

# Cross-Cultural Perspectives on the State of Basketball in Japan: Retrospection and Reflection on Trends and Innovations

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**Abstract:** This paper represents a 15-year retrospective on the state of basketball in Japan through the eyes of coaches who have had international experiences in the game. The discussion highlights aspects of the approach to basketball in Japan that may need to be reassessed in accordance with the insights drawn from cross-cultural perspectives. This paper also provides a timely analysis of the recent phenomena of the Golden State Warriors and the unprecedented play of Stephen Curry. The success of the Chicago Bulls and Michael Jordan had a generational influence upon the approach to basketball in Japan. The Warriors' success stands to imprint its brand and style of play upon the current generation in Japan. This paper outlines considerations that should be heeded in emulating this "new sensation" in basketball.

**Key words:** Japanese basketball, cross-cultural perspectives, trends

## Introduction

Despite the progress made in the sport of men's basketball in Japan over the past decade, Japan still sits at 48th on the world ranking scale according to FIBA (FIBA World Ranking, 2015), the International Basketball Federation. This places Japan behind Asian countries such as China (14th), the Philippines (28th), South Korea (30th), and even Chinese Taipei (47th). This paper looks to the past and then to the future in offering cross-cultural perspectives to improve the state of affairs for Japanese basketball.

This paper follows up on a publication by Steven E. Quasha, head coach of the Gifu Shotoku University men's basketball team, which discussed the state of the art of basketball in Japan in 2001. This paper represents a timely 15-year retrospective of intercultural perspectives on Japanese basketball from 2001 to the present. This paper draws upon

the insights of foreign coaches and enthusiasts of basketball in Japan, especially those who have set a trained eye on the intercultural dimensions that are reflected in the game in Japan.

In addition to Quasha's insights, this paper highlights the reflections of a long time basketball enthusiast in Japan who served as player-coach at his former university in Tokyo and who established the basketball program at his present university in Japan. He wishes to remain anonymous for the purposes of this research. It is a reflection of the insular nature of sports in Japan, as his honest input here could jeopardize his standing among the coaches that currently run the program at his university. (For the purposes of this paper he will be referred to as Coach Carter.)

Steven E. Quasha's basketball resume runs deep. He was the captain of his state quarter finalist basketball team in Massachusetts. He served as a

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broadcaster for men's basketball at the University of San Francisco. And he played on a community team that won the men's club championship in the 26-team Gifu Prefecture league. Additionally, he served as head coach for the Gifu Shotoku University men's team before accepting a position at a university in Nagoya.

## Recollections

Quasha recalls coming into the position in Japan 15 years ago and feeling befuddled by the style of basketball being played in rather uniform fashion across Japan. He quickly recognized that an emphasis was placed on sharing the ball and passing the ball around the perimeter in order to gain an opening for an outside shot. Quasha recalls confiding in longtime referees in Japan who relayed to him that the game of basketball developed in Japan with the mindset that Japanese players lacked height. In order to compensate for the lack of height, coaches gravitated toward a style of play that stressed ball rotations around the perimeter with a focus on outside shooting.

At the time, Quasha's close confidant in the coaching fraternity in Japan, George Gemelch, had this reflection about the style of play in Japan (Quasha, 2001:10):

Basketball in Japan is more concerned about getting everyone involved. Lots of passing makes sure all players on the floor participate in the game. This differs from most American games in which the best ballplayers do most of the shooting. The highly individualistic, run-and-gun style of inner-city, American pickup basketball would be incomprehensible to my Japanese teammates.

With the success of the Chicago Bulls and the fame of legendary figure Michael Jordan, the "triangle

offense" became the popular motion offense for teams in Japan. Imitation was a form of flattery. Many teams longed to emulate the successful strategies of Jordan's Bulls, under the "zen master" tutelage of Phil Jackson.

For Japan, the triangle offense seemed to validate the adherence to perimeter shooting and passing in Japan, though the Triangle Offense had been derived for different purposes, i. e, not for the purpose of making up for a lack of height.

In the Triangle Offense (Davis, 2000; Jackson, 2004), the signature feature is the triangle created near the sideline with the center (positioned at the low post), the forward (positioned at the wing), and the guard (positioned at the corner). In addition, the strategy employs the "two-man game" of the remaining guard and forward, positioned at the top of the key and weak-side high post, respectively. The goal of the offense becomes attending to those five spots on the floor and creating optimal spacing on the floor. In the scheme, each player should technically be able to pass to all four teammates on the floor. In this motion offense, there is meaning and intention to every cut and pass, as counter moves to the defensive postures and strategies faced.

But even as Japanese players began to grow taller on average across Japan due to changes in diet and other factors (Harris, 1997; Samaras, 1995; Takamura, 1988), the game of basketball seemed mired in the original strategies that were suited for a shorter squad.

"Whither the post" (Quasha, 2001) became the signature approach of a Quasha-run Gifu Shotoku University team.

It was clear to Quasha that the post game, employing a strong center or forward to establish a back-to-the-basket presence, was being under-utilized. Since all the teams Quasha's squad faced in

the interscholastic league played in similar fashion, Quasha strategized to throw a new wrinkle into the mix. He recognized that the relatively uniform offensive schemes were easily defendable, as teams innately grasped the offensive strategies thrown at them that they themselves employed. In practices, the same offensive sets were matched against the same defensive sets. The game situations were no different in many cases.

Quasha recollects the success of his former team (2001:11):

With our university squad, we bucked the system and spent a considerably amount of time working on post positioning for this purpose. Not surprisingly, our taller players quickly became better rebounders and this in turn allowed us to begin our fast break with more consistency. Also, we grabbed more offensive rebounds than our opponents which led to many second chance points. Furthermore, training some of our guards in offensive post skills proved quite useful. During games we often forced opponent's smaller players to play post defense which was a new and uncomfortable place for them and disrupted their defensive schemes while creating good shots for our better shooters. This tactic was quite effective for pulling opponent's rebounders, the trigger for any fast break, and forcibly placing their point guards further away from starting the break.

Since most teams in Japan rigorously practice the fast break, this approach was a significant part of our success because we caused many teams to play out of sync. In other words, we forced opponents to confront situations they had not practiced and made them adjust. This coaching

approach is quite effective when playing teams of equal or better ability. For opponents with less talent, a more traditional offense is sufficient.

## Trends and Innovations

The game of basketball, like any sport, evolves around modifications. Like a chess match, strategic moves beget counter moves. And like the ebbs and flows within a game, the general approaches and wider schemes flow from innovation to counter innovation.

Like the adulation of the Chicago Bulls and Michael Jordan, a new team and star has emerged and has received deserved attention for their success and their brand of basketball which is, like the Bulls were in their era, fresh, innovative and highly successful.

### *Enter Stephen Curry and the Golden State Warriors*

Taking the NBA by storm in 2014-2015, Curry and his Golden State Warriors were marked men coming off their championship season. Yet, Curry was able to elevate his game to even greater heights and his team reeled off record-breaking consecutive wins to begin the 2015-2016 campaign. The style of play and the level of success were unprecedented in many ways, from a team as well as an individual standpoint. This section examines the individual skills exhibited by Curry and the team strategies employed by the Warriors, along with their ramifications for the approaches to basketball in Japan.

### *The "new normal.?"*

With win after consecutive win under their belts, the Warriors showed up at arenas across the NBA as the team that the opponents collectively conspired to take down. Like a pitcher throwing a

no-hitter in baseball, each consecutive “inning” brought heightened awareness and urgency to the matchup. When it became apparent that the Warriors were capable of tossing “shut out and no-hit ball” on a regular basis, the fans, pundits and all connected to the game of basketball stood up to take notice.

Brian Scalabrine, former NBA player and current NBA analyst for Yahoo Sports, was one of the first ones to boldly claim that the Warriors' imprint on the game was long lasting and revolutionary. Scalabrine assessed the success of the Warriors just a few games into the new season (Devine, 2015):

...it's going to be very difficult to go against the Warriors... The game is shifting now. Everyone thinks that the Golden State Warriors are all about running and gunning, and shooting threes. That's not the case. (They were) number one in defense last year in the NBA. The Warriors play defense and they shoot threes. What shooting threes does for your team, it creates space, and space is what everyone wants to play at right now. You want big men, or a guy like Draymond Green who can stretch the floor, shoot the three, and the biggest thing is when a guy closes out on him, drive the basketball. That's the hardest thing to defend right now in the NBA is running a guy off his shot and keeping him in front. That's what you're looking for. That's where the game is shifting... Getting to the paint and having shooting is really the key to way that the NBA is played right now.

Shortly thereafter, future Hall of Fame point guard Steve Nash, was quick to crown Stephen Curry as the best player in the NBA. He put into words what everyone had been “witnessing” to that point, ironically borrowing a word here that heralded the

arrival of a younger LeBron James — that “we are all witnesses.” Coming from legendary Nash, Curry's coronation seemed legitimate (Dwyer, 2015):

... I would say Steph is turning into a historical category of his own, in a way... I think he's unlike anyone else. His ability to make shots and still handle the play-making duties is historic... The skill level is already prodigious and it keeps getting better. And since the experience and understanding will continue to grow, it's pretty remarkable to think about the heights he can get to... He's maybe as skilled a player as we've ever had in this game.

NBA Hall of Fame guard Reggie Miller commented on the appeal of Curry from the standpoint of a skillset that can be emulated and an approach to the game that is admirable (Poole, 2015):

What made Jordan so great was that he could get the ball way up in the air and finish it. But you don't have to dunk to be like Steph. Every kid looks at Steph and thinks: 'I can shoot and dribble. I can do that...' You don't have to be like Mike anymore. You know, Mike was an a-----. I was an a-----, too. But you don't have to be an a----- to be successful. Steph is living proof.

What are the ramifications and potentialities of Curry's skill set and the Warriors style of play for Japan? Is imitation as a form of flattery and adoration a futile exercise, as the bar is set so high by the Warriors? Is Curry a one-of-a-kind athlete, not to be seen (or emulated) in a generation or more — as some have said “in the history of basketball”? Does “going small” in the manner that the Warriors have demonstrated match the skill set that is

available in Japan? Is it practical and possible for Japanese players and teams to emulate the style of Curry and the Warriors without sacrificing fundamental aspects of their game? These are some of the questions that are raised with the emergence of the great success shining from the west that has cast a large shadow over the global basketball arena.

### *From micro to macro*

With the success of Michael Jordan, Kobe Bryant, and numerous other superstars, the individual moves and shooting forms of players are scrutinized for imitation. When Kobe made his entrance into the NBA, the similarities between him and Jordan were uncanny (Niketalk, 2013):

From the gum chomping to the arched eyebrows to the actual inflection of his voice, you can tell that Bryant clearly watched tape after tape of Jordan while growing up in Italy. That aspect is legitimate, and just fine. It's a habit that's hard to break. "I still inadvertently give off the MJ-styled inner-cheek chew and squinted-eye look while attempting to concentrate on what someone is saying. I'm not trying to be Michael Jordan, it's just something I picked up after watching hours and hours of SportsChannel as a kid."

The on court aspects, though, don't have to be just because Kobe Bryant watched a ton of Michael Jordan while growing up. Again, Kobe is supposed to be doing this.

Both players are around the NBA's average height and weight — 6-6 and 220 pounds — and both have similar skill sets. And when you pair those two factors with the athleticism and smarts that both boast, you get a similar game. And for that size,

with those skills, jab-step jumpers and turnaround daggers off of a post-up are the most efficient way to go. For Bryant, our only longtime complaint is that he relies too heavily on that jab-step from 19 or 20 feet out, when Jordan would usually attempt to get to 15 feet.

The torch was passed from Jordan to Kobe. Jordan was gloriously celebrated in his "farewell tour" season at the All-Star game. Kobe may be honored in similar fashion. The torch has arguably been passed to Stephen Curry — in this era of Internet video scrutiny. The contention here is that Stephen Curry's shooting touch, which may be the best the NBA has ever seen, involves some details that are consistent and notable.

Here are some observations that shooting coaches have noticed about Curry's form and approach:

- Curry's shot is quick and rarely blocked — one of the most impressive attributes of his game. He is able to make space for his shot through deft dribbling but there are aspects of his set up that also enhance his shot.
- For example, he dribbles low and is already in the process of shooting when he rises from the dribble. It is a subtle aspect of his set up but it is notable. He also sets his feet and starts to rise before receiving passes. One basketball trainer employs the following drill to simulate the Curry set up: toss a ball with a backward spin in front of you, take quick "one-two" jab steps before the return of the bounced ball, start into the midway rise as you receive the ball, and continue with the rise in a smooth motion to shoot the ball.
- As for body alignment, Curry aligns his right hip, right elbow and right shoulder in a straight line when shooting. Watching Curry play, it is amazing that this alignment is consistently set

despite shooting from different spots on the floor and coming off a varying array of deft dribbling moves. The consistency of the alignment probably is key to the accuracy of his shots.

- The alignment is possible through several other factors related to body positioning. One, he tends to point his knees inward (toward each other) on a consistent basis. Two, he tends to point his feet toward the left on a consistent basis.
- Other consistencies of Curry's jump shot include the arc of the ball. Curry brings the ball back toward his head in his jumpshot motion. The ball initially travels backward first before being propelled upward. It makes for a high arching shot that is more difficult to block. Another consistency is something a shooting coach referred to as the "dip". Clutching the ball with two hands, Curry often dips the ball, about 10 centimeters or more, before his midpoint rise and subsequent shot. In other words, one of the first motions upon receiving the ball is a dip. It seems in synch with his midway rise and generates power.

There is a reason why shooting is referred to as an "art" form. Each individual's physical attributes are slightly different, most especially for a shooter, height, left or right-handedness, hand size, body type, flexibility, strength, the ratio of lengths of the forearm and upper arm, the particular angles at which the wrist and elbow bend, etc. Like a pitcher in baseball, the ball does not come out of one player's hand exactly the same way as another. Yet, there are some fundamentals that allow players — shooters, pitchers, etc. — to maximize their full potentials. For a shooter they include the foundation (of the feet and hips), the set up (body motion for propulsion of the ball), proper positioning of the hands on the ball, the cock and release point, etc. Easier said than done; honed over countless hours on the basketball court from childhood to adult. It is

beyond the scope of this paper to attend to the details here. These details are better demonstrated in a basketball clinic than on paper here.

But the point of the discussion here is to explore aspects of Curry's jump shot that can be beneficial for players in Japan. The main takeaways from the discussion here include the skill set of a smaller guard whose shooting range can spread the spacing on the floor. There may be aspects of the subtleties of Curry's jump shot that can be explored by Japanese players and incorporated into their skill set.

Curry's dribbling ability is already becoming legendary. The Internet is filled with clips of his practice drills, pregame drills, and displays of wizardry during games. It is beyond the scope of this paper to break down the array of moves he incorporates. In fact, like his shooting eye, it may be meaningless to the current discussion. It is almost like saying "Michael Jordan dunks effortlessly, and with flair and authority. That is a good skill to learn."

There was only one Michael Jordan and there may only be one Stephan Curry. Some aspects of their games cannot be learned. Other aspects certainly can be explored, for example, for players to glean what they can from Curry's skill set and original drills.

Former NBA player Bogue was recently featured in an NHK special (NHK, 2015). The program followed his weeklong coaching stint at a junior high school in Japan. Upon observing the team running through one of their regular dribbling drills utilizing two balls, Bogue commented that the essence of the drill was lost. Simply dribbling with two balls in the manner that the team displayed, according to Bogue, created bad habits:

I hate this. I don't like two balls. It teaches

you bad habits. A lot of people do it but I'm from that old school. You pound it and you have your head down the whole time (so you can't see the whole floor).

Bogues' observation illustrated that the trendy and innovative training insights that can be gained through watching Youtube clips need to be considered and followed carefully with function and proper technique in mind. It is a point that Quasha has concurred with many times as a coach in Japan.

Another takeaway from this discussion on Curry's ball handling abilities is that Curry is a great finisher. Players need to recognize that they may not be able to shed a defender in the manner Curry is able to, but they still need to be able to finish at the rim when the opportunity arises — whether it be by layup, floater, baby hook shot, passing off to a player whose defender switches off, etc. All of the dribbling dexterity and wizardry means very little if a player cannot finish — drive the lane, finish at the rim, or pass off on point and with timing.

It is one of the observations Carter made in his encounters with basketball in Japan. He was surprised that even some of the better dribblers and shooters were not as well versed and skilled in finishing at the rim as they should have been — in consideration of their balance of skills. And this observation seemed to corroborate with Quasha's stance that the inside game was not stressed enough here in Japan.

The takeaway from Curry's game here is that he is a smaller guard and does not rely upon power and exceptional leaping ability to finish at the rim. His high arching floaters and his ambidextrous layups are moves that can be explored by players in Japan. This aspect of Curry's game would definitely help to strengthen a skill set that is widely lacking in Japan, according to Carter.

### *The Warrior Offense*

It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a blueprint plan for copying the offensive and defensive schemes of the Golden State Warriors. The generalities, as gathered through the various comments about the offense by head coach Steve Kerr, are as follows (Apricot, 2015):

- **Motion.** If you do a standard play like a Pick and Roll or a Post up, be moving so no one can set themselves for the play.
- **Reversal.** Change sides of the court so the D will have to keep changing looks and re-positioning themselves.
- **Big Passing.** Give the bigs chances to read and pass.
- **Off-ball Play.** Particularly, use many screens away from the ball, if you pick and roll, pre-screen for the pick as they come up.
- **Interchangeable Roles.** Roles in plays can be filled by almost anyone.
- **Pace and Improvisation.** Push the ball early before the D can set, create chaos and let players create.
- **Deception.** Run different plays out of similar sets.

For teams in Japan, it is enticing to commit to this trendy and admired style of play. After all, it seems a good fit for Japanese teams with their long history of valuing passing and perimeter shooting.

However, they would be remiss if they do not recognize the fundamental dichotomy in play for the Golden State approach. The outside game does not exist without the inside game, and vice versa. Teams do not simply choose to “live and die” with an outside (or inside) game exclusively without consideration of the balance. Otherwise, opposing teams will anchor their defense on the imbalance.

It could be a good match for Japanese teams but only if there is an inside game that looms as a

distraction for the defensive team. The inside and outside game in basketball is analogous to the running and passing game of American football. In football, teams always need to establish the running game in order to set up the passing game. Without the threat of a run, the defense will key on the pass and the offense will become too predictable — and vice versa.

Quasha had already observed that the inside game was lacking in Japan. Carter noted that Japanese players tended to be less skilled at finishing at the rim. Simply attempting to employ the Golden State Warriors' offensive scheme, without shoring up (and honing the skills to establish) a strong middle, would be a detriment to the team. It would neglect a fundamental need and strength of the team.

It should be noted that Golden State under Steve Kerr assembled a team with the talent to do both — play strong on the inside and shoot from the outside. The “biggs” of Golden State (while admittedly smaller than the average size in the NBA) are a force in the middle. They are strong and feisty and make up for the slight height disadvantage with muscle and high energy. They all possess inside moves that are a given — overplay their outside game and they will burn you in the middle (turn around jumper, hook shot, layup, dunk, floater, pass off, etc.). It is their ability to do both that spreads the floor. But it starts, quite arguably, with the strength they establish in the middle.

And like the dichotomy of an inside and outside game, the Warriors display the strength of an overriding dichotomy — their offensive and defensive prowess. It is often overlooked that the Warriors are an excellent defensive team. In fact, their defense ranks at the top of league play. Therefore, balance is their key. Balance and taking advantage of teams that cannot cover that balance of attack gives the Warriors a decided advantage.

Therefore, for teams wishing to emulate the style of play of the Golden State Warriors, the challenge becomes developing, not assembling, players who can display this balance, and then applying it to team play.

### *Final thoughts: Strength Training*

Strength training as related to “balancing the affairs of scholar athletes” will be addressed in a subsequent paper by Higa, Quasha, and Katagiri (2016b). In this section, strength training is addressed as it relates to intercultural perspectives on the state of basketball in Japan. In this final section, a consideration of upper body strength provides intercultural insights that will serve to align some of the arguments made throughout this paper.

Quasha had noted that the “inside game” was lacking in Japan, with a preference placed on passing the ball around the perimeter, sharing the ball, and taking outside shots. Carter expressed surprise that many of the better players he encountered in Japan were less versed at finishing at the rim — in consideration of their balance of skills. It seems that this penchant to avoid hard contact in Japan is reflected, in part, in the lack of value placed on strength training, especially for a balance of lower and upper body strength. In other words, the style of play advocated here seems to complement the lack of an adherence to strength training, and vice versa.

Considering strength training for the needs of basketball players, Quasha, Carter and others have noted that Japanese players lack power, specifically explosive (“quick jumping”) ability and upper body strength. The vertical leap has been one of the standard measurements for basketball performance. It can be a “static” assessment if not considered in the wider context of skills for basketball. In true-game situations, the ability to jump high is also



augmented by skills such as jumping quickly and explosively. In addition, the basketball acuity attached to the timing of the jump (which in turn is connected to the ability to “hang in the air”, as they say in basketball jargon) is another performance related skill set for basketball. Both can be developed and enhanced through strength training regiments (Higa et al., 2016b).

Carter has always been baffled by the lack of recognition of the importance of upper body strength in sports in Japan, including basketball. Leg strength and conditioning can be attained through the rigors of running and the calisthenics routines that are popular among sports teams in Japan. (However, this range of training is limited compared to an approach that incorporates modern sports science regiments.) Optimal upper body strength cannot be achieved through a basic range of calisthenics such as push-ups. For Carter, Quasha and others, the imbalance is rather glaring in Japan, especially considering the needs for sports performance at the elite level and the comparisons with the athletes from abroad. But for Carter, pointing out the imbalance and making claims that Japanese players lack upper body strength resulted in backlash. Therefore, he observed these aspects from afar and allowed the players and teams he was associated with to carry on with their haphazard approach to strength training — with a negligible focus on upper body strength training.

Carter had been a member of the 4X100 sprint team that won the league championship in high school in his state in America. He recalls that his sprint coaches, two former NFL players from New York, always stressed upper body strength in the weight room as well as on the track. On the track, the team members performed drills for developing arm speed. Standing stationary with a slight lean forward, sets of rhythmic arm swings were conducted with the coaches barking out, “Pump your arms! Pump your arms! The faster you swing

your arms, the faster your legs will move.” This notion that the arms would lead the legs in the sprint movement provided credence for the importance of upper body strength, even for a non-contact sport like sprinting. Additionally, Carter had always noticed that the top caliber sprinters in the world had an impressive balance of power to their physiques, considering upper and lower body strength.

Quasha (2001) noted that the progression of Japanese basketball would be stagnated unless there was more international exchange and competition, as well as an appreciation and infusion of aspects of American approaches to the game. Quasha also mentioned that basketball in Japan could benefit from youth leagues and youth basketball clinics.

Similarly, Carter notes that the style of play in the US is ingrained through a process of acculturation from the youth playgrounds to the organized leagues, from childhood to adulthood. The style of play becomes progressively competitive in a short span of years. By junior high school, the playground and league games can be fiercely competitive, with rivalries being established, individually and among teams. Public courts often take on a “survival of the fittest” mindset. One team remains on the court to take on challengers until a stronger team replaces them as “kings of the court.” The games often exhibit tournament play pressure where the competition is closer to “full-contact” than non-contact. At a relatively young age, the inside game and finishing-at-the-rim become integral parts of the skill sets. Without them the players and teams would not succeed in the survival-of-the-fittest competition. The pecking order is often established through these “contact” aspects of the game. Other dimensions of the game flow from there.

It is no wonder that this type of competition breeds an appreciation and recognition of the value of upper

body strength. Picks are set hard; establishing position on the inside is a fierce battle. Dribbling with one's back to the basket while torquing forcefully left and right to shed an overbearing defender, driving the lane with the off-hand deflecting arms and bodies, etc. cannot be achieved without a balance of upper and lower body strength.

In comparison, it would be considered that the game in Japan is played with more finesse. There are very few outlets for the eager basketball enthusiast to hone his or her game in Japan (whereas in the US, the entire landscape is quite literally dotted with basketball courts in every neighborhood). In Japan, without the opportunities (outdoor courts, indoor facilities, competitive play, youth leagues, youth clinics, etc.) to hone competitive skills, many players spend extended hours engaged in a more friendly game of "shoot around." It is no wonder that Japanese players tend to be better versed at free-throw shooting and set shots than inside moves and finishing at the rim (in real game situations). And it is no wonder that there is a lack of recognition for the need for strength and power, especially upper body strength.

But in order for the game of basketball to achieve new heights in Japan, some of the cues from the international game may need to be heeded.

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