

POINT OF VIEW/ *William W. Kelly***Summer's Koshien—a field of dreams and drama**

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The names and places—Sadaharu Oh, Ichiro, the Hanshin Tigers, Tokyo Dome—of Japanese professional baseball are now well-known abroad. I suspect that most foreigners feel that what they know of high school baseball, especially the national summer tournament that begins Friday at Koshien Stadium, is even more distinctively Japanese than the professional game.

Fabled Koshien has been the scene of the greatest high school baseball dramas since its 1924 opening at the then-largest stadium in Asia. Over the decades, the mystique of the stadium and its tournaments (it also hosts a national spring invitational tourney) has ennobled the sanctity of the playing field and the purity and heroics of adolescent effort.

And yet we foreigners have come to hold a stereotypic image of high school baseball. We tend to dismiss it, and particularly its August showcase at Koshien, as rigidly regulated, conservatively played, entirely predictable—so much so that it has lost the very excitement that is the essence of sport. Some of these accusations may be true but I have always been suspicious of these value judgments.

If that were all that Koshien high school baseball was about, it is unlikely it would have become the celebrated national event that it has been and remains today. Rather, what seems so remarkable and compelling about the Koshien tournaments are the intended tensions and unintended ironies that lie just be-

low their seemingly imperturbable and predictable surface.

Like many, I have seen the Koshien tournaments on television for a number of years, but last August was my first chance to experience the summer tournament live at the stadium over a number of days. It was only then, sweating in the brutal sun, sitting among the rabid fans in the famous "Alps" stands, watching the play of emotions across the faces of the players, game after game, that I began to sense the intense and unpredictable drama that lies within the well-ordered script.

And Koshien is certainly an orderly scene, evident throughout the two weeks in the lockstep marching formations, the absolute deference shown to managers and umpires, the bows of gratitude toward supporters, and other displays. Such discipline goes back to the tournament's prewar origins, and is still strictly enforced by the National High School Baseball Association.

But at the same time, Koshien is a highly volatile tournament. There is a fierce pressure and scrutiny that these young players have never faced before. The teams, mostly seniors, are made up of different players each year, even if the same schools appear year after year.

The game pairings are known only shortly in advance. For these and other reasons, against the facile impression, the tournament course is entirely unpredictable. Much of the fascination of playing and watching any sport is precisely in this tension between knowing or not knowing exactly what will happen.

Koshien baseball, which in tightening

the regulations of play only heightens the suspense of the outcome, is a quintessential expression of that sporting sensibility.

Understanding Koshien is deepened further by appreciating some of the other aspects of the tournament. For example, the adults who come to watch are nostalgically celebrating the purity of youth in an age of enormous gulfs between generational experiences and frictions between generations in their own lives.

And it is intriguing, too, that the high school tournament has become such an expression of regional identity (the teams are prefectural representatives). Apart from some of the support groups, most of the fans who so enthusiastically cheer on their "hometown" team left their prefectures long ago. They now live in Tokyo or Nagoya or Osaka, and rarely, if ever, return or even want to return.

But like the ancestor spirits who return home at mid-summer O-bon, they seek a sentimental identity with their roots through support of a team on the hot August playing field of Koshien.

Finally, as a school sport, the Koshien tournament dramatically highlights the many complexities of sports and education. As with American university sports (especially basketball and football), the prominent baseball teams are not the top academic schools. They are the commercial or technical high schools or the private high schools at the bottom of the normal school status hierarchy. Thus one is struck by the irony of fans across the country who cheer mad-

ly for schools which in their everyday life and work they look down upon.

And yet Koshien is not entirely an inversion of the postwar educational hierarchy. Indeed, in many respects, the Koshien tournament is a very public metaphor for the educational meritocracy of Japan. It "models" standards of success and venues for performance. It mimics the university entrance examination ordeal: a one-time test, based on performance under incredible, visible pressure that pits the individual not against his classmates but against national competition.

Like the entrance exams, within the standardizing and open rules, every team is supposed to have an equal chance. But like the exams, as *tatemaie* is to *honme*, certain schools have gained an edge through aggressive recruiting and support and other behind-the-scenes maneuvering for special advantage. Even the media's frenzy of post-game interviewing of winners and losers reminds one of the emotional scenes at the board postings of entrance examination results.

In this and other respects, Koshien and high school baseball is not a distortion of the standards of the educational system, but an important demonstration of its features on a national stage.

Both summer baseball and winter exams highlight a national fascination with the struggles of youth, within and against the regimentation of competition.

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