
**BASEBALL BEYOND
OUR BORDERS**
An International Pastime

Edited by *George Gmelch* and *Daniel A. Nathan*

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Contents

List of Illustrations	xi
Acknowledgments	xiii
Introduction: Around the Horn <i>George Gmelch and Daniel A. Nathan</i>	xv
Part 1. The Americas	
1. Cuba: The Curtain Begins to Fall <i>Tim Wendel</i>	3
2. Dominican Republic: From Paternalism to Parity <i>Alan Klein</i>	17
3. Puerto Rico: A Major League Stepping-Stone <i>Franklin Otto and Thomas E. Van Hyning</i>	39
4. Canada: Internationalizing America's National Pastime <i>Colin Howell</i>	57
5. Mexico: Baseball's Humble Beginnings to Budding Competitor <i>Jorge Iber</i>	75

6. Nicaragua: In Search of Diamonds <i>Dan Gordon</i>	85
7. Venezuela: The Passion and Politics of Baseball <i>Arturo J. Marciano and David P. Fidler</i>	111
8. Brazil: Baseball Is Popular, and the Players Are (Mainly) Japanese! <i>Carlos Azzoni, Tales Azzoni, and Wayne Patterson</i>	133
 Part 2. Asia	
9. Japan: “No Matter What Happens, Stand Up” <i>Dan Gordon</i>	153
10. Japan: Professional Baseball Enters the Twenty-First Century <i>William W. Kelly</i>	183
11. Korea: Straw Sandals and Strong Arms <i>Joseph A. Reaves</i>	203
12. China: A Century and a Half of Bat Ball <i>Joseph A. Reaves</i>	229
13. Taiwan: Baseball, Colonialism, Nationalism, and Other Inconceivable Things <i>Andrew D. Morris</i>	249
 Part 3. The Pacific	
14. Australia: Baseball’s Curious Journey <i>Rick Burton</i>	285
15. Tasmania: Baseball Struggles to Survive <i>George Gmelch</i>	299
16. New Zealand: Baseball between British Traditions <i>Greg Ryan</i>	311

Part 4. The Middle East

17. Israel: From the Desert to Jupiter . . . and Beyond 323
William Ressler

Part 5. Africa

18. South Africa: The Battle for Baseball 337
Marizanne Grundlingh

Part 6. Europe

19. Italy: No Hot Dogs in the Bleachers 351
Peter Carino
20. Holland: An American Coaching *Honkbal* 373
Harvey Shapiro
21. Great Britain: Baseball's Battle for Respect in
the Land of Cricket, Rugby, and Soccer 393
Josh Chetwynd
22. Finland: *Pesäpallo*, Baseball Finnish Style 411
Mikko Hyvärinen

Part 7. World Baseball Classic

23. The World Baseball Classic:
Conflicts and Contradictions 425
Robert Elias
- Afterword 441
George Gmelch and Daniel A. Nathan
- Source Acknowledgments 451
- Contributors 453
- Index 461

Japan

Professional Baseball Enters the Twenty-First Century

William W. Kelly

As several articles in this volume document, baseball went global early on, spreading to the Caribbean in the 1860s and to Japan in the 1870s, even as it was still taking shape in the United States. Baseball may fashion itself as the national pastime in the United States and in Cuba, but it has been even more solidly the dominant sport in Japan since the 1890s and remains so, longer than any other country.

It became the most popular sport of Japan's elite boys' schools by the end of the nineteenth century and then moved up to the new national universities and downward through the national secondary school system early in the twentieth century. The 1920s witnessed a burgeoning mass culture in the metropolitan regions, in which schoolboy baseball was watched by enthusiastic crowds in new sports stadiums and reported prominently in the national press and through a nascent national radio network.

The professional game appeared in 1936, with an initial league of eight teams. It was shut down by the military government in 1944, but after the war, in late 1946, General Douglas MacArthur, then supreme Allied commander of the Allied occupation in Japan, authorized the restart of baseball, schoolboy and professional. At his insistence, in 1950, the professional level was reorganized into two leagues of six teams each, to mimic Major League Baseball's American and National

Leagues. MacArthur believed that a two-league structure would be more democratic for Japan than the previous single league. Thus was born the Central League and the Pacific League of Nippon Professional Baseball (NPB). Most of the teams were located in the two major metropolitan regions of Tokyo-Yokohama and Osaka-Kobe, with single teams in the cities of Nagoya, Hiroshima, and Fukuoka. Although there have been changes in team ownership and a few location changes in the sixty-five years since, there has been no team expansion, and the two leagues have remained remarkably stable in size and organization.

The game's rules and the sport's organization in Japan will be familiar to Americans. The rule books and equipment are nearly identical, and the universal demands of the game impose a broad commonality. Nonetheless, the formal organization and the day-to-day practices of the professional game do differ somewhat. In this chapter I offer an overview of some of the key features of Japanese professional baseball in the early twenty-first century. The timeliness of this portrait is important because the NPB is facing some powerful challenges at the moment—a rapidly aging and shrinking national population, a digital media revolution, the rising popularity of soccer, the threat of asset stripping from MLB, and the demands of the World Baseball Classic (WBC). It remains to be seen whether NPB has the organizational resolve and imagination to overcome these threats, and I will turn to this issue in the concluding section.

Club Organization

One of the first things a visitor to a professional baseball game in Japan will notice is the names of the teams, which are often not that of a city but of a corporation—for example, the Hanshin Tigers, not the Osaka Tigers (named for a railroad company); the Chūnichi Dragons, not the Nagoya Dragons (named for the parent newspaper company); and the Yomiuri Giants (named for the media conglomerate, not its Tokyo hometown). Professional baseball is big business in Japan as well as in the United States, but MLB teams have generally been owned

and operated by wealthy individuals or partners. Only recently have corporations begun to own and operate MLB teams. In Japan, though, major companies have always owned and run the teams as subsidiaries. Public information about club balance sheets is as scarce in Japan as in the United States, but it is widely believed that only two or three NPB clubs operate profitably; the rest run chronic operating deficits. Rather than being run as profitable ventures, they serve as publicity vehicles for the owning company, which is why they so often prominently showcase the names of their corporate owners.

Also, distinctively, the baseball clubs themselves are large organizations. The NPB has never developed a tiered minor league system as in the United States, and the twelve clubs maintain large rosters. Presently each can have seventy players under contract, and most are close to or at that maximum. To take the case of the Hanshin Tigers, which I know best from extended field research, its roster in 2014 had sixty-six contract players plus four trainee players. The roster is divided into two squads, a first team and a second team. The first team is the actual major league team, which is limited to twenty-eight players. The remainder are registered to the “farm” team, which plays a short season against the farm teams of the other clubs. Injuries and performances result in much up-and-down movement between first and second teams during a season.

Large team sizes have several consequences, one of which is the need for an extensive coaching staff. Hanshin’s first and second squads each have a manager, ten coaches, three trainers, and several batting practice pitchers and catchers. The Tigers’ second team practices and plays at a facility named Tiger Den, several miles from the main stadium, Kōshien. Tiger Den has been laid out in the exact dimensions of the parent park. Like many other clubs, it has a modern dormitory for bachelor players, which used to be mandatory but is now optional—and not particularly popular.

Because the seventy players range from the most talented stars to raw rookies, the coaching staff must devote a lot more time to teaching

fundamentals than on an MLB club, which depends on its large farm system to prepare and winnow young players. For all NPB teams there are daily structured practices, requiring detailed scheduling to coordinate the drills of a hundred players and staff. In this regard NPB less resembles MLB than the National Football League (NFL), with its large staffs, highly orchestrated practices, and all-powerful head coaches.

Above the players and coaches on the field is the “front office,” the club’s management and support staff. Not surprisingly, the large team size requires a large front office; Hanshin’s 65 employees range in positions from administration to accounting, marketing, player development, and press relations. Like other clubs, the Hanshin front office is organized in a corporate hierarchy of divisions, departments, and small sections that would be familiar to any Japanese office worker. In effect, then, to get nine players on the field to start each major league game, the Tigers baseball club has become a large organization of more than 160 employees!

And above that, each of the twelve baseball clubs is embedded in an even larger corporate nexus. In Japanese business shorthand, a club is a “child company,” or wholly owned subsidiary of a “parent company.” In the case of the Hanshin Tigers, for instance, until recently it was a subsidiary within the Hanshin Electric Railroad Corporation. The parent name recalls its urban transport origins, but it is now a family of businesses, including department store retailing, travel agencies, air transport, land development, taxi companies, and leisure park operations in addition to the railroad. Even baseball-related operations are distributed among a set of subsidiaries—the Tigers ball team, of course, but also a stadium management company, a horticulture and grounds-keeping company, a security company, and a goods and concessions company—all under the control of the parent corporation. Each club has a designated “owner,” who is usually the chief executive officer or chairman of the board of the parent company. It is the owner who represents the club in all executive dealings with the league by sitting on the all-important Owners’ Committee.

Thus, the business ethos of Japanese baseball is decidedly more corporate than the entrepreneurial image of MLB ownership (although actual MLB clubs have become quite corporate operations). Nonetheless, this intricate organization does not ensure harmony despite common perceptions that Japanese prefer supportive collectivism. I discovered the Hanshin organization to be rife with friction and infighting—between the parent headquarters and the child club, within the front office (especially between those who are dispatched by the main company and the others who are permanent employees of the club), and between the “suits” of the front office (claiming educational credentials and corporate seniority) and the “uniforms,” the field manager and coaches who claim baseball expertise and public recognition.

The Baseball Season

The rhythms of the professional baseball season in Japan would be generally familiar to any fan of U.S. baseball, albeit with several distinctive features. Spring training is in the “South”—Okinawa and the southern island of Kyushu are current favored locations—and all of the monthlong camps open on February 1. Preseason exhibition games are played from late February through March. The 144-game regular season begins around April 1 and continues into mid-October. In recent years there has been interleague play in the middle of the season, during which time each team plays a two-game series with each of the six teams in the other league. The regular season concludes with a two-stage playoff in both leagues (dubbed the Climax Series). The two league champions then meet in a best-of-seven game Japan Series, which usually overlaps with the MLB World Series. Most clubs have a postseason camp and rookie leagues in October and November. The November through January off-season is busy with personnel issues: the player draft, free-agent signings and team trades, and player salary negotiations.

The shorter distances, the country’s single time zone, and the high-speed train network in Japan make travel less of a determinant than in

MLB. For several decades almost all regular-season games have been evening games (starting time varies from 6:00 p.m. to 6:30 p.m.), and there are no doubleheaders. Teams typically play a three-game series twice a week (Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, Saturday, Sunday), with Monday dedicated as a travel day. Given the six-team leagues, each team faces its five opponents more than twenty times a year, which gives an intensity and frequency to the team rivalries that is greater than that of MLB.

It is often said that Japanese players put in many more hours of practice than MLB players, not just in the off-season but throughout the regular season as well. This is generally so, although as with other aspects of the global game we should not exaggerate the differences and we should be clear about the reasons. In both countries through the 1960s at least, the “off-season” was just that, and many players needed other jobs to augment their modest baseball earnings. (Alternatively, the Caribbean and Central American winter leagues provided income and playing exposure for local players and North Americans.) Only more recently have rising salaries permitted and competition demanded a full-year commitment by players to practice and training. In America, though, most of the off-season effort is beyond public notice because MLB vies for media exposure with two other powerful professional leagues, the National Basketball Association (NBA) and the NFL.

In Japan—as in most places—the situation is fundamentally different. The U.S. sports world is quite unusual in having three dominant spectator sports. In most countries there is a single “center sport” and other secondary sports. As with baseball in Cuba and the Dominican Republic, with ice hockey in Canada, and with soccer in many European and South American countries, baseball in Japan is the center sport. At least until quite recently, soccer, sumo, golf, horse racing, and other sports have had to fit around and within the baseball calendar.

This means that the NPB keeps itself in front of the public eye as much as possible—and it must do this to retain its media preeminence. The clubs’ owners want maximum exposure for their corporate names.

The broadcast and print media, which have invested considerable resources in baseball reporting, need to generate nonstop news, and the players themselves, even those at the lowest rungs of the second squad, are playing for the club. The pressures—and the profits—of keeping the operations of baseball before the public even in the off-season (and even during breaks in the regular season) are enormous, and this goes a long way in explaining the distinctiveness of the pro-ball work year.

The Game

Sports are by definition rather tight sets of formal rules, basic equipment, and set strategies, and their modern history has been one of local games becoming standardized across wider regions, then being nationalized and eventually “transnationalized” across societies. The earliest Japanese baseball organized itself around American rules, and the regulation and patterns of game play have changed in tandem with the American game. The NPB rule book remains largely identical to the MLB rule book; the Pacific League in Japan copied the innovation of a designated hitter by the American League. Equipment is also much the same: for instance, like in the United States, metal bats are used in scholastic and amateur associations, while wood bats are used in the pros, and in both countries the transition to hitting with wood bats is difficult for players.

The Tigers’ Kōshien Stadium (and several of the other older stadiums) could easily find a place among America’s green cathedrals with its dimensions, grand ivy-covered exterior, and interior layout of covered stands and bleachers. Nonetheless, any visitor to a Hanshin Tigers game will notice small differences, some with important implications. Like most fields in Japan, the Kōshien infield is all dirt, and this makes for slightly slower ground-ball play. And while the MLB commissioner’s office designates a single manufacturer’s baseball to be used by all teams, in Japan each team can choose among three manufacturers’ balls to use during the season. Managers select slightly livelier or deader baseballs according to their teams’ strengths during the season.

NPB games have a reputation for taking a long time and for ending in ties. Games do tend to run longer because many pitchers prefer to work the count, batters take more elaborate setup time, and Japanese umpires are more indulgent of coaches and managers who want meetings on the mound. However, you will rarely see a tie game at Kōshien or elsewhere; they are possible within the rules, which limit the number of extra-inning games, but they are statistically insignificant (about 3 percent of all NPB games in the past six decades). It is the time limit, of course, that offends the sensibilities of MLB purists for whom the sport is limitless: the foul lines continue into infinity, and the game continues as long as required to produce a winner.

But the NPB has constraints. As with most stadiums, Kōshien is in the city, and almost all fans come by public transportation—largely by the trains, buses, and taxis of the parent Hanshin company! Almost all games are evening games, urban transit shuts down late at night, and the clubs will not risk inconveniencing tens of thousands of spectators of extra-inning games that extend into the early morning.

The Players

The life of a professional athlete is not Hobbesian—nasty, brutish, and short—but it is often ruthlessly competitive, unpredictable, and short. This is certainly true for baseball players in Japan, despite our preconceived images that Japanese sports professionals working for Japanese organizations must be securely enmeshed in a familiar nexus of long-term loyalty and mutual commitment. Not so. As with aspects of rules and game conditions, the contractual status of players and the course of their careers have broad similarities to MLB players, in part because the NPB has tended to borrow such features on the U.S. model.

For instance, like MLB, Japanese players (and coaches) are independent contractors. This is a legal status in Japan; it means that players are not legally members of their club in December and January, and every year they must negotiate salaries with the club (multiyear contracts are rare). And as independent contractors, they have no pension or other

company benefits. Loyalty and commitment must be revalidated each year in November and December.

However, player vulnerability is not matched by club exposure. Through a reserve clause similar to but longer than MLB's, Japanese clubs have exclusive rights to all players on their roster for nine years, which is an effective hold over most players for their entire professional careers. There is less player movement among Japanese teams than in the American Major Leagues, but there is more than one might think. For instance, by opening day of the 2014 Hanshin Tiger season, fifteen players had retired or been released over the winter, and ten new players were drafted or signed. Twenty percent turnover in the rosters each year is fairly common.

In general, salaries are lower at the high end and higher at the low end of the player spectrum. Star players earn far less than those at the top of the MLB pyramid. Several NPB players have broken through the 70-million yen threshold (about \$7 million), although the highest Hanshin salary in 2014 was the \$2.7 million to an eleven-year veteran infielder, Toritani. At the other end of the scale, though, players are drafted to the clubs with higher average salaries than MLB draftees. There is a much smaller pool of professional-level players in Japan, and each club signs only four to eight rookies each year out of high school, college, and industrial leagues (compare this to the average U.S. professional club, which drafts thirty-five to fifty players a year!). Fierce competition has led to a salary structure that pays exorbitant signing bonuses of \$1–\$1.5 million to untried teenagers. What pro baseball shares everywhere, though, is a relatively short career path. Few players ever last beyond their early thirties. The average age of most rosters hovers around twenty-six or -seven years old. Fully 50 percent of the seventy players on the Tigers' 2014 opening-day roster had five years or less professional experience.

Even salaries controvert the standard Japanese corporate model of steady upward increments. Automatic steps in pay have no relevance in the baseball world, whose dense statistical indicators exactly

measure player performance as the basis for annual adjustments of salaries. In tracking the reported salaries of Hanshin players over the past ten years, I have calculated that less than half of the annual resignings have been for salary increases (from 5 percent to 250 percent), about one-third of the players were forced to accept salary reductions (of 5 percent to 40 percent), and another quarter of the players were renewed at the same salary as the previous year.

The salaries themselves range widely across the roster. In 2014 more than a quarter of the players, those starting out or permanently stuck on the farm team, made from \$50,000 to \$100,000, most made between \$100,000 and \$500,000, and only ten of the sixty-six players exceeded the \$500,000 mark, which is the minimum salary in MLB. About 40 percent of the club's total payroll of about \$30 million went to the top five salaries.

The second-highest salary in 2014 went to an American outfielder, Mack Murton, who made just over \$2 million. Murton played for three MLB organizations over five years, mostly in the Minor Leagues, before coming to Hanshin in 2009 and thriving.

This draws attention to the pivotal but controversial place of foreign nationals in the NPB. Professional baseball is multiethnic almost everywhere (except in Cuba), but everywhere the deployment and treatment of foreign players vary. In the early years of Japanese baseball, little was made of Japanese Americans, White Russians, Taiwanese, or Korean Japanese who were often prominent on the rosters, but by the early 1970s the rush to hire aging stars from MLB and other pressures created the foreign players as a category apart, "hired bats" brought over with large salaries, special perks, and separate treatment. At present about seventy-five of the eight hundred players in the NPB are foreign nationals. In 2014 the Hanshin roster had four (from the United States, the Dominican Republic, and South Korea), which is about average. Only three non-Japanese ballplayers may be registered on the major team roster at any one time; the others keep in shape, sometimes impatiently, on the farm. Those from South Korea and

Taiwan are generally treated the same as regular players; those from North America, Australia, and the Caribbean are often provided with luxurious condominium housing, interpreters, separate hotels on road trips, and the freedom to follow their own training routines. Mercenaries are well compensated, but patience is short, adjustment is difficult, and their time is brief. A few find what it takes to succeed (like Murton), but most are rarely re-signed for a second year, and their experiences often end in mutual bafflement and bitterness.

The Media

If you arrive at Kōshien early on a game day to watch batting practice and warm-ups, you will immediately notice a huge media contingent lounging in the dugouts, staked out along the sidelines, and standing behind the batting cages. Baseball clubs in major U.S. markets face intense media coverage, but not even the Yankees are scrutinized as intensely as the Hanshin Tigers. On any day in the season all three national newspapers, the five major sports dailies, two local dailies, the two major news agencies, three radio networks, and three television networks will all send reporters, photographers, announcers, and commentators to the ballpark. Such media attention is welcome but also problematic for the club. The Yomiuri Corporation that runs the rival Giants owns its own television network (Japan's first and largest private system), the largest-circulation daily newspaper in the world, and one of the major daily sports newspapers. Not surprisingly, the Giants are relentlessly featured in Yomiuri publications, which are favored by the club. Other media are often a step behind and sometimes heavy-handedly sanctioned for being too critical. The Hanshin Group by contrast owns no media, and it finds itself at the center of (and often at the mercy of) an intensely competitive Kansai regional media whose dominant yearlong subject is the fortunes of the Tigers. It needs the media, but it fears them at the same time. It is an anxious and uneasy balance of courting and controlling.

Walking the several hundred yards from the Hanshin train station

to the stadium and passing the Babe Ruth plaque to the right of the main ticket office, one comes upon the one entrance that is not open to ordinary visitors. This is the “official entrance” for players, team officials, and the media, all of whom are funneled into a guarded door that leads directly under the infield bleachers. Straight ahead lies the runway to the field dugout and officials’ rooms behind home plate. A stairway to the left leads to the second-floor team rooms and to the press box.

Throughout the year the media pack the pressroom of the club offices and hang out in a low-hanging, crowded room of old desks and chairs that is euphemistically called the press club room; they fill the field sidelines and dugouts during practices and game warm-ups. During the game itself they are packed into a center section behind the backstop—literally a press “box” with folding chairs and rickety wood boards for tables, open to the surrounding spectators and stadium noise, unchanged for seventy-five years. However, as with all stadiums in Japan, they are banned from the team locker room and the manager’s office, and thus they keep watch in the runway to the field and in the hallways outside the team dressing rooms to catch players and coaches for a comment.

Professional baseball rose with the national newspaper and radio and became the national sport through television in the 1960s and 1970s, but of all the media those that have come to drive the gathering and reporting of Tiger news are the daily sports newspapers. These are also key sports media in other countries like Italy, France, Brazil, and Mexico, although not the United States. There are five national sports dailies, four of which date from the late 1940s; their big jump in circulation and notoriety happened in the 1960s. Their circulations remain in the millions, and they depend almost entirely on spot sales at street and station news kiosks and in convenience stores, not through subscriptions. Thus, to catch the eye of the passerby, they borrow from Japanese comic art and graphic design so that every front page is a garish, full-page multicolor spread about a single story. And almost invariably, it is professional baseball that dominates the papers’ dai-

ly front pages, total coverage, and staff assignments. For the Kansai editions of the sports papers, this means the Tigers; the other teams are relegated to a few stories on the inside pages. The previous day's game if in season, front-office conflicts, draft plans, contract signings, spring camp—whatever the moment in the baseball year, the sports dailies will find a Hanshin topic to foreground, and Osaka commuters, whether they buy the papers or not, will glimpse the florid front-page spreads as they pass newspaper kiosks throughout the region.

The Fans

Equally conspicuous to anyone arriving early for a Kōshien game are the people who begin to fill the right-field bleachers, dressed in yellow-and-black jackets (the Tiger team colors), busily at work attaching banners to the railings of the walkways, assembling large flags, testing trumpets and drums. These are the officers of the many fan clubs, who are based in the right-field stands but spill over into adjacent outfield and infield sections and give a distinctive flavor and sound to Kōshien games. Indeed, no doubt the most striking difference that a fan from another baseball culture will notice at Kōshien is the level and form of cheering—it is loud, constant, and coordinated. From start to finish the stadium pulsates with the frenzied chanting of the fans, driven by the percussive beat of drums and thumping clackers, accompanied by blaring trumpets and huge flags.

Significantly, though, the official cheerleaders and the stadium announcer do not coordinate them. Rather, the energies of the crowd are directed by an elaborate organization of private fan clubs, several hundred in all, organized into several broad associations and all centered in the right-field bleachers. From there whistles and hand signals communicate downward from a single association field chief, who sits in the lower far-right corner of the bleachers, to a hierarchy of subordinates stationed throughout adjacent sections. There are anthems and marches and chants for individual players (when first announced and when coming to bat) and for moments in the game

(at the start, at pitching changes, for home runs, at the end of each victory, and so on), all of which are composed and copyrighted by the lead association, not by Hanshin.

In this, too, the chanting and cheering parallel the support given the school teams in the spring and summer tournaments, and there is a historical connection that leads back to the early days of U.S. college football. When the first Japanese college baseball teams toured the United States in the opening decade of the twentieth century, they studied the baseball they encountered, but they were even more impressed with the cheerleader squads of the college football teams and the enthusiasm with which they could engage the student spectators. They took careful notes, which they used on their return to train student cheerleading squads that were immediately popular. It was this tradition of organized cheering that baseball fans later brought to the professional game.

And certainly *Kōshien* rocks in ways alien to any U.S. baseball game and at a level far surpassing even the exuberant fans at Caribbean and Mexican stadiums. Visiting American baseball fans sometimes complain that the cheering disrupts the concentration and decorum necessary to properly appreciate the game, but this has always seemed to be a hypocritical ethnocentrism. Spectator participation at Japanese baseball games is perhaps most similar to that seen in soccer stadiums in Europe, Africa, and South America, where there are also highly organized fan clubs to motivate and orchestrate the crowds. In both cases spectatorship is active—in fact, proactive—trying to create with collective voices and frenetic movement an emotional charge and a sensory atmosphere that will motivate their team. It is the fan as the “tenth player,” trying to intervene energetically.

Yet the discerning visitor will note one further aspect of *Kōshien* cheering: it is done for only half the game, that is, for the half of each inning when one’s team is at bat. For the defensive half of an inning, the fans relax—and schmooze. The key to appreciating the *Kōshien* fan-club organizations is that they serve not only to orchestrate a colorful

outpouring of emotional support for the Tigers, but also to provide spaces and times for socializing among friends, fellow workers, business associates, and others who are drawn together by this network. It is where Osakans go to cheer on their Tigers but also to cheer up one another through the spring, summer, and fall evenings after long days in factories, offices, and homes.

Japanese Professional Baseball under Challenge

These, then, are some of the key features of the professional game in Japan, a mixture of the familiar and the unfamiliar to readers more attuned to baseball *MLB* style. What is common throughout the baseball world, however, is the following. We are all tempted to see baseball, even at the professional level, as the game played between the lines by eighteen fit and talented athletes. Indeed it is. However, “Hanshin Tiger baseball” or that of the Yomiuri Giants or of the Boston Red Sox must also be appreciated as the coordinated product of players, coaches, the front-office staff, the corporate owners, the numerous members of the media, and the spectators, readers, and fans who not only watch and listen but also talk and live through the rich histories and suspenseful games, day after day, season after season. Through their efforts and energies, they transform a sport into a sports world.

But the sports world of the Hanshin Tigers and the larger horizons of Japanese professional baseball are facing some fundamental challenges in this second decade of the twenty-first century. Japan is the most rapidly aging of the advanced industrial societies, baseball’s own fan base is aging, and the clubs and the *NPB* itself have not been adept in attracting younger audiences. Mainstream media have also been under assault; broadcast television and the daily sports newspapers remain dependent on baseball, but cable, satellite television, and digital social media have cut heavily into their subscriber base and viewer audiences. The sports dailies have been particularly hard hit. In the 1990s when I would get on a local train or subway in Osaka, I would look around and usually see at least half the passengers reading one of the five daily

sports papers that were purchased at the platform kiosks. Riding the same lines in 2014, it was unusual to see more than one passenger in a car reading the dailies. Smart phones and social media have replaced earlier print platforms, but the sports media have not kept up.

Part of the competition is coming from a new national interest in soccer. School soccer teams are attracting boys away from baseball; the professional J League has established itself in markets and media beyond baseball's stadiums and income sources with a new model of regional identity and community involvement. Top Japanese soccer players are now recruited to the European leagues, and Japanese digital media companies are now broadcasting European league play in Japan. Both the men's national team and the women's national team are gaining international prominence; the men's team has become quite strong within International Federation of Association Football's (FIFA) Asia Federation, while the women's team has been even more successful at the world championship level. Perhaps even more threatening to baseball in Japan is the greater potential of soccer as a platform for sporting rivalries among the East Asian nations of China, the two Koreas, and Japan.

Yet another threat looms on the other side of the Pacific: MLB itself. For twenty years now, a small but steady outflow of NPB's top stars has been drawn to the American Major Leagues, both within and outside the leaky "posting" system MLB and the NPB cobbled together. From the initial move by pitcher Hideo Nomo in 1994 to the present, MLB rosters have carried eight to twelve Japanese players per year. While this is a small percentage of Major Leaguers in the United States, the loss of their top draws has had much more serious consequences for the Japanese teams they have left. And what is less widely recognized is that for every star player who jumps to MLB, there are three or four young unknown Japanese players who choose not to enter the domestic draft at all, preferring to take their chances at the lowest levels of the American Minor League system. Few of them advance to the MLB level, but they shrink an already small pool of potential talent in Japan for the NPB.

In broader terms what is now going on between MLB and the NPB follows a historical pattern of “asset stripping” by American professional sports businesses. Earlier player recruitment devastated the Negro Leagues, Dominican Republic baseball, Venezuelan baseball, and perhaps soon Cuban baseball. National Hockey League recruitment proved seriously detrimental to ex-Soviet bloc hockey leagues, and the NBA has internationalized at the expense of European and South American leagues. To be sure European soccer leagues have devastated the quality of leagues in Brazil and Argentina, and even the Japanese NPB has regularly raided Taiwan and Korean professional leagues for their best players, but U.S. professional sports remain the master of this.

Can the World Baseball Classic Help Save Japanese Professional Baseball?

One of the most significant recent changes in international baseball has been the introduction of the World Baseball Classic, whose fourth rendition will come in 2017. The explosive popularity of the FIFA World Cup and the shock in 2005 of having baseball dropped from the Olympics prompted MLB to push the International Baseball Federation to sponsor a high-profile tournament like the FIFA World Cup. Over the first three WBC tournaments in 2006, 2009, and 2013, Japan was the dominant team, taking the gold medal in the first two Classics and the bronze medal in 2013. Its national team, dubbed the Blue Samurai, has gained a high media profile and lucrative corporate sponsorship, and NPB has ensured that top players and Hall of Fame managers are made available.

Nevertheless, it is not yet clear that the WBC will succeed on the global field of play or that it will significantly help the flagging popularity of the NPB. The FIFA World Cup is successful in part because the sport has a very deep history of simultaneous club and national team representation and an interweaving of club league play and national team play during the year. This is proving much more difficult with professional baseball. With the longest season of all professional sports,

playing a near-daily game schedule in the United States and in Japan, it is turning out to be very difficult to schedule qualifying rounds and the tournament itself. Even the brief off-season is critical for recovery and for training before the next preseason, especially for pitchers' arms, so it is understandable that the players' union in Japan as well as in the United States has raised serious objections to the scheduling and to the pressures to participate.

When the Japanese pro baseball players' union threatened to boycott the 2013 WBC, it had another complaint beyond the dangers of physical injury and the disruption to the carefully calibrated season. The 2009 WBC had generated eighteen million dollars in revenue, of which the Japanese league and its players received 13 percent and MLB and its players' association took 66 percent. The Japanese players eventually capitulated, but it underscored an uncomfortable fact about the WBC. Although it is formally operated by what is now called the World Baseball Softball Confederation, it is still controlled by MLB, and it underscores the dependency that the NPB feels about its relation to U.S. baseball. MLB may not field the winning teams in the WBC (the Americans have yet to win even a bronze medal), but it wields the power and yields the profits. This rankles the Japanese baseball world, and it is a point of serious negotiation in the lead-up to the 2017 Classic.

Baseball has yet to be displaced as the center sport in contemporary Japan, but the domestic professional leagues are under serious assault by baseball elsewhere, by soccer and other sports, and by the inexorable dynamics of an aging and shrinking society and troubled economy. It is too soon to declare the game over, but it will require decisive leadership in the Japanese baseball world to sustain the joys and pride that the game has brought to the Japanese for more than a century.

Note on Sources

Much of the data for this chapter is drawn from observations and interviews by the author and club records provided to the author during extended field research with the Hanshin Tigers and other Japanese

professional clubs from 1996 to the present. Salaries, attendance, and other player data are drawn from the annual professional baseball yearbooks from several publishers (in Japanese), particularly the *Puro yakyuu paafectodeeta senshu meikan*, edited by the Bessatsu Takarajima Editorial Division and published annually by Takarajima-sha.

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