

# 野球

## Baseball in Japan:

How America's National Pastime Flourished in the Orient

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*“Baseball is more than just a game. It has eternal value. Through it, one learns the beautiful and noble spirit of Japan.”*

-- Suishu Tobita, Japan's original "God of Baseball"

The Major League Baseball Hall of Fame is located in Cooperstown, New York. The reasoning behind selecting such an obscure location to be epicenter of the Baseball lies in the game's founder Abner Doubleday. Historians credit the Civil War general as crafting the modern game of baseball. He allegedly invented the game and its first set of recorded rules in Cooperstown in 1839. A beloved international pastime was forged from this quaint, rural setting in upstate New York. The game has become an irrevocable and timeless foundation of classic Americana. The sounds of baseball can be heard ringing through the balmy summer evenings all across rural America.

American baseball history enjoys a rich and heavily memorialized legacy but the spread of the game overseas and its complete scope of influence in the or world today is less studied. Many American sports fans are unfamiliar with when, how, and why the game has spread around the world to places like the Far East. Most have a basic understanding that Japan as a nation is completely infatuated baseball, but most are clueless about its origin and depth. A common belief is that American troops fostered interest in the game during the post-war occupation of Japan. Although it is true that American troops have always imported the game overseas during and after foreign wars, this was not the genesis period for baseball in Japan. By the time World War II erupted, Japan already had a thriving professional league with a national following.

Many American fans are shocked to learn that baseball has existed in Japan almost as long as it has in the United States. Appearing in Japan for the first time only a mere 33 years after its creation, baseball in Japan has rightfully taken its own evolutionary path. This unique path of Japanese baseball has been shaped by an enormous collection of influences both domestic and foreign. Since the creation of baseball in 1839, the American and Japanese versions of the game have evolved independently into what they exist as today.

Other Western sports introduced during the same time period were unable to capture the same interest in the Japanese. Sailors of the British Royal Navy enjoyed playing cricket during their shore leave, but their game did not capture the hearts of the Japanese quite like baseball. Americans can better appreciate the Japanese love for the game than any other nation of people. The American way of baseball is easily considered the benchmark in comparing all international forms of the game. To suggest anything else would certainly be taken as blasphemy against the sacred house of baseball. But understanding and respecting the unique character and world class quality of Japanese baseball should be of interest to every thoughtful and loyal fan of the game.

The presence of baseball in Japan begins with a visiting baseball enthusiast from America. Using his position of education and influence, a mathematics professor at Kaisei Gakko

(which later became Tokyo University) named Horace Wilson introduced the American pastime to his students in 1872.<sup>1</sup> He created a club comprised of interested students and began to teach them the basics of the game. It is generally accepted that another American, Albert Bates, should be credited as organizing and conducting the first official baseball game in Japan in 1873. The earliest documented international game in Japanese history happened three years later in 1876.<sup>2</sup> The match was between students from the Imperial College at Tokyo and a group of American foreigners including Horace Wilson. The Americans soundly defeated the Japanese student team 34-11. This high scoring game suggested an amateur competition where the bats far outweighed the quality of pitching and defensive play.

Japan's first organized team, the Shimbashi Athletic Club Athletics, was created by Hiroshi Hiraoka in 1878.<sup>3</sup> The western-educated Japanese railway engineer developed his passion for the game while studying engineering in Boston, Massachusetts. Spirits were high but the team had difficulty obtaining basic equipment and could even be seen rounding the bases in traditional wooden *geta* sandals.

Although crew was the first sport to sweep secondary and collegiate institutions with widespread participation, baseball soon far surpassed it in popularity. Japanese students took an immediate and keen interest in *besuboru*—baseball. Other team sports introduced to Japan through Western nations were unable to capture the same interest as baseball. Sailors of the British Royal Navy brought cricket to Japan, but it did not catch on nearly as well.

To the high schools and colleges in the Tokyo area that were instrumental in securing baseball as the national game, the sport became accepted as an essential tool in developing purity and discipline within students. This is where the unforgiving and rigorous training regimen that has become characteristic of Japanese baseball was born. Despite the game's widespread popularity, there was a very small population of radicals who denounced the proliferation of baseball in Japan. But even the most prolific staunch cultural conservatives embraced baseball as fit for the Japanese race.

The First Higher School of Tokyo, also known as Ichiko, was the premier prep school training tomorrow's elites for leadership positions throughout Japan.<sup>4</sup> With Ichiko's students living in dormitories, their baseball program resembled a boot camp regimen. Players had to endure conditioning exercises that would seem absurd to American sensibilities. Players were even strictly forbidden to use the word "ouch" on the diamond, and instead adopted the word *kayui*,

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Whiting. *You Gotta Have Wa* (MacMillan Publishing Company, 1989)

<sup>2</sup> Peter C. Bjarkman. *Diamonds Around the Globe : The Encyclopedia of International Baseball* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2005)

<sup>3</sup> Robert K. Fitts *Remembering Japanese Baseball : An Oral History of the Game* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005)

<sup>4</sup> George Gmelch, ed. *Baseball Without Borders; The international pastime* (University of Nebraska Press, 2006)

which means “it itches.”<sup>5</sup> Even making the slightest attempt to dodge an incoming wild pitch resulted in punishment, as it was considered the impulse of a coward. A painful training exercise for catchers involved being repeatedly bruised by fastballs pitched from a mere 20 feet away.

Ichiko’s primary baseball rival was the American coached Meiji Gakuin School. The rivalry was seen, particularly by the Japanese, as an ideological battle first between Japanese and American coaching philosophy, which ultimately translated to a contest of cultural superiority.<sup>6</sup> Ichiko was determined to demonstrate its superior mode of baseball, but suffered bitterly at each defeat by the hands of the Meiji Gakuin.<sup>7</sup> Emotional anguish boiled over in 1891 during the sixth inning of a shutout by Meiji Gakuin. An American professor, William Imbrie, was brutally attacked by distraught Ichiko fans after he unwittingly made a serious cultural faux pas from the bleachers. In a rush because he was late to the game, Imbrie innocently hurdled himself over a fence that was considered sacred to Japanese players. Shockwaves from the *Imuburi Jiken*—Imbrie Incident, further escalated diplomatic tension between Japan and the United States. Imbrie himself was quite forgiving of the incident but the Japanese government feared American diplomats would not be so willing to forget and thus compromised their efforts in mending the disadvantageous treaties that were hastily signed under veiled American military intimidation in 1853.

Despite their early losses to Meiji Gakuin, the Ichiko school eventually became Japan’s most advanced baseball program, which delivered their nation’s first victory over a team comprised entirely of Americans in 1896. Despite the American squad, the Yokohama Country Athletic Club, being a loose band of civilian and military amateur players the entire nation of Japan rejoiced. To defeat a team from the *honke*—main house of baseball was considered a great victory. Even from such an early stage the Japanese were determined to prove the “Japanese way” of playing baseball was ultimately superior to the original American model.

Ichiko’s “Baseball Club Rouser” fight song shows the kind of zeal and sense of honor that was won through the victory. Verse four proclaims the magnitude of the victory over a formidable foe.

*“The valorous sailors from the Detroit, Kentucky, and Yorktown  
Whose furious batting can intimidate a cyclone  
Threw off their helmets, their energies depleted  
Behold how pathetically, they run away defeated.”<sup>8</sup>*

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<sup>5</sup> Gmelch

<sup>6</sup> Baldassaro, Lawrence and Richard A. Johnson, eds. *The American Game : Baseball and Ethnicity*. (Carbondale IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2002)

<sup>7</sup> Sayuri Guthrie-Shimizu. *For Love of the Game: Baseball in early U.S.-Japanese encounters and the rise of a transitional sporting fraternity* (Diplomatic History; November 2004, vol. 28)

<sup>8</sup> Donald Roden. *Baseball an the Quest for National Dignity in Meiji Japan* (The American Historical Review, June, 1980)

The next verse shows that the Japanese had an early understanding of just how prideful America was for their national pastime.

*“Courageously, we marched twenty miles south  
To fight the Americans in Yokohama  
Though they boast of the game as their national sport  
Behold the games they have left with no score.”*

If baseball’s popularity had not yet made a complete sweep of the countryside, these nationally celebrated victories against the Americans in 1896 catapulted baseball to a level of collective obsession in Japan. Every college and university developed and nurtured a team. American university and college teams made many tours of Japan in the first two decades of the twentieth century, which further intensified the baseball craze seizing the nation.<sup>9</sup> By 1925 the city of Tokyo had developed an exclusive Big Six University League that was regarded as the most competitive baseball circuit in Japan.

The genesis phase of Japanese baseball took place during a major cultural overhaul sweeping the nation. The Meiji period brought about many revolutionary changes to Japanese culture. The Meiji restorations exposed Japan to Western influence and helped to catapult Japan into the twentieth century.

The middle of the nineteenth century was a time when Western powers began flexing imperial strength in the Far East. Japan suffered exploitive treaties enacted by Western powers in the 1850’s which essentially allowed merchant trade to operate freely. During this decade, six major seaports were established in Japan by Western powers. The treaties allowed Americans and Europeans to have “complete extraterritorial authority” over the annexed seaports and harbors. Consequently these merchant establishments grew exponentially in traffic volume and population during the following decade. The Japanese archipelago served as a convenient coaling station for American and European military ships in pacific fleets. As worries of security diminished with such a strong naval presence in local waters and with business soaring, the population of the foreign settlements rose steadily in the 1860s to over 15,000. The foreign community soon developed facilities to enhance the quality of life for sailors, diplomats, merchants and families. Recreation was quickly incorporated into colonial life in Japan. Club and organized sports became prolific among the male-dominated foreign community.

Before the introduction of baseball, the basic concept of “sport” was unheard of in Japan. Pre-Meiji Japan engaged in many athletic activities that we would today regard as sport such as swimming, horseback riding and martial arts; but these all were practiced with aims of honing

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<sup>9</sup> Robert Whiting. *You Gotta Have Wa*

military skills or gaining spiritual enrichment.<sup>10</sup> Even the ancient and fierce competition found in Sumo wrestling bears roots from Shinto rites rather than pure sport.

Lack of sporting among Japanese men combined with other behaviors identified as effeminate by Western standards further entrenched stereotypes of Western cultural supremacy. American and European gentlemen shrugged off the Japanese mode of masculinity as being “essentially feeble.” Japanese men engaged in hobbies of kite-flying and floral arrangement. They tended gardens and carried fans and seemed to bear no resemblance to the lore fierce samurai warriors. The judgments made from these casual observations were of course overshadowed by Meiji Japan’s concrete diplomatic, commercial and military progress.

Despite the omnipresent competitive spirit of American sports, the American people have always known the game of baseball to be about “fun” and “leisure.” In Japan these concepts in the realm of athletic contest were only discovered since the introduction of baseball after the Meiji restorations. Since no accurate translation existed for *sport*, the Japanese term *supotsu* was created.<sup>11</sup>

At first the Meiji Ministry of Education dismissed any need for physical education in the national curriculum. Educators stressed urgency in teaching students and the primary and secondary levels the “practical knowledge” possessed by the West.<sup>12</sup> Because the Meiji Restorations were about bootstrapping Japan to the leading field of Western powers, educators felt that physical education for the next generation of Japanese was a waste of precious time and energy. Although American professors admired how astute Japanese students were in the classroom, the professors unanimously agreed that the “narrowing intellectualism” of the student was becoming problematic as Meiji educators further demoted priority in athletic development of students of all ages and both sexes.

In response to the foreign criticism, the Ministry of Education founded the Gymnastics Institute to be headed by American George A. Leyland. Dr. Leyland’s program concentrated on light calisthenics for primary schools who required significantly less equipment and training rather more physically intense team sports like baseball or football. One of Dr. Leyland’s rationales for not pursuing team sport education among older students was his own personal bias of cultural relativism.<sup>13</sup> Some questionable scientific studies of the time led him to believe that the Japanese race as a whole was not physically or mentally capable of advanced team play and strategy in sports like baseball or football.

More viable concerns over teaching team sports are related to a Japan’s cultural vulnerabilities during the Meiji restorations. After centuries of feudal society in Japan, the encouragement of competitive team sports could inadvertently trigger an elitist rite of passage

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<sup>10</sup> Joseph A. Reaves. *Taking in a Game : A History of Baseball in Asia* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2002)

<sup>11</sup> Robert Whiting. *You Gotta Have Wa*

<sup>12</sup> Donald Roden

<sup>13</sup> Donald Roden

reminiscent of the samurai class. The regimen that was ultimately institutionalized for the primary grades was a program firmly structured group calisthenics. Even the untrained eye could see that these strictly executed regimens accompanied by singing to count cadence were militaristic. This was to instill a strong sense of unity and obedience in the younger children of primary school. This program was not continued as students reached the secondary stages and beyond.

Busy burying their faces in books and with no exercise program to replace the primary school calisthenics, student athletic ability began to atrophy. Educators agreed that the lack of physical fitness was taking its toll on Japanese youth and something needed to be done. They feared that group calisthenics prescribed for older students would stunt the maturing of individual leadership potential. The immediate compromise incorporated a minimal regimen of group calisthenics, accompanied by common “outdoor games” like tug-o-war and capture-the-flag. But soon it became clear these games were failing to galvanize students to play with any substantial competitive spirit. The formation of extracurricular sporting clubs and teams was the only answer to the athleticism problem. Once the enthusiasm for baseball among students was impossible to overlook, educators recognized that the physical and mental strengths considered virtuous in baseball are also virtuous in Japanese life.<sup>14</sup> This harmonious chord strikes so deep that by the final decade of the nineteenth century the Ministry of Education officially recognized baseball as “good for national character.”

The consistencies of virtue between martial arts and baseball are perhaps the most obvious cases for explaining Japanese fanaticism for the game. Japanese sensibilities were instantly keyed through the necessary concentration and mental and challenges found in baseball. The duel between pitcher and batter is a battle of composure executed in a split-second confrontation. Timing and patience would reign as the means to finding success at the plate. On the mound precision and endurance allows pitchers to retain control of the ball. A modernized Bushido was born on the baseball diamond. A new era of samurai ethics would help identify the modern nation of Japan in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The Japanese see the benefits of mastering baseball as an invaluable lesson to budding adolescence. Rather than the simple mission of “molding boys into gentlemen” as commonly seen in an English prep school setting, Japanese educational institutions aim to refine the spirits and build character of their students.<sup>15</sup> In stark cultural contrast, Great Britain, swelling with a pretentious, elitist worldview in the Victorian Era found sport to support their self-proclaimed cultural and racial superiority. This thinking also pervaded the United States and their budding campaigns of foreign adventurism. Any nation that did not engage in sport was seen as definitively weak and unsophisticated.

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<sup>14</sup> Donald Roden

<sup>15</sup> Gmelch.

Ultimately conquering social barriers, the baseball diamond provides an even plane of interaction between races and cultures.<sup>16</sup> Baseball history in the United States contains what is known as an “East Coast bias.” This bias also carries over into documented cases of racial incidents in baseball. Because the birth and expansion of the United States occurred on the Atlantic seaboard moving in a westward direction, and the bulk of the American population and lineage exists on the eastern half, baseball thus grew from East Coast roots. This explains why by far the most studied incidents of racial tension in baseball are between white and black and not Asian or Hispanic. It was not until a little over a decade after the closing of the American Frontier in 1890 did Americans first encounter Asian baseball players.

This late arrival did not mean American baseball history was void of Asian racism. In 1904, Waseda Imperial University embarked on a baseball tour of California. Unfortunately the Japanese arrived during a time Americans were turning increasingly hostile towards the Chinese. Immigrants from China had been pouring in and recruited en masse to build the extensive railroad network across the western United States. Although the Japanese considered themselves a distinct and superior race of people among Asians, American eyes rarely distinguished a difference between nationalities and resentment for the Chinese easily shifted to the Japanese. Immigrants from Japan were also beginning to settle in Hawaii and the West Coast at this time. Flexing their new status as a legitimate world power, Japan began to rival American interests in the Pacific which did not improve diplomatic or cultural relations. Members of the American press were unimpressed with the stature and bearing of Japanese players and even harshly criticized them for not having spiked cleats.<sup>17</sup> Newspaper articles covering matches in Seattle, San Francisco, and Los Angeles are laced with racially charged terminology. The *San Francisco Chronicle* noted that when the Waseda team faced off with Stanford University over two-thirds of the 2,000 in attendance were of Japanese descent and was ruefully described as being more like “a holiday in Nagasaki.” *The Seattle Times* criticized the enthusiastic Japanese crowd who came to witness a match against the University of Washington, describing them as brash and wholly undesirable stating that “there was an oriental tinge to the grandstand, given by a few hundred Seattle Japs, who smoked cigarettes, cracked peanuts, and rooted for the Waseda bunch.”

Some American baseball figureheads like Albert C. Spalding, pioneer professional player most famously known for his equipment manufacturing empire, praised the arrival of the Japanese team, citing the affair as a “milestone in the internationalization of America’s national pastime.” In Spalding’s 1911 book titled *America’s National Game*, he uses the Waseda Imperial University tour to support his theory on the cross-cultural appeal of baseball. He argues that baseball is an intrinsically combative game that is most commonly embraced by cultures who, like Americans, are aggressive, competitive and progressive. Spalding reminds his readers that this

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<sup>16</sup> Gmelch.

<sup>17</sup> Sayuri Guthrie-Shimizu.



fact about the game is “quite in keeping with what we know of the little brown men of the Orient.”<sup>18</sup> Facing an edgy American public and cynical sports writing community, the tour ultimately furthered negative stereotypes in the United States about Japanese baseball.

Baseball in America has an intrinsic link to adolescence and the manifestation of this bond is the Little League Baseball organization. Although Little League was developed as an American institution in 1939, it quickly spread into an international phenomenon that collectively speaks for baseball education among the world’s youth. Little League operates on a standardized set of rules and invites all teams to participate in an annual tournament culminating in a World Series that takes place in Williamsport, Pennsylvania. Little League players all share the dream in one day playing Major League Baseball. The ladder to Big League glory starts with Little League, which operates a slightly scaled-down diamond accommodating children through the age of twelve. The high school system takes over when children outgrow the miniaturized proportions of Little League play. From this full-size diamond, players graduate from various levels of competition during high school and college before being considered in professional drafts. American children who dream of Big-League careers believe their opportunity will simply come with age. The baseball dreams of Japanese children take a more convoluted path. Until recent years, their goals of professional baseball peaked with the Japanese Leagues. Now with international free-agency rapidly expanding, Japanese children can place their sights on Major League Baseball, but not without winning personal glory in Japan or at least using the Japanese Leagues as a stepping stone across the Pacific.

What would come as a shock to many Americans, the 1999 Little League World Series Champions from Osaka, Japan received almost no welcome reception when they returned to Japan. Upon returning home the runner-up team from Alabama was greeted by 5,000 cheering fans. When the Japanese team exited customs at Narita Airport, one old woman clapped after a TV crew pointed them out.<sup>19</sup> Even the mayor of Osaka did not take the time to greet or congratulate the team after their homecoming. The lukewarm reception could suggest that the Japanese have greater goals in mind for international competition.

Explanations for the continued expansion and popularity of the Japanese Professional League can be found in foreign business interests as well as cultural underpinnings. American Major League teams shopping for the latest talent from the Far East are regarding the Japanese Professional Leagues as respectable proving grounds for young prospects.<sup>20</sup> This has not been the case for most of the twentieth century but in recent decades an increasing number of Japanese players are making lateral transfers between Japanese and American major leagues,

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<sup>18</sup> Baldassaro, Lawrence and Richard A. Johnson

<sup>19</sup> *Japan’s Champs return to non-reception* (CNN-Sports Illustrated, August 31, 1999)

<sup>20</sup> Robert Whiting. *The Meaning of Ichiro : The New Wave from Japan and the Transformation of Our National Pastime*. New York, NY: (Time Warner Book Group, 2004)

bypassing the American farm-club system altogether. This reality suggests parity in Japan's quality of play at the professional level. For talent goldmines in the less developed regions of Caribbean and Latin America, American scouts filter most players through the extensive farm-club system in small town and rural America before reaching the Majors. Sendai star player Yoosuke Kotoh, of Japan's most successful 2002 Little League World Series team, relayed to the American press that most of his teammates wished to play in Japan first and then perhaps move on to Major League Baseball afterwards.<sup>21</sup> It would be regarded as a disservice to one's sense of national identity and pride to nurture a baseball career outside of Japan.

During the first half of the twentieth century before the outbreak of the Second World War, Japan hosted a number of American baseball tours. Although the Japanese managed only a single victory in fifty-seven contests, all of the tours were extremely popular and beneficial to the game's development in Japan.<sup>22</sup>

Baseball historians argue that the last tour in 1934 had the greatest impact on the game in Japan. The American team comprising of Major League stars faced off with Japan's best university squads in 15 matches taking place in numerous cities across the nation. The 1934 tour exposed Japan to legendary Babe Ruth, for the first time. Ruth's towering stature, affable nature and dramatic swing of the bat struck deep with Japanese fans and players alike.<sup>23</sup> Ruth to this day is revered to almost god-like proportions in Japan. His standing with the Japanese was so great that the United States government seriously considered recruiting Babe Ruth to serve as a head diplomat during the final days of World War II. The plan called for Ruth to deliver a broadcasted message, pleading with Japanese people, encouraging them to pressure their leaders into surrendering.

The 1934 tour almost departed without Ruth as he was initially not too keen on participating. It is reported that Sotaro Suzuki, a former Columbia University student and journalist for the *Yomiuri Shimbun*, flew to New York and personally convinced the Sultan of Swat to join the tour. Suzuki's instrumental role in bringing the Bambino to Japan was duly noted as he was later inducted into the Japanese Baseball Hall of Fame for his great deed. The American team, coached by celebrated Philadelphia Athletics manager Connie Mack, had an impressive roster of future legends stars including Lou Gehrig, Jimmie Foxx, Charlie Gehringer and Earl Averill.

The American players and coaches were especially impressed with the level of order and courtesy the masses of zealous Japanese fans maintained throughout the matches. Connie Mack noted that the fans were very attentive and orderly. An estimated 65,000 fans packed the Meiji

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<sup>21</sup> Steve Wieberg. *Japanese Kids Aspire to Big-League Careers*  
(USA Today; August 23, 2002)

<sup>22</sup> James E. Elfers. *The Tour to End All Tours : The Story of Major League Baseball's 1913-1914 World Tour*. (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2003)

<sup>23</sup> *65,000 Watch Ruth Lead Mates To Triumph in Tokyo by 17 to 1*  
(The New York Times, November 5, 1934)

Shrine Stadium hoping to catch a glimpse of the opposing squad from the baseball's *honke*. Opening game, as reported in the New York Times stateside, was attended by many important Japanese and American diplomats and including Ambassador Joseph C. Grew and his wife. The opening ceremonies of the debut match resembled the fanfare preceding the Major League World Series. The first pitch was thrown by Japanese Baseball League's president Marquis Nobutsune Okuma and received by manager Connie Mack acting as catcher. The American press commented that Japanese outfield fences seemed deeper than in American ballparks and that if it were not for Japanese outfielders hugging the distant warning track the American squad would have tallied more homeruns.<sup>24</sup> The deep fences proved inconsequential as the visitors trounced the Japanese All-Stars seventeen to one. Despite the dramatic margin of the final score, the Americans only doubled the number of Japanese hits and only committed one less error in the field. Connie Mack's post game report explained their bizarre twelve-hit, seventeen run victory over the Japanese. Numerous infield blunders by the Japanese enabled Americans to score double the runs they actually earned.

Pitching prodigy Eiji Sawamura almost became Japan's first game-winning pitcher against the United States. Lou Gehrig managed to shatter the seventeen year-old's shutout with a seventh inning homerun, but Sawamura's brilliant performance did not go unnoticed by Major League scouts. During the next several years he was approached by numerous Major League teams, but he always chose to remain in Japan and serve his beloved team, the Yomiuri Giants.<sup>25</sup> His untimely death in military service propelled him to Japanese baseball immortality.

Even though the Japanese teams were defeated in every match and often by embarrassing proportions, the tour was hugely popular drawing hundreds of thousands of eager fans. Behind the fanfare of the goodwill visit, producers of the tour including *Yomiuri Shimbun* owner, Matsutaru Shoriki, were utterly humiliated by the lopsided American victories. Rather than repealing attention and focus on baseball, Shoriki moved to immediately found Japan's first professional team and league to better prepare Japan for future international contests.

Although the style of play in Japan continued to grow with an inherent and unique "Japanese" flavor, samurai code did not forbid players and coaches from learning new technique from outside sources.<sup>26</sup> Despite having such reverence for their own Samurai Code, the Japanese are eager to learn from foreign experts in technique and mindset. Over the years Major League Baseball produced larger than life legends immortalized by their memorable quips of ironic puns and pseudo wisdom. Beloved baseball personalities like Yogi Berra, have a profound effect on Japan's game. When interviewed by members of the Japanese press, Hall-of-Famer

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<sup>24</sup> *65,000 Watch Ruth Lead Mates To Triumph in Tokyo by 17 to 1*

<sup>25</sup> James E. Elfers.

<sup>26</sup> Boyé. Lafayette de Mente. *The Japanese Samurai Code: Classic strategies for success* (North Clarendon,

VT; Tuttle Publishing, 2004)

Stan Musial replied to questions of hitting technique with typical American baseball witticism. Musial's advice of, "You gotta hit the ball between the seams" was regarded as Zen teaching.<sup>27</sup>

American players rarely exhibit indifferent attitudes or record bland accounts when recalling their experiences in the Japan Major Leagues. The differences between the American and Japanese versions of the game become most apparent in these colorful histories of international player exchange. The most interesting and often controversial accounts of culture shock come from American players who crossed over to Japan. This is probably due to the nature and terms of the exchange itself. Japan used to have an image of harboring aging American Major Leaguers, desperate to sign contracts during the twilight of their careers. In the fewer instances where Japanese talent has ventured to the *honke*, the personal story was usually evoked with humble awestruck encounters with American baseball glory.

Education never ceases for the Japanese athlete, even in adulthood. In the United States, the understanding among coaching circles is that players must be dedicated to improving one's self until reaching the individual threshold of talent and ability. From that point the player's skill would level out, and further practice would ensure maintaining that apex of performance. The Japanese forever strive for perfection and are never permanently satisfied with their performance.<sup>28</sup> This principle in Samurai code is very serious, and any deviation from this practice, even when made by a *gaijin*, is considered lazy and even despicable. This fundamental mindset is perhaps the most common culture clash between the American and Japanese versions of the game.

A significant milestone in Japanese baseball came when American Major League Star Bob Horner signed with the Yakult Swallows in 1987. Although Horner was an aging veteran Major League player in 1987, he could still play at star caliber at a professional level, which thrilled the nation of Japan to unprecedented heights. Yakult Swallows owner, Hisami Matsuzono, outbid interested American teams by successfully negotiating a single season contract for a record 2 million dollars. Besides testing a new caliber of talent in the Japanese leagues, the purchase illustrated a burgeoning era of Japanese economic prowess.<sup>29</sup> 1980's Japan had been swarming with Western name-brand novelty.<sup>30</sup> An American baseball star was the ultimate status symbol for a team's owner and loyal fan-base. But just like American fans, the Japanese held a special reverence for the homerun hitter. Hisami Matsuzono was an avid businessman who understood the allure of a power-hitter at the plate.

Matsuzono's priorities as team owner, baseball fan, and business CEO created an awkward conflict of interest. Besides owning the team, Matsuzono piloted the Yakult soft-drink

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<sup>27</sup> Robert Whiting. *You Gotta Have Wa*

<sup>28</sup> Boyé. Lafayette de Mente

<sup>29</sup> Emily Thorton and Joshua Kaufman. *Japan's Surge in Exported Arms*  
(Business Week; June 23, 1997)

<sup>30</sup> Mary Ellen Snodgrass. *Japan & the United States: Economic Competitors* (Brookfield, CT: Millbrook Press, 1993)

empire, the Swallows principal sponsor. It was discovered that whenever cross-town rival and hugely popular Yomiuri Giants lost to the Swallows, Yakult sales would plummet. This negative correlation combined with his personal fancy for the Giants, created a bizarre set of objectives. After the Swallows won their first and only championship series in 1978, Matsuzono personally congratulated his team but suggested to the players that a repeat victory over the widely successful Giants next season would not be necessary. Although delicately phrased, the message was clear. One player lamented that, “He sort of implied that it was the Giants’ turn to win.” Because of his questionable business practices, many dismissed Bob Horner’s contract as merely a publicity stunt by the soft drink tycoon.<sup>31</sup>

But the arrival of Bob Horner rekindled an old but fiery debate among Japanese sports writers. Just as American and Japanese coaching philosophy squared off in the Ichiko-Meiji Gakuin rivalry of the late nineteenth century, Bob Horner’s Japanese debut was highlighted by the continued ideological battle between East and West. American players have tried and failed in Japan before. A consistent theme in players’ inability to perform in Japan was the ultra-strict group training regimen. American managers allowed for more individuality and expression of “personality” in players and their practicing habits. One trait of Horner’s immediately targeted by Japanese critics was his lengthy 7-month hiatus from practicing during the off-season. This combined with his lumbering build made many sports writers doubtful of his health and professionalism. Judging by his appearance, some even suggested that he was a heavy drinker.

Silencing critics on both sides of the Pacific, Horner proved to be an immediate asset to the Swallows. In his very first game in Japan, Horner belted a homerun during the fifth inning in front of a jubilant home crowd of 48,000. Beleaguered Hanshin Tigers left fielder, Noriyoshi Sano, expressed his desire to put “springs on my spikes, and leap up and catch the ball before it goes out.” Horner’s immediate success in Japan caused a nationwide infatuation. Yakult stock soared and food vendors at stadiums suffered, because no one wanted to miss the super-*gaijin* at work. Japanese stars of the day lauded his impeccable form and patience at the plate. After an explosive first week of batting .533 with 6 homeruns, the entire nation of Japan was entranced by the American slugger. The Swallows manager described Horner with the Japanese word *sugoi*, which means both “terrible” and “wonderful.” Nicknames for Horner like the *Akaoni*—Red Devil, were harvested from ancient Buddhist mythology.<sup>32</sup> Advertising contracts began to pour in. His bulky build and bright blond hair happened to perfectly fit the Japanese stereotype of Americans at the time. He was handsomely paid for selling beer dressed as a pitchfork wielding, Farmer John of the American Bread Basket. Horner was of course enamored with this exotic nation of adoring fans. He would relay his enthusiasm to fellow *gaijin* players over dinner. They tried to dilute his gusto by warning him that once his performance faltered, their affection would vanish.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Robert Whiting. *You Gotta Have Wa*

<sup>32</sup> Robert Whiting. *You Gotta Have Wa*

<sup>33</sup> Robert Whiting. *You Gotta Have Wa*

Soon Horner began to feel smothered by the unrelenting media frenzy working 24 hours a day to monitor his every move. Privacy is a rare commodity for superstars in such a small and densely populated nation. The overbearing and hyperactive Japanese media machine was even diligently interviewing Horner's barber hoping to obtain the precise measurement of hair cut off and speculating on the possible effect it may have on his batting.

After the initial tremor settled, Horner began to face many of the common frustrations experienced by *gaijin* players. Generally the competitive spirit in American baseball encourages a clash of skill and aggressiveness rather than meticulous shrewdness prevalent in the Japanese version of the game. To the Japanese mind, losing is such a severe outcome that unwavering prudence is seen as the surest path to victory. Japanese pitchers also intensely fear the personal disgrace of allowing a homerun, especially to a *gaijin*. Horner and other American players came to despise the regularity of purely defensive pitching. Horner felt that the Japanese were the most "face-conscious" people he had ever known. In American baseball, pitchers only resort to defensive pitching in the most vulnerable of circumstances. After one blowout loss where Horner was walked in the eighth inning despite the Swallows being down by 12 runs with nobody on base, he vented his outrage at Japanese pitching strategy, "You throw me your best stuff!" he shouted, "I'll see if I can hit it. That's big-league baseball!"

Just like most other *gaijin* players, Horner became increasingly annoyed with umpires applying a widened strike zone to compensate for his larger build and "extended reach."

<sup>34</sup>Because the Japanese generally have smaller builds than imported players, umpires tend to call strikes and balls based on physical stature and perceived ability rather than the dimensions of the plate.

When it came time to consider a new contract, Matsuzono's Swallows decision was simple. Since Horner's arrival the Swallows had not only maintained a winning record, but they had regularly packed the stadium with intrigued fans. With both strategic and financial interests in mind, Matsuzono offered Horner a 3-year, 10 million dollar contract. This kind of security and paycheck for an aging star was a formidable temptation but Horner's decision was not so simple. Horner's agent back home researched his prospects for the following year in the Major Leagues and found the St. Louis Cardinals would offer a little less than 1 million for a single year contract. Although when speaking with the press Horner often cited the many practical advantages of playing in the United States, like providing his children with an American education, it is likely that his patience for the Japanese style of game finally ran out. Horner's story in the Japanese leagues is great example of the clash between East and West. His career in Japan also maps a common lifespan of *gaijin* players.

American Major League player, Warren Cromartie, lead a successful yet turbulent 7-season career in Japan. Besides consistently recording favorable statistics during his time with

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<sup>34</sup> Robert Whiting. *You Gotta Have Wa*

the Yomiuri Giants, Cromartie became one of the most loved and hated *gaijin* ever to play in Japan. Playing for the most popular team in Japan, Cromartie developed a massive and loyal fan-base. Besides being an exotic foreign talent, he impacted the game with his beaming passion sometimes volatile personality. The Japanese are known for their reserve and self control. Unlike in the United States, brawls on the playing field are rarities in Japan. After the few instances when he angrily charged the mound pummeling opposing pitchers with his fists, enraged fans from rival clubs would hold banners in the outfield with obscenities aimed at Cromartie written in English.<sup>35</sup>

The *gaijin* players who found the most success in Japan proved to be masters of adaptation. It was only natural that a social community of American players developed in Japan. This network allowed overwhelmed players to feel some camaraderie and cultural familiarity in a strange and unforgiving land. Many *gaijin* players later credited their American friendships developed in Japan as being instrumental in their survival. Japanese league veterans like former St. Louis Cardinal, Leon Lee, who put over a decade of their careers into Japan, served as guidance counselors for the steady stream of uneasy rookies. Lee was a classic example of the *gaijin* player who willingly assimilated into Japanese routines and consequently thrived.

Japan also possesses a long history of racism and institutionalized xenophobia. The Japanese Professional Leagues have a regulation limiting teams to two *gaijin* per final roster. Some would argue this stiff regulation is an equalizing force that protects smaller market teams from larger ones that can afford to arm their roster with expensive foreign starters. But the issue moves beyond concerns of money and fair play, as the century old debate within Japan regarding *gaijin* still exists today. Culturally conservative fans and sports writers are most interested in preserving the inherent Japanese qualities of the game, while the more progressive Japanese would be pleased to continue having top talent arriving from overseas, benefiting their quality of play. Today Japan remains one of the most difficult countries for foreigners to obtain citizenship. Even national hero and All-Time Japanese Homerun Champion, Sadaharu Oh, was not granted full Japanese citizenship because of his Chinese heritage and was burdened with immigration hurdles every time he re-entered Japan when returning from international tours with his team.<sup>36</sup>

Sadaharu Oh is regarded as the Babe Ruth of Japanese Baseball. He is the all-time career homerun leader in Japan with 868. This number even surpasses American homerun king Henry Aaron, although Americans are first point out the disparity in Japanese stadium sizes and overall quality of opposing pitching. Besides being overlooked as a candidate for complete Japanese citizenship, Oh is not entirely embraced by conservative purists because of his mixed blood. Although he only speaks Japanese and was born of a Japanese mother, officials refuse to

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<sup>35</sup> Warren Cromartie and Robert Whiting. *Slugging It Out in Japan* (New York, NY; Kodansha International Ltd., 1991)

<sup>36</sup> Gall, John and Gary Engel. *Sayonara home run! : The Art of the Japanese Baseball Card* (San Francisco, CA: Chronicle Books, 2006)

ignore that his father is Chinese. Just like Babe Ruth, Oh began his baseball career as a formidable pitcher. In high school he was a dominating presence on the mound and caught the attention of the Yomiuri Giants. Although he signed with the Giants as a pitcher in 1959, his talents at first base and power with the bat eclipsed his performance on the mound. He remained with the Giants until he retired at the age of 40 in 1980. Oh was inducted into the Japanese Hall of Fame in 1994 and is currently the manager of the Fukuoka Hawks.

An even more sensitive component to the cultural hierarchy within a Japanese baseball team is the manager. East versus West coaching philosophy continues to be a controversial matter in Japan to this day. In the spirit of the Ichiko and Meiji Gakuin coaching rivalry, Japanese sports writers continue to both commend and criticize American coaches crossing the Pacific to manage Japanese professional teams.

Japan's first American general manager, Marty Kuehnert, had the skills and experience to be a successful leader in the Japanese professional leagues. Fluent in Japanese language, Kuehnert was a former Stanford University player who settled in Japan after completing graduate school at Tokyo's Keio University. Shortly after the merger of the Orix Blue Wave and Kintetsu Buffaloes in 2004, Kuehnert was hired as the first general manager of the newly formed Tohoku Rakuten Golden Eagles, Japan's first expansion team in nearly fifty years. Golden Eagles owner, Hiroshi Mikitani, approved of Kuehnert's liberal approach to building the new franchise.<sup>37</sup> He gambled that the American influence could create a unique and respected reputation for the Golden Eagles. Expectations were high as Rakuten stock soared.

Immediately following an opening day victory, the Golden Eagles suffered a huge blowout loss of 26-0. The Golden Eagles never recovered in spirit and finished the season with a miserable 5-22 record. After shaving his own head in traditional custom to cleanse disgrace, Mikitani demoted Kuehnert to "advisor" status. The ordeal did not go without protest from critics.

Kuehnert had numerous disadvantages plaguing his stint as general manager. Industry experts agree that it is not reasonable to expect a new franchise to become a powerhouse force in its rookie year. The aftermath of the Orix/Kintetsu merger also left a talent vacuum that was not reinforced by an ample salary budget. For Kuehnert's case, the Golden Eagles continued to struggle even well after his demotion. It takes resilient character to thrive as an American manager as Japanese baseball executives are very hasty to point to *gaijin* and their liberal ideals during times of financial and strategic crisis.<sup>38</sup>

Not all Americans in leadership roles fail in Japan. The infamous but respected veteran Major League manager, Bobby Valentine, found great success in Japan. Although Valentine

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<sup>37</sup> Robert Whiting. *Lost in Translation; A Japanese expansion team turned to an American G.M. to bring new blood to the game. He didn't last long.* (Sports Illustrated; June 6, 2005)

<sup>38</sup> Robert Whiting. *Lost in Translation; A Japanese expansion team turned to an American G.M. to bring new blood to the game. He didn't last long.*



guided the Texas Rangers and New York Mets to almost two full decades of winning seasons, he is perhaps most remembered for his abrasiveness towards umpires and explosive temper. Despite his talent for managing baseball clubs, Valentine found himself out of work after the 1992 season. With Major League teams hesitant to hire the impulsive manager, the Chiba Lotte Marines offered Valentine a 2-year contract. After a surprisingly successful first season in Japan, bootstrapping the historically weak Marines to a second place record, Valentine did not return due to a personal conflict with the team's general manager, [Tatsuro Hirooka](#). Valentine returned to Marines in 2003 where he remains today. He has since established himself among Japanese fans, players, and executives alike. Valentine became the first gaijin manager to lead a championship team in Japan with a win over the heavily favored Hanshin Tigers in 2005.

An exclusive product line of souvenirs along with signature ballpark food and namesake holiday have embellished Valentines successes in Japan. His overwhelming popularity and managerial freedom have convinced Valentine to remain in Japan despite recent offers from Major League teams. When asked by the *New York Times* in 2007 whether he missed Major League Baseball he responded, "I Don't Miss M.L.B. – capital letters. And I don't say that in a degrading way – I just don't miss it. But I'm not more fulfilled or less fulfilled. I try to do something that when I'm through doing it, it's a little better than when I started. And I don't think I've been anywhere in baseball yet that was worse after I left." Although Bobby's independent and roguish character often dissuaded prospective Major League clubs, it appealed to progressive Japanese executives. They recognized that his potential for success in the Japanese Leagues extended beyond statistical accomplishments gained in the United States. His potent personality and intangible *honke* swagger rapidly propelled him to iconic status in Japan.<sup>39</sup> He has since been awarded the Matsutaro Shoriki Award which is presented annually to a player or manager who makes a significant contribution to Japanese baseball and the Tokyo American Club's Sports Lifetime Achievement Award.

Already a respected staple of American baseball lore, Valentine's unabashed public voice in favor of Japanese baseball easily catches the attention of baseball writers and fans overseas. Perhaps charmed by his own experiences with Japanese baseball Valentine also publicly supports efforts to globalize baseball, wanting "baseball to be a real, true international sport." Valentine has challenged American and Japanese professional baseball in two ways. He is disappointed in Japanese ownership for allowing Japan's top talent be lured away by multi-million dollar Major League contracts. Valentine believes that these deals are critically undermining the perceived quality of play in the Japanese Professional Leagues and destroying any progress made in building a first class international reputation.<sup>40</sup> In contrast some Japanese fans argue that their top players finding comparable stardom in the American Major Leagues is clear evidence

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<sup>39</sup> Kepner, Tyler. Interview: Bobby Valentine, the American Tsunami (The New York Times, March 4, 2007)

<sup>40</sup> Tyler Kepner.

that their small nation is emerging as a world baseball power. But Valentine's most dramatic statement came as an open challenge to his home country. After leading his Chiba Lotte Marines to a 2005 Championship victory, he announced his desire to see an annually commenced seven-game series played between the victors of the Japanese and American playoff tournaments in what would be the first truly international world series.

Although Valentine's proposition was considered bold and competitive in spirit, it is unlikely his calls for a Trans-Pacific showdown will be answered in the near future. In 1960 the *New York Times* reported that talks were being held to consider the possibility of a regular playoff between Major League Baseball and Japan. Japanese Baseball commissioner, Noboru Inouye, and assistant to the Major League commissioner, Cappy Harada, along with other representatives met in Tokyo to discuss the possibility of an annual international competition. Also in attendance was Hall of Fame legend and Japanese baseball promoter, Frank "Lefty" O'Doul, who recommended that 1964 should be the breakout year for Japan as it would coincide with their hosting of the summer Olympics.<sup>41</sup> In the end both parties agreed that at the current quality of professional play in Japan had become equal to Triple-A league play in America. Although Triple-A is the highest quality of play in the Major League farm club system, it was for this reason that the international series was denied birth.

Valentine and other progressive minds in the international baseball scene would argue quality of play is no longer a substantial setback in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. They argue that the corporate atmosphere of contemporary Major League Baseball will never risk financial gains in the name of competitive sportsmanship. Valentine points out that the Americans are not the only ones to blame. He feels that every time a Japanese star gets lured across the Pacific by hefty contracts, the reputation of Japanese Leagues loses merit. "Teams there (Japan) are owned by large corporations, and the corporation gets the money and does whatever with it. If they don't work out a better system, then everyone is going to lose."

Texas Rangers infielder Alfonso Soriano spent significant time in the Japanese professional system before launching his Major League career. Soriano's native Dominican Republic has been discovered in recent years as a major baseball talent pool. In addition to the Major Leagues, the more wealthy Japanese teams have developed complex scouting institutions throughout Latin America. These generously funded scouting networks enlist young prospective players into training camps and seminars to shape them into professional athletes. Soriano was a product of these training camp empires. He was discovered by the Hiroshima Carp in 1997. The seventeen year old baseball prodigy found Japan to be a huge shock. Being from a relaxed Caribbean nation, he found the military-like regimen of practicing in Japan to be more "like a job" than a game.<sup>42</sup> Although he did not like the harsh, joyless atmosphere of the practices, he

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<sup>41</sup> *U.S. and Japanese to Discuss a Trans-Pacific World Series* (The New York Times, November 5, 1960)

<sup>42</sup> Robert Whiting. *The Meaning of Ichiro*

admitted the intensity had greatly improved his quality of play, especially his hitting. Soriano only played nine games at the top level before getting picked up by the New York Yankees in 1998 but his experience with Japan had great impact on the future protocol of international contracts.

Ultimately it was the \$45,000 per year league minimum Soriano was being paid that became the intolerable variable. It was this most of all that caused him to seek out the American Major Leagues. With the help of an opportunistic Japanese agent named Don Nomura, Soriano eventually made the jump back across the Pacific, but not without a fight from the Hiroshima Carp.

Nomura had been watching the exploitive business practices of Japanese teams in the Caribbean and was waiting for the right time to strike. With Soriano's blessing, Nomura approached the Japanese League Commissioner challenging the legality of the Soriano's Hiroshima contract. The heart of Soriano's case was that his contract was signed illegally under Japanese age of consent laws. The Carp's counterattack argued that in Soriano's home country of the Dominican Republic, the contract was legal although this was weak position because the contract was actually signed after Soriano had begun official residency in Japan. After private meetings between Hiroshima Carp representatives and the League commissioner, the league eventually sided with the Carp. After failing to negate his pending obligations with the Carp, Numura convinced Soriano to "voluntarily retire" in order to jump ship and relocate to the United States. This loophole was technically legal under the established agreement signed between Japan and the United States in 1967, but during the subsequent decades the Japanese unofficially and unilaterally chose not to comply.

When Soriano began exploring his options in America, the outraged Hiroshima Carp sent out letters to Major League teams expressing their claim to Soriano and requested that they do not consider hiring him. The Carp's objection to Soriano's availability is what caused Major League teams to explore the loophole in question and discover the unilateral conduct. In the decades since the 1967 baseball trade agreement was signed the Japanese leagues had grown enormously in quality of play and international clout.<sup>43</sup> The Japanese quickly found this outdated measure that allowed Japanese league retirees to emigrate abroad to be a sore inconvenience. The most devastating example was when Japanese superstar pitcher Hideo Nomo abandoned the Kintetsu Buffaloes for the lucrative Los Angeles Dodgers in 1995.

Major League Baseball was insulted that Japan would take this operative stance without consulting them first. As a result, the Soriano incident prompted a written memo sent by acting Major League Baseball commissioner, Bud Selig, to all Major League teams expressing that the original provisions under the 1967 agreement should be upheld. The memo reiterated that any player who voluntarily retired from the Japanese Leagues could in fact sign a contract with an American team.

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<sup>43</sup> Robert Whiting. *The Meaning of Ichiro*

The stories of Japanese superstars venturing across the Pacific to play in the Major Leagues are usually inspiring and hopeful for the Japanese people. The players have generally benefited greatly after putting time in the Major Leagues. Whether or not their careers blossomed in the United States, the players generally received much respect from their countrymen for their experience with American baseball.

As a pioneer of sorts, Nankai Hawks pitcher, Masanori Murakami, signed with the San Francisco Giants minor league organization in 1964. Although Murakami had dreams of excelling in Major League Baseball, from the Hawks perspective, the move to the United States was seen as a temporary hiatus to study the American way of baseball. Murakami was immediately dazzled by the city of San Francisco. He later recalled the view from the airplane window on landing approach as a picture of “fantasyland.” After enjoying some free time exploring the city and tourist sights, Murakami reported to Arizona to begin spring training. Through the spring he demonstrated promising ability on the mound. His Major League debut came late in the season when the Major League starting rosters were increased for postseason play. In early September of his first year in the United States, Murakami flew to New York City to join the Giants on their road series against the Mets at Shea Stadium. Just before the game began, the general manager of the Giants approached Murakami with a new contract. Murakami was highly suspicious of this proposition as signing two contracts in the same year was unheard of in his native Japan.<sup>44</sup> Team officials tried to explain the purpose of the contract to no avail and he was not confident enough in his English to read and understand the contents of the contract himself. The Giants scrambled to get an interpreter and found a Japanese fan in the crowd moments before the game’s first pitch. Murakami gladly signed after the fan explained to him that in the United States a new contract must be signed when players from the minor league system jump to a Major League roster.

Murakami decided to remain with the Giants organization for another year but returned to Japan to discuss contract terms with the Hawks, who still claimed ultimate rights over Murakami’s services. Midway through the season he returned to play with the Giants in the United States. He had a very successful remainder of the season and his prospects for a long-term career in the Major Leagues looked promising. A compromise made with the Hawks before his second Major League season compelled a reluctant Murakami to once again return to Japan as a Hawk in 1966. Murakami later admitted that he regrets not committing to the Giants after 1965 and seizing his dreams of Major League glory.<sup>45</sup>

The most famous and perhaps the greatest success to date of a Japanese player in the Major Leagues is the career of Ichiro Suzuki. Something that was unique about his initial arrival was that he was the first starting “position” player to be recruited from Japan. All other previous imports were either pitchers or the occasional pinch-hitter. Suzuki was a nine year veteran of the Japanese Orix Blue Wave before being picked up by the Seattle Mariners in 2001. He was a

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<sup>44</sup> Fitts, Robert K.

<sup>45</sup> Fitts, Robert K.

known as a hugely talented defensive and offensive player in Japan, but a number of American critics doubted he could stand up to American pitching at the plate. Even Japanese pitcher Kazuhiro Sasaki of the Yokohama Bay Stars believed Ichiro's exemplary technique would drown out by powerful American pitchers.<sup>46</sup> All skepticism over Suzuki's abilities was washed away as he proved to be an immediate success offensively. He was a dependable fielder with a solid throwing arm who was feared by base-runners. Today his list of accomplishments in the Major Leagues continues. In 2004 he broke the single-season record for hits with 262, and has won a Gold Glove award for every season since his arrival.

His stardom in the Major Leagues has definitely had its impact at home in Japan. Suzuki has transcended his Blue Wave identity and is now a national hero. The Japanese media fervently reports on his daily performance in America and broadcasts games live in the small hours of the morning.<sup>47</sup> Ichiro's migration to the Major Leagues is a prime example of Bobby Valentine's warning of talent drain of the Japanese Professional Leagues.

A snapshot of professional baseball today in both Japan and the United States reveals some ugly shared realities. Both nations are modern, thriving bastions of capitalism. Shrewd businessmen who compromise good sportsmanship for extra profit leave fans from both nations shaking their heads in disgust. They know that a true fan of the game does not think like a businessman. Both nations have developed a big money, high-stakes business in professional baseball. Unlike the United States where teams are privately owned, Japanese teams are almost exclusively owned by corporations. This is one of the reasons why team names indicate their parent company rather than hometown city. Another reason concerns marketing strategy for the very densely populated archipelago. Japan is not demographically suited to have geographical lines to naturally determine fan allegiance. Unlike homogeneous Japan, rivalries in the United States develop not only because of league and division level competition, but because of a clash between regional cultures. Shortly after the westward migration of Major League teams like the Giants and the Dodgers, a common rivalry of East versus West culture has emerged in the United States. Within the confines of a large, old and culturally diverse metropolis like New York City, the lines of allegiance are even more narrowly drawn.

Amateur baseball remains the true foundation and greatest champion of the game's integrity. This is where the similarities and camaraderie between two entirely different cultures have proved most striking. The professional baseball businessmen and players unions of both nations need to uphold the integrity of the game if they expect to earn money in the long run. Fan enthusiasm will critically taper off when classic sportsmanship becomes too sparse at the

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<sup>46</sup> Bob Rains. *Baseball Samurais: Ichiro Suzuki and the Asian invasion* (New York, NY; St. Martin's Press, 2001)

<sup>47</sup> David Picker. *Japan Goes Channel Surfing*: (The New York Times, July 20, 2006)

professional of play. The competitive field of free-agency among players has dissolved a longstanding era when players remained with one or two teams through their entire career.

Just as American Major League players like Joe DiMaggio and Ted Williams were hanging up their cleats to contribute to the war effort after 1941, Japan's own baseball stars also heeded to military service during World War II. Japan's extensive military casualties, particularly towards the end of the war, had a devastating effect on the morale of the Japanese people. In a number of instances, Japanese baseball heroes were killed in action. Just before flying to his death in a Kamikaze mission, Nagoya All-Star pitcher Shinichi Ishimaru decreed to the few present at the runway he would throw ten strikes before climbing into his aircraft for the last time. A reluctant soldier was recruited for the cheerless duty of calling balls and strikes. After the tenth strike, Ishimaru gravely carried out his mission and was never seen again.

Erected in 1981, a monument stands near the Tokyo Dome, home of the Yomiuri Giants, honoring 69 professional players who died fighting for Imperial Japan during World War II. Inscribed in the monument are the parting words of Nagoya All-Star pitcher Shinichi Ishimaru, who perished in a kamikaze mission in 1945.

*"Playing baseball was my happiness.*

*A life filled with devotion and filial piety.*

*I have nothing to regret even though I die at 22."*

These moving words transcend nationality and speak of an undying passion that all lovers of the game can sympathize with. Whether it is played in Japan or the United States, baseball is ultimately a timeless, international pastime.

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