote improvements in competition and training conditions, such as venue planning and design, heat countermeasures, and event formats. In other words, the term was repeatedly mobilized to support decisions about infrastructure and event management, rather than to describe changes in everyday coaching or athlete development processes.

In contrast, media attention to coach–athlete relationships was strikingly limited. Only two articles (3.4%) explicitly addressed the interpersonal dimension of “Athlete-First,” including communication, coaching practice, or the cultural norms shaping daily training interactions. This imbalance suggests that, within mainstream media discourse, “Athlete-First” is most often discussed through visible, system-level themes (protection policies and physical environments), while the less visible but central domain of coaching practice remains largely outside the frame.

One of the few exceptions was a 2015 interview with Seiko Hashimoto, which directly challenged a common misunderstanding of “Athlete-First” as meaning “letting athletes do whatever they want.” The interview stressed the importance of decisive coaching judgment and long-term development, including encouraging athletes to experience multiple events as part of broader growth. Finally, the dataset also indicates a decline in the number of articles after 2023 that place “Athlete-First” as a central theme, suggesting reduced media salience once Tokyo 2020-related debates receded.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The newspaper analysis suggests that the meaning of “Athlete-First” in Japan has been shaped less by changes in everyday coaching and more by debates about the sporting environment. In the Yomiuri Shimbun dataset (2013–2025), articles classified as “environment” accounted for 74% (43/58), while references to the “coach–athlete relationship” appeared in only 3.4% (2/58). This imbalance implies that, even as “Athlete-First” became widely recognized, it did not

function as a strong driver for rethinking interpersonal coaching practice. Instead, the concept was mainly used to legitimize improvements in venues, training sites, and event management, especially during the bid and preparation phase for Tokyo 2020. In this sense, “Athlete-First” in Japan appears to have shifted from an initial “protection” frame (triggered by violence and harassment scandals in 2013) toward a broader, infrastructure-focused frame, while leaving the core issue of athlete development culture largely untouched.

From a coaching perspective, this tendency is important. If “Athlete-First” remains tied to facilities and support systems, the concept risks becoming a convenient slogan rather than a practical guide for daily decision-making. The limited attention to coach–athlete interaction also suggests that media discourse may underestimate the central role of trust, communication, and shared responsibility in athlete growth. A notable exception was Seiko Hashimoto’s 2015 interview, which warned that “Athlete-First” is often misunderstood as “letting athletes do whatever they want.” Hashimoto emphasized that the concept should involve a coach’s commitment to the athlete’s future and a long-term approach to development, including learning across multiple events. This interpretation aligns with the logic of the German system, which is designed to support athletes over the long term through stable development pathways (Naul & Hardman, 2004).

Based on these findings, the present brief report concludes that redefining “Athlete-First” in Japan requires shifting attention from visible environments to less visible relational processes. The next phase of the study will therefore focus on German throwing teams through interviews and participant observation, examining how coaches cultivate athlete autonomy that is not “self-centered freedom,” but a form of independence grounded in mutual trust and accountability. By clarifying the concrete, daily processes through which such trust is built—feedback routines, decision-making roles, and norms of communication—this research aims to provide practice-based guidelines for a more meaningful and actionable “Athlete-First” concept in Japanese coaching culture.

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