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BASEBALL AS AMERICA

Seeing Ourselves Through Our National Game

GEORGE PLIMPTON • W. P. KINSELLA • PAUL SIMON • ROGER ANGELL

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Baseball in Japan: The National Pastime Beyond National Character

BASEBALL IS THE NATIONAL PASTIME of a number of countries in the Caribbean, Asia, and North America. First played in Cuba in the 1860s, it spread to other parts of the Caribbean and Central America shortly thereafter. The sport began in Japan in the 1870s and flourished.

By the 1890s, baseball was the prestige club sport at Japan's elite preparatory schools, and First Higher School's victories over teams of American fleet sailors and Yokohama residents electrified the Tokyo populace at a time when the country was trying to renegotiate the unequal treaties with the Western powers.

Throughout the 20th century, baseball remained the most significant sporting tie between two nations whose relative economic power and political relationship have oscillated wildly. From the early 1900s, baseball moved up into the new universities, whose teams soon began traveling to the U.S. for extended series against minor league teams and American universities.

Barnstorming tours of Japan by U.S. players began in 1908, and the 18-game tour in 1934, led by Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig, solidified Ruth as a national hero in Japan and helped stimulate the organization of a professional Japanese league, which began play in 1936. General Douglas MacArthur cleared the munitions out of the baseball stadiums that had been requisitioned by the military during the war and encouraged baseball's revival after World War II. The growth of Little Leagues spread, an annual U.S.-Japan college series began, and major

league teams made frequent post-season exhibition tours.

Since the 1950s, players from the U.S. minor and major leagues have been recruited by the 12 Japanese professional teams (which are divided into two leagues, with the respective champions meeting in a Japan Series). In 2001, approximately 70 players, or 10 percent of the professional rosters, were foreign. Japanese baseball has been forged by a long history of binational connections.

Any sport that moves across national boundaries becomes a set of local permutations on a common body of rules, techniques, and structures. Baseball in Japan exhibits this double quality of being recognizably different from and fundamentally the same as the game played elsewhere. There is, however, a very seductive, but deeply flawed, tendency to exaggerate the differences and attribute them to indelible, underlying radical contrasts in the American and Japanese character. This has become the dominant frame for comparing baseball in the two countries, by Americans and Japanese alike.

It is a pitfall that has proved unavoidable for even our most eloquent and influential American commentator on Japanese baseball, Robert Whiting, who has lived in Japan for 30 years and has authored a shelf of insightful, best-selling books and articles, in both English and Japanese. The opening sentences of his first book in 1977, *The Chrysanthemum and the Bat*, set the tone for decades of subsequent opinion:

"At first glance, baseball in Japan appears to be the

◆ Program from the American baseball tour of Japan, 1931, featuring Lou Gehrig on the cover. The tour pitted an American All-Star team, organized by sportswriter Fred Lieb and including Gehrig, Lefty O'Doul, Mickey Cochrane, and Frankie Frisch, against an All-Japan team sponsored by the *Yomiuri Shimbun*, a leading newspaper. The Americans swept the tour, winning all 17 games.



same game played in the U.S.—but it isn't. The Japanese view of life stressing group identity, cooperation, respect for age, seniority and "face" has permeated almost every aspect of the sport. Americans who come to play in Japan quickly realize that Baseball Samurai Style is different. For some, it is fascinating and exciting; for others, exasperating, and occasionally devastating."

This is baseball reduced to an extension of national character, asserting that the Japanese play baseball the way they lead their lives—by following others, by submerging themselves in the grinding Japanese collective, and by not insisting on asserting themselves as individuals.

Such a character portrait is obviously simplistic. How could a society of 125 million and a sport history of 125 years be summed up by the notion these are latter-day samurai playing with bats instead of swords? It's illogical as well; all team sports, especially baseball, demand complex mixes of teamwork and individual effort. Most of all, the point of view is troubling for its disparaging tone. It suggests the Japanese can copy the form of the sport, but they miss its true feeling.

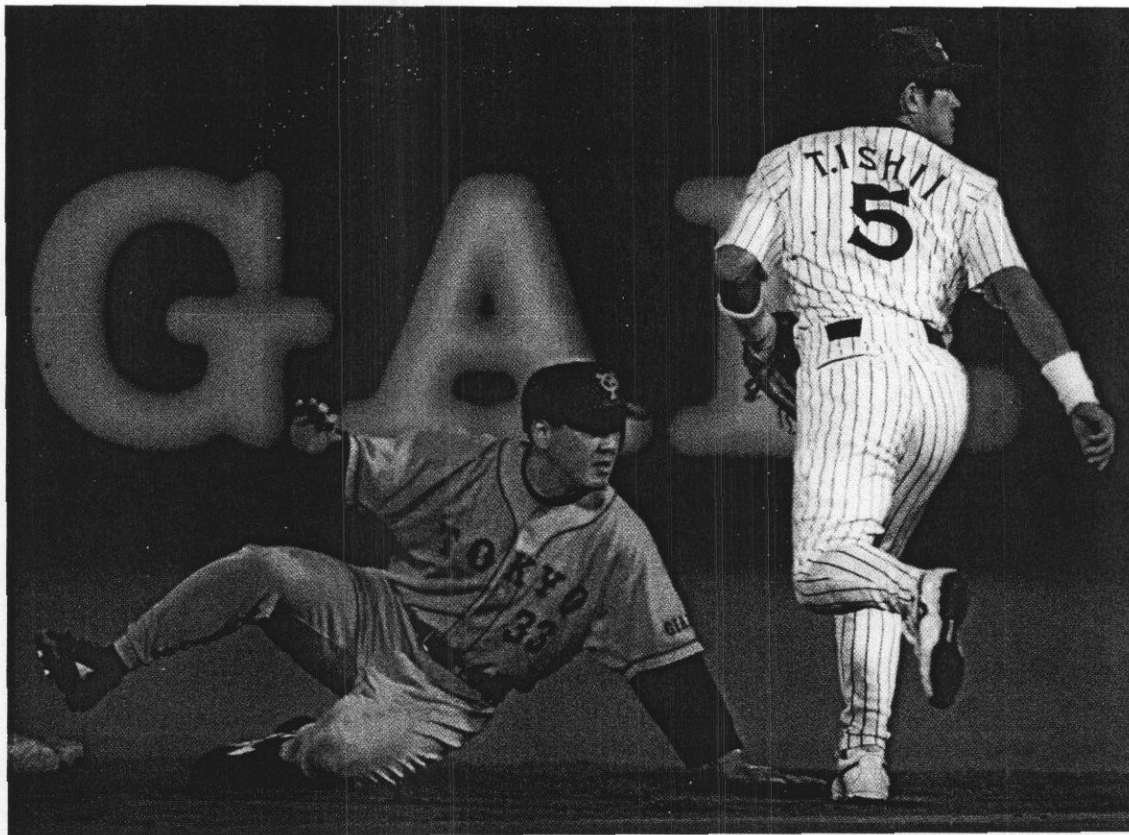
For real fans of baseball, the wrapping of the sport in national character garb precludes a real appreciation of just how the game is played in Japan and what is at stake—to the players, the teams, and the spectators.

Consider, for example, one of the most famous incidents involving an American player. It took place on October 25, 1985, in the final game of the Central League regular season between the Hanshin Tigers of Osaka and their archrivals, the Yomiuri Giants of Tokyo. After fielding a mediocre team for several seasons, the Tigers had remarkably clinched the 1985 Central League championship and were going on to the Japan Series the next week. Much of their success was due to their colorful and popular American power hitter, Randy Bass. Coming into this final game, Bass had hit 54 home runs and was one short of tying the great Sadaharu Oh's single-season record.

This last game was in Korakuen, the Giants' home

- ◆ Babe Ruth and Japanese children during the 1934 Asian tour by big league ballplayers. Ruth's iconic status in America was magnified in Japan, where he was sometimes called "The God of Baseball."





stadium. Bass was deliberately walked in his first two at-bats. The Giants' pitcher tried to pitch around him again his third time up, but Bass reached out and swung anyway, managing a single. The pitchers were more careful in his fourth and fifth at-bats and never gave Bass a pitch he could put into play, so he failed to break Oh's record, which was matched but not broken by American Tuffy Rhodes in 2001.

The Bass story was widely reported in the American press and was interpreted as an extension of indelible national character. The *New York Times* headline the next day was "The Japanese Protect Oh's Record." The message was clear: That's the Japanese for you. The Japanese people will just not accept foreigners. The *New York Times* reporter used a religious metaphor, suggesting "it is fine for [foreigners] to come into the church, but they cannot sit in a front pew."

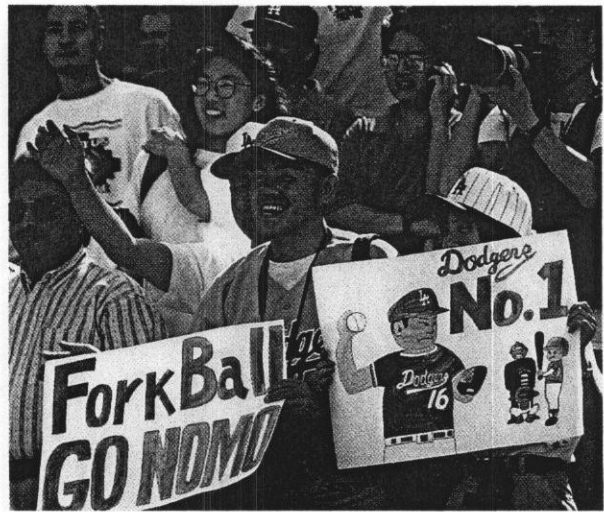
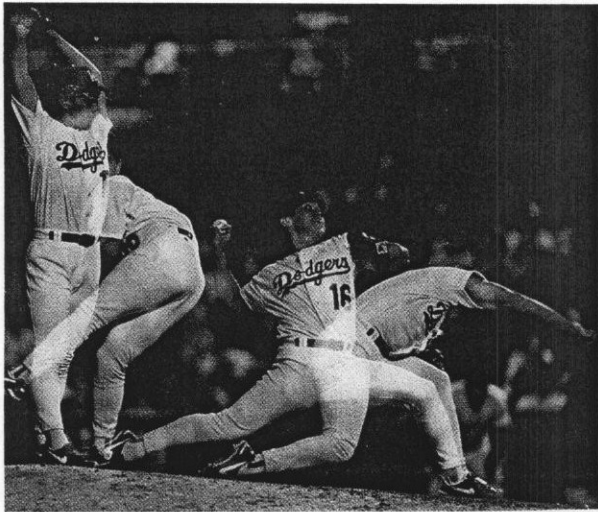
In other words, the message was the Japanese are

simply a clannish people and will never treat foreign players equitably, so national character trumped sportsmanship. But this interpretation of Bass's treatment solely as an outgrowth of national pride doesn't take into account other factors.

Consider that the passionate Giants fans at Korakuen booed the pitchers, not Bass, and a popular Japanese columnist was quoted as deploring the pitchers' actions as "disgraceful," according to that same *New York Times* article. It was not "the Japanese" who walked Bass, but rather the Giants' pitchers, and I think they had many more reasons for doing so than the simple fact they were Japanese.

For one thing, the Giants wanted to win that final game very much, because they could salvage some pride by clinching the season series against their bitter, long-standing rivals, the Tigers. One cannot exaggerate the intensity of what was for decades not only a rivalry of teams

◆ Akira Eto of the Tokyo Yomiuri Giants slides into base safely as he and All-Star shortstop Takuro Ishii of the Yokohama Baystars follow the action in a May 2001 game at Yokohama Stadium in Japan.



but also the pitting of second-city Osaka pride against national-capital Tokyo dominance. That year, the Giants had been preseason favorites to win the league title but slipped disappointingly and embarrassingly, while the Tigers were celebrating a rare success. With the Giants desperate for a victory, it was obvious strategy for them to pitch around the Tigers' most potent hitter, who nevertheless became the second foreigner to win the Triple Crown in as many years.

Furthermore, the record the Giants' pitchers were protecting belongs to their manager, who was standing in the dugout watching them. Manager Oh was perhaps remembering another controversial game against the Tigers from his own playing days, when Oh himself was thrown at twice by the Tigers' pitching ace, Gene Bacque, known as the "Ragin' Cajun." The second time Bacque threw at Oh produced a bench-clearing brawl, during which Oh's

batting coach, Arakawa Hiroshi, stormed the mound and was punched out by Bacque. Perhaps, too, Oh and his pitchers were recalling the belittlement of Oh's career home run record by the American baseball world.

Most baseball fans, Japanese and American, felt it was unfortunate that the Giants' pitchers avoided pitching to Bass. But the incident was much more revealing about the Giants, the Tigers, and that season than it was about the Japanese as a people. Personal histories, bitter team rivalries, city pride, and our nations' past interactions were all part of what happened that evening. A simplistic interpretation solely in the context of a broad-brushed national character is not an explanation. A love of the game and its pleasures should encourage us to appreciate the subtleties of baseball in Japan with the same knowledge and passion that we bring to the sport here at home.

- ◆ Bursting on the scene in 1995, Japanese pitcher Hideo Nomo's success heightened interest in baseball among Japanese Americans and paved the way for more Japanese players, including Seattle Mariner standouts Kazuhiro Sasaki and Ichiro Suzuki.