

Take me out to the ballgame!

Part II

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Cheerleaders dance on the field, young women with kegs strapped to their backs pour draft beer, vendors hawk cigarettes, and players throw stuffed animals to the crowd after crossing home plate. It's baseball — the great American pastime — right?

Well, sort of. These scenes describe Japan's current take on baseball, which is now as much a national sport there as sumo wrestling. But Japan's enthusiastic embrace of baseball is hardly unique. It is part of a long and rich history that has seen the sport grow in popularity around the globe — after first having put down deep roots in Fort Monmouth and the wider Garden State.

Baseball in Japan

American missionaries introduced baseball to Japan in the early 1870s as the country modernized after the Meiji Restoration. It became such a hit in Japan over the years that Babe Ruth and other stars played exhibition games there. In fact, Ruth played his last game in a Yankee uniform while visiting Japan, alongside teammate Lou Gehrig in 1934. The Yomiuri newspaper chain sponsored that all-star tour, which inspired the creation of the country's first professional baseball team.

A former American major leaguer, Lefty O'Doul, was interested in Japan and became friends with Matsutarō Shoriki, "the father" of professional baseball in that country. The two joined forces to start Japan's first professional baseball team: the Dai Nippon Baseball Club. That team would later become the Tokyo Giants. O'Doul arranged for the club to tour the U.S. in 1935 and 1936.

A Japanese professional league, Nippon Professional Baseball, was formed in 1936. Since baseball fit nicely into a culture that stressed the goals of teamwork and individual sacrifice, the Japanese approached the new sport with a dedication usually reserved for martial arts — since Japan’s former samurai elite interpreted baseball to be a kind of spiritual training, a discipline for shaping young minds and bodies. To the Japanese, *yakyuu* (field ball) is seen even to this day as a martial art to be practiced relentlessly to perfection, and then executed remorselessly with the sole purpose of crushing the opposition.

After the Second World War, American occupation authorities turned to baseball as a means of reconciling the two former enemy nations. As an advisor to the Tokyo Giants in 1951, Tsuneu “Cappy” Harada, a Nisei California native who was part of the U.S. Army Military Intelligence Service (MIS), worked with Shoriki and O’Doul to bring a U.S. All-Star team to Japan. Harada was asked to throw the first pitch in opening ceremonies to the Governor of Toyama Prefecture, the honorary first batter. The game was played in the newly-built Toyama Baseball Stadium. With O’Doul as its manager, the visiting team consisted mainly of standout American League players: Mel Parnell and Dom DiMaggio from the Red Sox; Bobby Shantz and Ferris Fain from the Athletics; and Joe DiMaggio, Eddie Lopat, and Billy Martin from the Yankees. O’Doul’s team won all the games, and Joe DiMaggio hit the final home run of his career during the tour.

Baseball unites the US, Japan, and the Army

United States-Japanese baseball connections have grown closer with the passage of time. Since 1936, over 400 American baseball players have played for Japanese professional teams and Japanese players have come to the United States to play in the major leagues in increasing numbers over the past decade. And they’ve done so with great success.

Ichiro Suzuki came to the Seattle Mariners from the Kobe-based Orix BlueWave in the Pacific League in November 2000. He was awarded both American League MVP & Rookie of the Year awards for 2001. Suzuki has played in every All-Star game since his career in the majors began. A more recent Japanese player to come to the majors is Kosuke Fukudome, a right fielder for the Chicago Cubs, who is also the first Japanese player to join their roster. While 2008 is his first

season in the major leagues, he was part of the winning Japanese team in the World Baseball Classic in 2006, and had won Bronze and Silver medals in the Summer Olympic Games. Daisuke “Dice-K” Matsuzaka is one of the starting pitchers for the Boston Red Sox. Previously of the Tokyo-based Seibu Lions, Dice-K is the third pitcher in Boston Red Sox franchise history to record two RBIs in a World Series game. The last person to accomplish that feat was Babe Ruth in game four of the 1918 World Series. The other was Cy Young in 1903.

Major League Baseball still sends an all-star team to Japan to play exhibition games against Japanese baseball teams every other year.

The New York Yankees and the Tampa Bay Devil Rays played their 2004 opening season game in the Tokyo Dome. Legendary retired players Yogi Berra and Reggie Jackson even made the 18 hour plane trip from the Spring Training location. The Yankees went on to play the Yomiuri Giants, and another Tokyo team, the Hanshin Tigers, in exhibition games during their time in Japan.

In 2008, the Boston Red Sox and the Oakland A’s played the first two regular season games against each other in the Tokyo Dome. The Red Sox also played an exhibition game against the Hanshin Tigers.

Five members of the Yankees and the manager Joe Torre visited Camp Zama, a U.S. Army military base in Japan during their 2004 visit. MLB Reporter Ian Brown stated that the team got to ride in a Black Hawk helicopter and they felt that this was a way to give something back to the military. This tradition of visiting American teams continued, and a few members of the Red Sox went right from a 17-hour flight from Fort Myers, Florida, into a Black Hawk helicopter to fly over Tokyo to Camp Zama to meet Army members stationed there. A crowd of hundreds excitedly greeted the players when they arrived in a Camp Zama gymnasium. The players were presented coins by the soldiers, and the Red Sox gave jerseys to General Elbert Perkins, Commanding General, U.S. Army Japan Command, and Colonel Robert Waltemeyer, Camp Zama Garrison Commander. Red Sox relief pitcher Mike Timlin said about the Camp Zama

experience: “It was an honor... to come over here and shake their hand and say ‘thanks’ personally means a lot.”

Baseball can help to unite nations who were previously at war, just as it fosters camaraderie between professional players and the military, and continues to link vastly different cultures. Baseball is the great American pastime, but it’s certainly more than just a game.