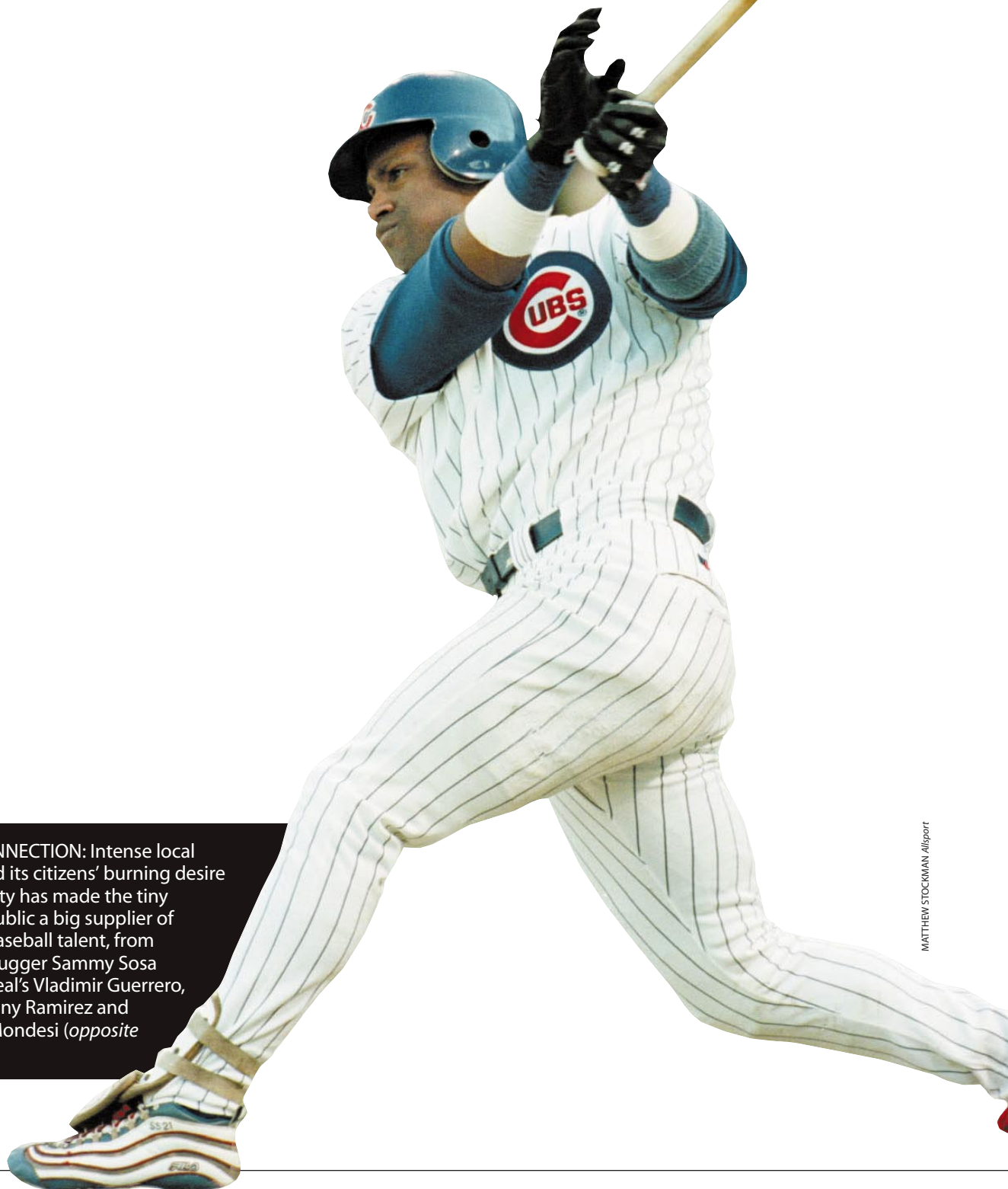


# Unlikely Domin-ation



**CARIBBEAN CONNECTION:** Intense local competition and its citizens' burning desire to escape poverty has made the tiny Dominican Republic a big supplier of Major League Baseball talent, from Chicago Cubs slugger Sammy Sosa (*right*) to Montreal's Vladimir Guerrero, Cleveland's Manny Ramirez and Toronto's Raul Mondesi (*opposite page, from left*).

MATTHEW STOCKMAN/Allsport

# Dominican baseball players. Chinese Ping-Pongers.

## Why do certain countries, even poor, tiny ones, dominate certain sports?

by Reinout van Wagtenonk

Think snow. Think wintry Alps. It seems obvious that Austria would be home to “The Herminator,” the world’s dominating downhill skier, Hermann Maier. Steep mountains and many months of fresh powder—of course Austria produces gold-medal skiers. Hasn’t it always?

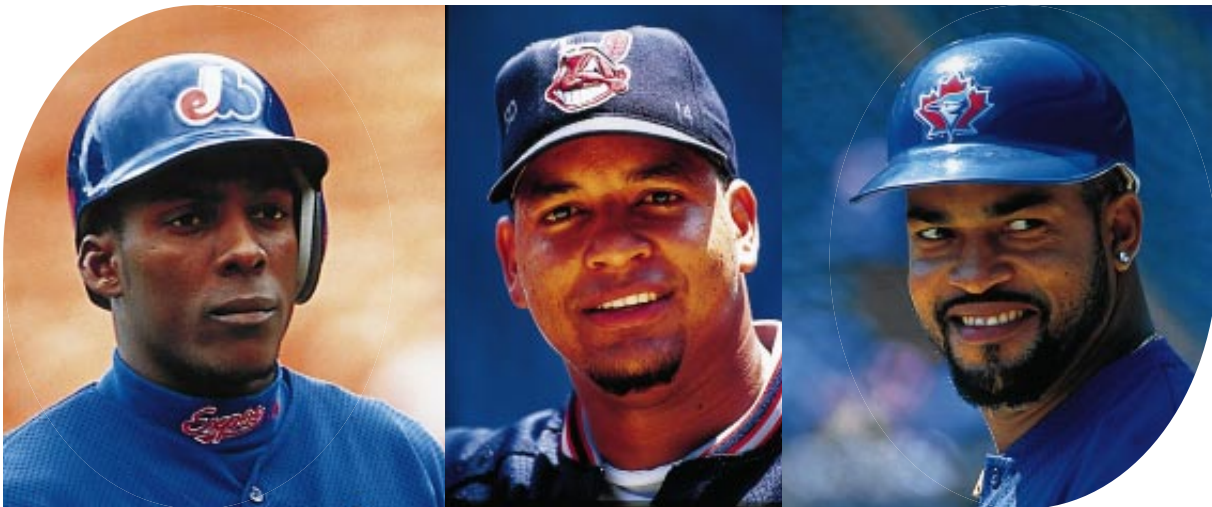
“Actually, the British brought alpine skiing to the Alps,” says Allen Guttman, a professor of history at Amherst College and author of *Games and Empires*, which examines the spread of modern sports. “The native people in Switzerland and Austria moved about on skis, but they didn’t make an organized sport out of downhill skiing. The first alpine club was founded [in 1903] in London.”

The role of mostly snowless, mostly mountainless England in organizing skiing as a sport illustrates the British Empire’s enormous influence on the propagation of modern sports to all corners of the world. It also illustrates that the geography of sports is not as simple to map out as it may appear. Dominance in a sport is ultimately not about physical geography or a nation’s population or wealth, it’s about the geography of power.

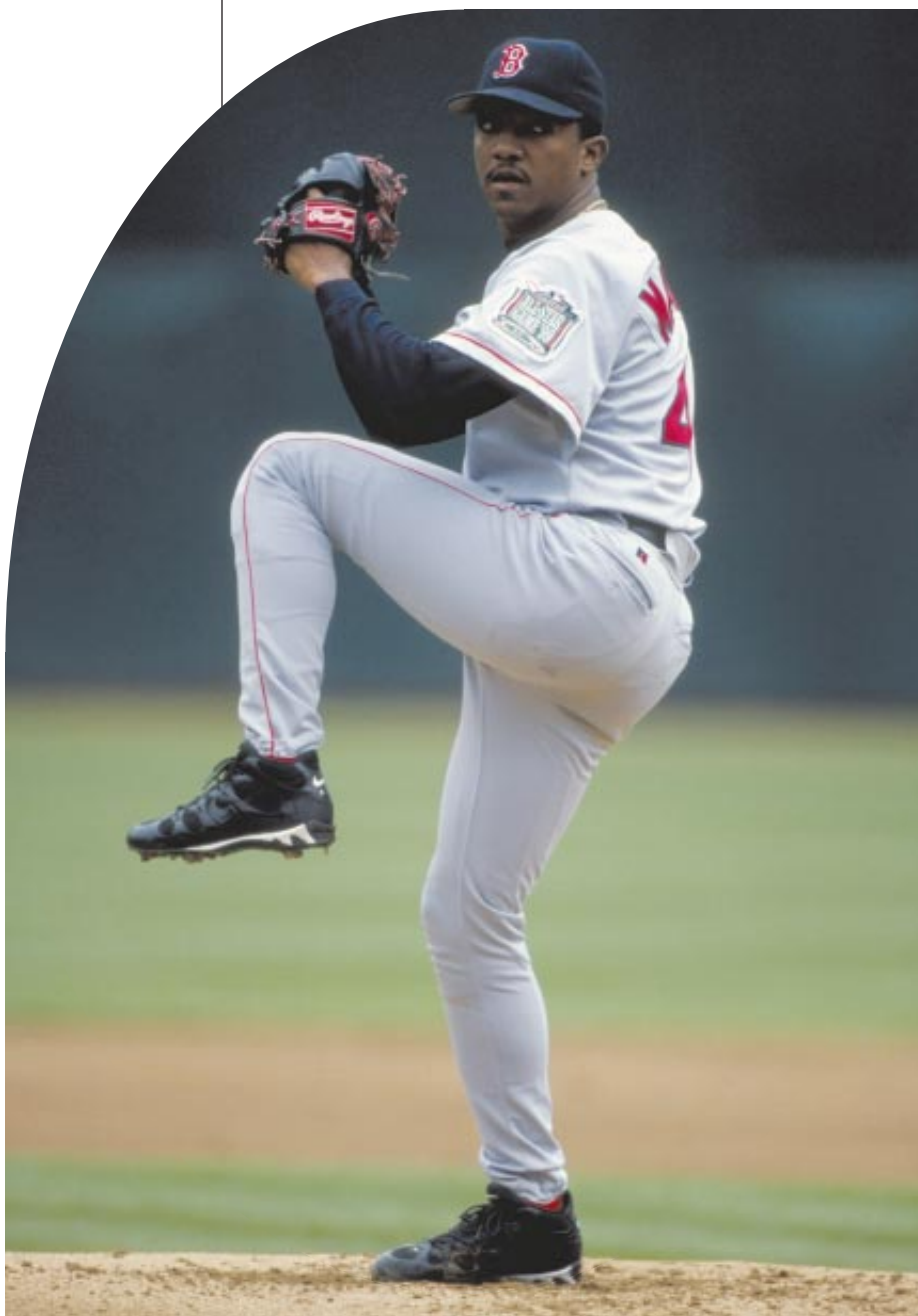
On closer examination, popular notions about why

certain countries are hotbeds for star athletes often prove to be fallacies, particularly when the country is tiny or poor. Baseball fans, for example, know the Dominican Republic as the largest supplier of foreign players to Major League Baseball in the U.S. Home-run giant Sammy Sosa, pitching ace Pedro Martinez, third-base sensation Adrian Beltre and dozens of their countrymen earn millions of dollars with their skills. But has anybody ever heard of a Haitian prospect with a major-league arm? The Dominican Republic shares the Caribbean island of Hispaniola with Haiti; both countries enjoy the same languid climate that is perfect for year-round baseball. What’s different?

Kenya is another anomaly. The East African nation is known the world over as the commanding presence in distance running. Kenyan middle- and long-distance runners first came to broad public attention at the 1968 “high-altitude” Olympic Games in Mexico City, where Kipchoge Keino, Naftali Temu and Amos Biwott won gold medals. Sports commentators were swift to attribute their success to Kenya’s highlands. But since then, Kenyan runners have expanded their dominance, winning races at sea level and in all climate zones. Besides, if high-altitude preparation is all



CHRIS TROTTMAN/Duomo (Guerrero); GREG FLUME/Duomo (Ramirez); GREG FLUME/Allsport (Mondesi)



**MONEY BALL:** Dominican Pedro Martinez, the 1999 American League Cy Young Award winner, has pitched his way to prosperity.

it takes, then where are the world-class runners from similarly situated countries, such as neighboring Tanzania or Uganda or countries in the Andes or Himalayan regions?

### SOCIAL ROOTS

A way from the daily sports pages, historians, sociologists and anthropologists have written extensively about why certain countries produce a disproportionate number of world-class athletes in certain sports, often despite small populations and widespread poverty.

One big reason is simply that the fervent, sustained popularity of a single sport will create world-class athletes, says University of Amsterdam professor Ruud Stokvis, a social scientist who specializes in sports history. It's baseball in the Dominican Republic, running in Kenya's Rift Valley, table tennis

in China, field hockey in India and Pakistan, soccer in many other countries. So what has created that sometimes very localized fervor?

In earlier times scholars maintained that there was a link between the "ethnic character" of a country or its people and the characteristics of their favorite sports. But in today's age of multiculturalism and globalization, most modern academics reject this notion. The evidence is plain, too; baseball, for example, is widely popular in the U.S. and Japan, two countries with extremely different cultures.

"You have to go back and examine the social characteristics of a sport for your first answers as to why a particular country produces champions in a particular sport," says Maarten van Bottenburg, another Dutch sports sociologist and author of *Hidden Competitions*. "Where did a sport originate, who introduced that sport in another country and with what aim, and which part of the population adopted the sport?"

Many social roots trace back to England. Before the 19th century, sport-like games were played according to a wide variety of local rules and traditions. Britain's "public schools"—the private boarding schools where the elite sent their sons—played an essential role in molding these games into standardized sports. "Schools like Rugby and Eton were very violent places in the 18th century," Guttman says. "It occurred to 19th-century headmasters that sports might be a way to tame the young gentlemen, to civilize them."

"At the same time," adds David Levinson, an anthropologist and co-editor of the *Encyclopedia of World Sport*,

"the riches coming from the British colonial empire supported a leisure class that could afford to play games, that could travel to Switzerland for three months to go skiing just because it looked like a fun thing to do. It wasn't necessarily about competition. You'll notice that as the empire faded, so did British sports dominance."

Many games began with this elite pedigree: soccer, rugby, cricket, field hockey. But soccer quickly became the sport of choice for the urban masses in England's industrial centers, both to play and to watch. The surest sign of its popularity was the early introduction of professionalism—pay for play—which was an abomination to the upper classes.

Because it caught on with the commoners, soccer was often brought to other cultures by British sailors, enlisted soldiers or tradesmen. Across the globe, the sport caught on as the people's game, spreading into

broad social classes without much more purpose than enjoyment.

But as a colonial power, Britain ferried other sports abroad much more discriminately. Administrators, educators and other colonial masters exported their less democratized games wherever the Union Jack flew—the Asian, African and Caribbean territories. Often the games were sustained for the ruling classes' own amusement in the “upstairs, downstairs” atmosphere that they created wherever they settled. Sports were also made part of the curriculum of the British-style schools where the sons of the local upper classes enrolled to prepare for their part in England's rule. And as was done in the 19th century, public school headmasters who discovered these organized sports introduced them as a way to tame their own unruly pupils, as an instrument of control over the native population.

This begins to explain the rise of Kenyan running. “The introduction of sportized running and other Western sports into Kenya was explicitly meant as a form of social control, as a safety valve against excessive anticolonial feelings,” says John Bale, a professor of education and geography at England's Keele University and co-author of *Kenyan Running*. “Studying the archives made that very clear. There are all sorts of quotations from British colonial officers about how sports will stop these guys from stealing cattle, how it will keep them quiet and subdue them.”

Native Kenyans were also recruited for police and army services. Hard physical training to assure their fitness was a priority, especially after R.G.B. Spicer arrived in 1925 as commissioner of police. Spicer was an all-around sportsman. His emphasis on athletics in his force produced a team of policemen-athletes that dominated the so-called African Olympics in those years. Schools, premier among them the Jeanes School, founded by American philanthropists, contributed to the development of Kenyan athletics.

Foreign missionaries played a crucial role, too, introducing Western sports as a part of their efforts to remake native culture more in their own image.

What that proves to Bale is that the dominance of Kenyan long-distance running today cannot be explained through inherently local factors. It's not only high altitude, or just a hypothesized genetic advantage in members of the Nandi tribe (which produces so many world-class Kenyan distance runners), and not the jolly folkloristic belief that Kenyan children perhaps run long distances to get to school (most don't, according to Bale's research). The first Kenyan who impressed track-and-field aficionados was Nyandika Maiyoro, who in 1954 in

a three-mile race in London kept pace with British world-record breakers Fred Green and Chris Chataway. The 1968 Olympic gold medalists and dozens of top runners have since followed in Maiyoro's footsteps.

The Kenyans did not burst on the scene as “natural athletes” (read: unsophisticated blacks who just happen to be born fast). “There had been a strong program of development going on at least since the 1930s,” Bale says. “One can only explain the emergence of Kenyan runners by taking the influence of missionaries and other foreign teachers into account and their enrollment in the police force, the army and all those kinds of Western agencies that stimulated athletics.”

Kenyan runners have now clearly become an export product. International sports agents, the organizers of marathons and other track meets, American universities aiming to boost their prestige with National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) running titles, and the world's large athletic-shoe companies all mine their talents. Likewise, the Dominican Republic has become a “baseball plantation” for American major-league teams, in the words of Northeastern University anthropologist-sociologist Alan Klein in his book *Sugarball: The American Game, the Dominican*

**WIN WIN:**  
Kenyans Elijah  
Lagat and  
Catherine  
Ndereba won the  
2000 Boston  
Marathon.  
Colonialists,  
missionaries and  
police recruiters  
all influenced  
Kenya's rise in  
distance running.



AL BELLO Allsport (top and bottom)



**BLOODBATH:** Political hatred can motivate rivalry. This Hungarian water polo player emerged battered from a 1956 Olympic match with the Soviets, whose country had invaded Hungary that same year.

**FOCUSED:** The Chinese concentrated on table tennis to beat rivals from imperialist Japan. Linghui Kong ranks first in the world; three of his countrymen round out the top five.

*Dream.* There's lots of raw talent there that can be developed cheaply.

A bit of history is necessary to understand why the Dominican Republic, a poor country of only eight million people, has become such a prominent supplier of superior baseball talent. As British sports started to spread globally in the late 1800s, the U.S. became a world power with its own identity, economic might and political sphere of influence. It also began to separate culturally from Britain. It was baseball, not cricket, that became America's dominant bat-and-ball sport. (Guttmann says that "the absolutely wacky notion" that Abner Doubleday invented baseball in 1839 in pastoral Cooperstown, N.Y., is a myth designed to deny the obvious British roots of the great American pastime.) Neither soccer nor rugby but the American football variation took hold in the U.S. Baseball became the sport of the masses, professionalism and all. As Britain had done, America bundled its game into the economic and cultural hegemony it built in Latin America, Cuba and most of the rest of the Caribbean—and, to a lesser extent, in Japan, the Philippines and other parts of the Far East.



"Note on a map which countries play predominantly soccer and which play baseball, and you'll know if it was Britain or the U.S. that held sway there around the beginning of the 20th century," Stokvis says.

Baseball came to the Dominican Republic when a Cuban slave revolt in 1868 forced many upper-class Cubans with American connections to move there. Along with their sugar plantations and refineries, they brought baseball. In a classic pattern, periodic occupations of the republic by the U.S. Marines strengthened both emulation and resentment of the dominant power.

The rich Cuban sugar barons liked to bet on the teams they fielded. Rather than stock their teams with dilettante players from their own social class, they recruited the best players from the working class—their own farm and factory hands—to ensure victory on the diamond. Longtime Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo was so determined to have his Ciudad Trujillo Dragons win championships in the 1930s that he lured the legendary Satchel Paige, Cool Papa Bell and Josh Gibson from the American Negro League. The rivalries among the economic and political elite fostered the highest-level pennant races outside the American majors.

This laid the foundation for the later individual successes of Dominican players in Major League Baseball, Klein argues. "It's not that there is inherently more talent there," he says. "Baseball is practically the only way out of dead-end poverty. Sports can provide upward mobility. But if it was simply poverty as an incentive that drives kids to try to excel, then we would also expect to see as many ball-players come from Mexico and other places. It is a combination of the poverty plus the incredible caliber of competition that developed early on, driven by the refinery owners and others in the ruling class striving to outdo each other."

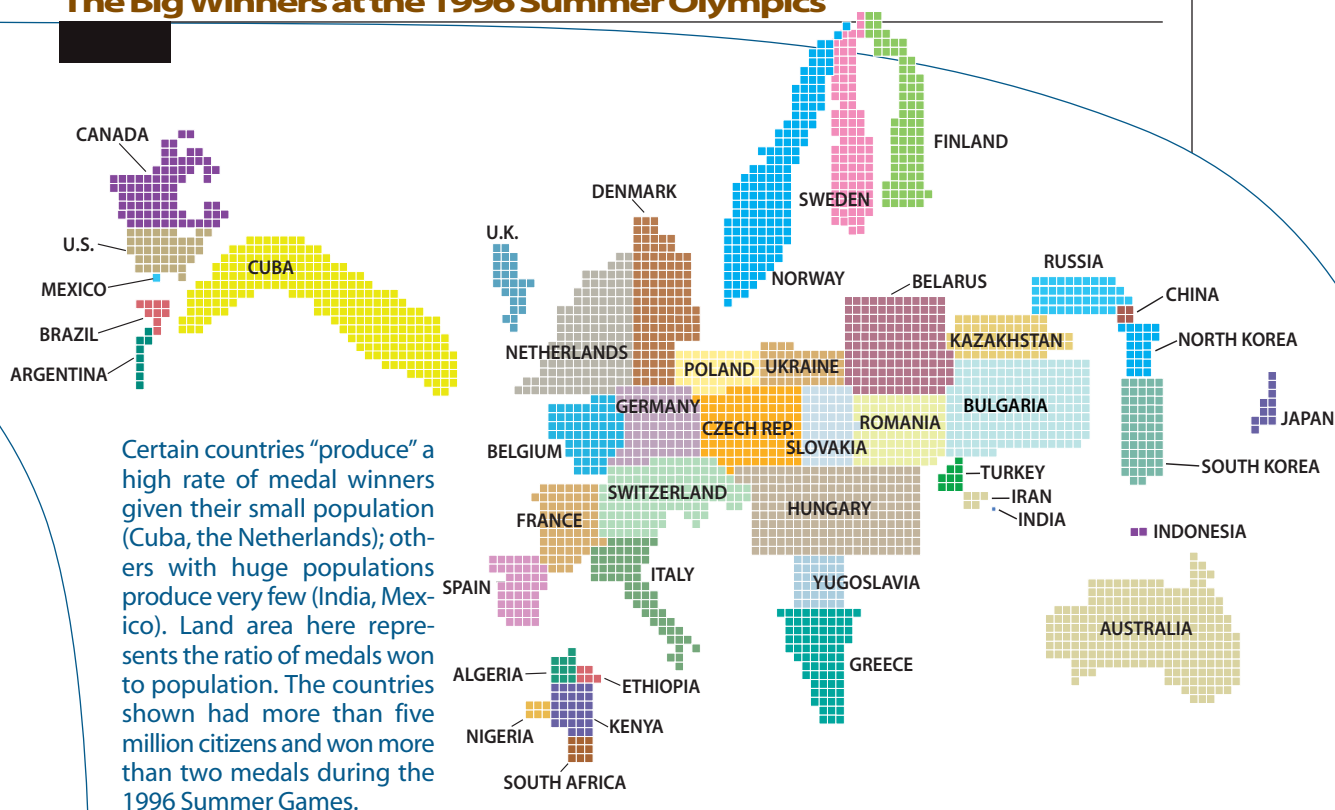
#### DRIVEN BY RESENTMENT

Aside from England and the U.S.—where "muscular Christianity" and the Young Men's Christian Association gave the world basketball and volleyball—Japan has been the nation most responsible for the spread of organized sports. Modern table tennis came from England, but a Chinese shop owner imported the first equipment to his country from Japan in 1904. Since the mid-1900s Chinese players have won more than 50 table tennis world championships. Their ascension has sprung in part from two distinct factors: paddle grip and resentment.

The British had one style of grip, which was emulated at

BETTMANN/CORBIS (top); JOHN GICHIGI/Allsport (bottom)

## The Big Winners at the 1996 Summer Olympics



English YMCAs in China’s large trading cities. But the Japanese had developed a different paddle grip. This cultural crosscurrent led to a variety of grips in China, which may have contributed to early successes in a sport in which the spin put on the ball through various ways of striking it is so important, according to Susan Brownell, professor of anthropology at the University of Missouri and author of *Training the Body for China*.

Meanwhile, Brownell says, expert play was also driven by Japan’s regional hegemony in the first decades of the 1900s. “Knowing that the Japanese were good at this made the Chinese concentrate on it just that much more,” she says. In his travels at the time of the communist takeover, China expert Edgar Snow observed the role of the Red Army in spreading table tennis to even the most remote areas of the country. Since table tennis became an Olympic sport in 1988, Chinese men and women have won nine gold medals out of a possible 12.

Resentment and rivalry from a less dominant country toward a stronger one have always been powerful motivators in the development of sports, Guttman argues. Between 1928 and 1984 India and, to a lesser extent, Pakistan dominated the Olympic field hockey tournaments, winning 11 out of a possible 13 gold medals. Neither country is visible in other world sports. The two countries initially grew strong in field hockey to beat the imperial Brits. But after their hard-fought independence, bitter hostility grew between the neighbors. The war

of words and deeds continued on the field hockey pitch, where Indian and Pakistani players literally bloodied one another in heated matches. Though twisted, this intense competition could further explain the desire of the people in these two cultures to excel in the sport.

Similarly, Hungarians and Czechs have waged legendary, bloody battles in water polo and ice hockey, respectively, against Russian teams ever since the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956 and of Czechoslovakia in 1968. “To beat them at their own game,” Guttman says. “Don’t underestimate that as a driving force. It’s about the only way that many of the less powerful countries will ever be in the headlines. It’s the only time that their flag will ever be hoisted before the eyes of the world. They can’t hope to compete in the economic realm or in science. They’re not going to send the first manned spaceship to Mars. But they can produce Olympic athletes who will stand there on the victory podium while the whole world is watching.”

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### FURTHER INFORMATION

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