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## Baseball, *Besuboru*, *Yakyu*: Comparing the American and Japanese Games

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One foreign sport—and only one—has acquired a certain mystique in Japan—baseball. The Japanese have even coined their own term for the game, *yakyu*, whereas all other imported recreations (football, soccer, tennis, basketball, and golf) are known to the Japanese only by their western names. The Japanese possess, as do the Americans, a spiritual connection with baseball. The Japanese traditionally equated the sport with the world of martial arts, hence their seriousness about the game. The Japanese adoption and embrace of baseball contrasts with the reception of baseball in Europe, where the game has attracted only a small following.

Why is baseball, though not native to Japan, so popular? The reasons for the popularity of baseball are mainly historical. The game was brought to Japan in 1873 by the American missionary Horace Wilson, who taught at *Kaisei-ko*, now Tokyo University. Many of the students whom he taught to love the game subsequently became leaders in government and industry and set the tastes of Westernizing nineteenth century Japan. Also, Japanese who went to the United States to study enjoyed baseball and were introduced to it before they were introduced to other Western sports. That baseball also became fashionable among the upper-class further explains the growth and acceptance of baseball in Japan.

In Japan, baseball enjoys extremely wide popularity as a spectator sport and as a participant sport. Several factors explain this development. On a prosaic level, the development of a modified version of the game, which uses a soft rubber ball and falls somewhere between softball and whiffleball, makes the game suitable for Japan's limited public spaces and widens the accessibility of the game to children and company teams.

More importantly, the widespread popularity of baseball in Japan partly arises because the sport took root through high school and college teams rather than through a system of professional clubs, which happened in the United States. Thus, college ball is taken quite seriously, and the Japanese professional league seeks new talent in the schools and universities. As with

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American football, the national interest in local teams is shaped by the possibility that a local prodigy may receive an offer and go straight to the professional league.

Two competing, but equally respected, high school championship tournaments are held each year in Japan, one in spring and one in summer. Each prefectural champion is invited to a summer contest, whereas entrants in the spring tourney are chosen from each of thirty regions by a national panel of experts who take the results of the past year and prospects of the current season into account. Every high-school ball player hopes to reach one of these tournaments. Anyone who plays baseball dreams of playing in Koshien Stadium, the site of the championship tournaments, or in Meiji Park, the mecca of college baseball.

Extensive coverage in the mass media fuels the popularity of baseball. Two of the largest dailies, the *Asahi* and *Mainichi*, each sponsor one of the two annual high school championships. Coverage is given to high school games in most newspapers, and major contests are televised. The movement of players from high schools and colleges to the pros inspires a public interest that is catered to by six sports tabloids and the large dailies. In particular, these sports papers satisfy off-season interest in baseball by offering exhaustive coverage of trades and drafts, forecasts, and gossip about popular players. Sensational in nature, these inexpensive tabloid papers are extremely popular with the Japanese working class and create an interest in players based as much on their personal misadventures as on their professional skills.

The popularity of baseball is also consistent with the national characteristics of the Japanese. They like the emergence of heroes, such as Nagashima Shigeo and Oh Sadaharu—two of the greatest post-World War II batters—and pitchers Enatsu Yutaka and Murayama Minoru. When their teams clashed, the excitement was over not only the battle between two teams, but also over the one-on-one battle between individuals. For the fans, it was breathtaking, like watching a fight-to-the-death sword duel in a samurai movie.

Another aspect of the game that has caused baseball to become widely popular in Japan is that the Japanese do not withhold their applause for “tragic heroes.” The Japanese people feel sympathy for the defeated team as well as happiness for the winning team. The losing high school team in the championship receives a shout of encouragement, such as “Come back next

year!," as its players pick up a handful of dirt and stand in silence or tears in the Koshien Stadium. The mass media also hype the "beauty of defeat."

As mentioned before, the Japanese take baseball as or more seriously than Americans. American Major Leaguers appear very relaxed on the diamond, in contrast to the tenseness of the Japanese professionals. This reflects a contrast between the two cultures. In the early days, the Japanese thought baseball was an American martial art and regarded it as they regarded kendo (Japanese fencing), judo, and archery. This, of course, is a spiritual approach. The Japanese said, "Let's train our spirit by playing baseball." The expression "way of baseball" was even coined. Symbolic of this attitude was the use of terms that meant "putting one's spirit into one throw of the ball" and "washing the soul with a clean hit." These Japanese cultural characteristics do not have equivalents in the way Americans think about or play baseball.

Baseball in Japan developed in a special way because of the process by which it was adopted. I think this determined the character of baseball in Japan. The Japanese have a different philosophy regarding baseball, and this philosophy is apparent not only in the players, but also in the fans. Anyone watching the play-by-play broadcast of baseball games on television can imagine himself as a manager and derive great enjoyment by second-guessing the real manager by calling out such observations as: "The pitcher should be relieved now" or "This situation calls for a pinch-hitter." This is one of the joys of baseball for the fan. Baseball is what the Japanese call a "*ma-no* sport." In Japanese, "*ma*" means an interval of time, a pause, a certain distance, which means that there are pauses during which the fan can think about the next move. Actually, in a two-hour game, the ball is in action only seven or eight minutes. In the United States, if the pauses are too long, the fans get impatient. In Japan, when a runner is on a base, the pitcher very often throws repeatedly to the base as if to pin down the runner, but this actually is a maneuver to gain time, or "*ma*." Such a maneuver will be booed in America, but the Japanese think such a strategy is appropriate because it gives them (and us) time to think.

The role of American and Japanese managers is quite different. In Japan, the managers are mostly former star players. Good examples are the legendary homerun king, Oh Sadaharu, and the number one sportsman of twentieth century Japan, Nagashima Shigeo. Both manage teams, although their managerial skills are suspect. In America, team managers are selected

only for their managerial abilities. Tommy Lasorda was the manager of the Los Angeles Dodgers for twenty years. As a player in the Major Leagues, he pitched only one winning game, but his ability as a manager was recognized. The thinking regarding team managers is beginning to change in Japan. The choice of managers has bipolarized between those managers who were superstars in their playing days and those managers who did not shine as players, but who possess managerial abilities.

The Japanese pitcher Hideo Nomo was a sensation with the Los Angeles Dodgers, and now Irapu Hideki and seven other pitchers have joined the Major Leagues, which brings American baseball even closer to Japan. But the resignation of Mike Di Muro, the first American to umpire regular-season games in Japan, is a reminder that Japanese and American baseball are still far apart. As part of an exchange program between Japanese and U.S. professional baseball, Di Muro was invited to umpire games in the Japanese 1997 Central League season. But only a couple of months into the season, and after umpiring for just thirty-nine games, Di Muro headed home.

There were various reasons for Di Muro's departure. Even before the start of the official season, there was trouble involving the American umpire. In a preseason exhibition game, Yakult Swallows manager Nomura Katsuya argued over a call by Di Muro; after the season started, Hanshin Tigers manager Yoshida Yoshio was ejected after protesting a tag out. The decisive incident, though, came in a game between the Chunichi Dragons and Yokohama Bay Stars. Chunichi slugger Taiho strongly protested a strike called by Di Muro, who subsequently ordered the player to leave the field. This ejection brought several Chunichi coaches and players off the bench. They surrounded Di Muro and jabbed him with their elbows. Di Muro later said that he felt physically threatened.

Di Muro, however, did nothing wrong. Japanese baseball rules state categorically that the umpire makes the final judgment as to whether a hit is fair or foul, whether a pitch is a strike or a ball, and whether a runner is out or safe. Players, managers, and coaches are not allowed to protest his judgment. In other words, Nomura, Yoshida, and Taiho were wrong to challenge Di Muro's calls. Baseball rules also give umpires the authority to eject players, managers, or coaches if they behave in an unsportsmanlike manner. According to these rules, Di Muro was quite correct in his ejections of Yoshida and Taiho.

In Japanese professional baseball, however, argumentative behavior that violates the rules takes place openly; consequently, the umpires have lost their authority. Why has this become a general trend? The root of the problem involves the umpire system in Japan. American umpires must, first of all, graduate from a recognized umpire school. Among the students of these schools, only those people who acquire thorough knowledge of the rules and are outstanding on the technical side are permitted to become professional umpires. After graduation, they polish their skills as they make their way up from the rookie league to the A, AA, and AAA leagues, and then to the Major Leagues. People without ability are weeded out in the process.

After graduating from umpire school in 1991, Di Muro made his debut as a professional umpire in the rookie league. He then climbed up the ladder gradually, serving as an umpire in the AAA Pacific Coast League before his trip to Japan. His ambition was to ascend to the Major Leagues, and his motivation for coming to Japan was to gain valuable experience as a step toward this goal. Accordingly, he had no thought of tossing away the American style of baseball and compromising with the Japanese *status quo*.

In Japan, by contrast, umpires are former players or amateur umpires who pass the Central and Pacific League recruitment exams and polish their skills with the farm teams before moving up. In many cases, they make a new start as umpires after failing to make a mark as professional players. As a result, many managers and active players in their hearts tend to scorn them: "You weren't much good as a player; are you really fit to be an umpire?"

Furthermore, Japanese umpires do not put up much of a stand when they are subjected to a barrage of protest. The day after Di Muro announced his resignation, a Pacific League umpire who came under protest admitted that he had meant to call a pitch a strike, but called out "ball" by mistake. Umpires should never admit their mistakes. When they call a strike or strikeout, the decision must stand. To change a call afterward or to apologize for a mistake is an admission of their lack of competence and leads to a loss of authority.

American umpires make mistakes too. And players occasionally protest. On such occasions, however, the baseball leagues always stand behind the umpire completely. Regarding the Di Muro incident, the *Washington Post* commented, "[T]he two countries play entirely different brands of baseball." And Jim Evans, a prominent Major League umpire and principal of an umpire school, commented that Japanese umpires are fifty years behind American

umpires. The Di Muro incident makes one think about the observation of rules in baseball and the competence, status, and authority of umpires.

There are sharp differences in baseball strategy in Japan and the United States. This difference probably stems from the fact that Japanese baseball is defensive, while American baseball is offensive. I once watched a rubber ball baseball game in Tokyo between boys on teams from Tokyo and New York, which have a sister-city relationship. The coach of the Japanese team instructed his boys, "Listen carefully. That team's pitcher has poor control. Don't swing until two strikes are called against you." What happened was that one Japanese batter after another got on base on four balls, and the Japanese won the game on runs that were forced in.

Two days later at a farewell party for the Americans, I had a chance to talk with their coach. He said to me, "I'm not saying this as an excuse for our losing the game. We believe that enjoyment of baseball lies in hitting, fielding, and running. The batter's box is not the place where players go to take a walk. They go to the plate in order to hit a ball. You look in the dictionary and you will find that 'strike' means 'hit.' If you keep playing the kind of game that was played the other day, you will never make progress in baseball. And, it won't be fun."

As this incident shows, there is a basic difference between Japan and America in the concept of and the approach to the game and sport of baseball. In Japan, players are coached not to swing at a ball not in the strike zone. They are instructed to wait through two strikes. In the United States, players are told to swing even at a count of three balls and no strikes. Japanese batters will not swing at such a pitch. Hideo Nomo's pitching is often uncontrolled. Since American batters are trained to hit as many balls as possible, this training works to Nomo's advantage because the American batters often strike out.

In the post-World War II period, more than 400 foreign players have played Japanese professional baseball. The history of importing foreign players is very interesting. In the 1950s, imported foreign players were mostly Nisei Japanese-Americans. In the 1960s, Caucasian and African American players in AAA and AA leagues who could not make the Major Leagues came to Japan, where they could earn more money. In the 1970s, Japanese economic power rose considerably, and Japanese professional teams were able to pay higher salaries. Thus, Major Leaguers who had passed their peak, but

could command high pay for their reputations, came to play in Japan. In the 1980s, Japan became even more affluent and was able to engage high-priced active Major Leaguers who had become free agents, but were shunned by American teams because of their high salaries. The 1990s was a period of transition. Active Major Leaguers, players with records of problems, and Minor Leaguers came from America together with players from Taiwan, South Korea, China, Brazil, the Dominican Republic, and Australia.

The imported players are popularly called *suketto gaijin* (foreign helpers), a term which I personally dislike. Their large salaries—from \$500,000 to \$2 million—are not directly connected with their performances. There have been four problems from the beginning: language barriers, family problems (especially schooling for their children), adapting to very different customs, and the difference between Japanese and American baseball philosophies.

The role of interpreters is critical in communicating with managers, coaches and the mass media. The most successful American baseball players—Joe Stanka, Gene Bacque, Randy Bass—have long minor league careers in the United States, and after coming to Japan, they adjusted themselves to the Japanese style in baseball and in daily life.

Major League Baseball had official opening games between the New York Mets and the Chicago Cubs at the Tokyo Dome in March 2000. In addition, Japan sent a mixed team of amateurs and professionals to play baseball at the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games. These two events demonstrate that Japan is a key player in the ongoing globalization of baseball. To what extent the processes of the globalization of baseball change the traditional Japanese approach to *yakyu* will be one of the more interesting questions for Japanese baseball in the next decade and beyond.

