

SAME SPORT, DIFFERENT STRUCTURE

BUNTING UNDER PRESSURE: *Contrary to the popular American image, Japanese professional baseball players take enormous risks in pursuing their chosen career*

According to the author, the apparent differences between U.S. and Japanese professional baseball are much less to do with national character than they are with the scale and structure of the sport's organization

BY WILLIAM KELLY

OUTSIDE the U.S. and the Caribbean, the one country that has had a long-standing love affair with the sport of baseball is Japan. Baseball was introduced to Japan in the 1880s, and it rapidly gained popularity, first in schools and universities, then in industrial leagues, and from 1936, in a professional league. Despite the recent success in Japan of J-League professional soccer, baseball remains, as it has for a century, the country's most watched and most played sport.

For many foreign commentators, however, what is played on the Japanese diamond is a unique and apparently barely recognizable brand of the sport. A recent American public television documentary, "American Game, Japanese Rules," highlighted the arduous practices, autocratic managers, docile players, timid strategies, and heavy-handed corporate management that the program's producers consider to be features of the Japanese game.

There is some substance to these claims, but many others are just plain silly, like the notion that Japanese teams often play for ties out of some deeply ingrained cultural desire for everyone to "save face." There is of course plenty of evidence in Japanese history of a "competitive" spirit, and anyway, even before recent rule changes allowed longer games, less than 5% of pro games ended in ties. In the often violent National Hockey League and in the fiercely competitive professional soccer leagues around the world, up to one-third of games end in ties, yet many American commentators remain wedded to superficial stereotypes of national character that pit the assertive Western individual against the grinding Japanese collective.

This is not to conclude that professional baseball is the same in the two countries. But we must be careful not to exaggerate the differences or to attribute them only to dubious and often self-serving contrasts of national character. Two crucial characteristics of the Japanese game that set it apart from the American variety are its relatively small scale and the greater influence of teams' corporate owners.

DIFFERENT DIMENSIONS

The two most obvious differences between Japanese and American baseball are to do with scale. First, Japanese professional teams are much larger than American teams. Japanese clubs are allowed a roster of up to 70 players, divided into the first team and a "farm" unit. U.S. major league clubs are limited to 25 players.

Second, there are far fewer professional teams in Japan than in the U.S. There are 12 pro teams playing in 2 leagues in Japan, compared with 30 teams in 6 divisions of 2 leagues in Major League Baseball (MLB). Moreover, in the U.S., instead of an attached farm unit, there are 4 levels of minor leagues—AAA, AA, A, and rookie—for a total of over 200 professional minor league teams. Most minor league teams are franchised autonomous clubs. They have their own owners, they are often based in a different part of the country from the Major team, and they must operate to make money. On Japanese teams, bachelor players live in the same team dormitory, the first team and farm unit often share the same practice field, and players are sometimes moved daily between the 2 rosters. In contrast, the East Coast city where I

live is home to the New Haven Ravens, one of 5 independent franchises in the farm system of the Colorado Rockies, based 2,000 kilometers away in Denver and in only intermittent contact.

This has several consequences. First, it means that there are only about 840 professional players in Japan, but about 5,000 pros in the United States, assigned to a huge number of teams across the country. Japanese pro baseball is a much smaller world than that of MLB, and there are far fewer opportunities to become a pro player, coach, or manager in Japan. And even at the major league level in Japan, there is a far wider talent spread than on an MLB team. Thus, Suzuki Ichirō and Matsui Hideki, who along with 20 or so other players could surely play in the U.S. majors, are competing daily with and against other players who could barely make a AA team.

It also means that a Japanese club must often combine what are 2 separate functions in the United States: training young talent and playing the very best baseball. In the U.S., new players usually spend 2–6 years learning their way up the minor league system before making it with a major league team; and the vast majority will never even get to the majors. An American major league manager can assume that his players have already been taught professional fundamentals, but a Japanese manager and his coaches must do much more basic training of their players. One reason that there are so many coaches and so much practice on a Japanese club is that the farm unit is close to and part of the club.

Aggravating the limited scale of Japanese pro baseball is a rigid barrier with amateur baseball, which was legislated

in the 1960s after some celebrated shenanigans around the signing of an amateur star. This wall is beginning to break down, but for decades it has meant that retired professional players in Japan could not work as coaches, managers, or umpires for high school or college teams and leagues. In the U.S. these are important sources of employment for ex-players, and have helped to transmit techniques and a sense of professionalism to young players. Conversely in Japan, pro coaching, umpiring, and managing positions remain very much taken up by ex-professional players. In the smaller world of Japanese pro baseball, networks and connections are even more crucial than in the U.S.

CORPORATE OWNERSHIP AND CONTRACT PLAYERS

Eleven of the twelve Japanese clubs are wholly-owned subsidiaries of major corporations or corporate groups (the Hiroshima Carp is now independent, but it used to be owned by Toyo Kogyo (now Mazda). In contrast, most U.S. teams are owned privately by wealthy individuals or investor groups—the Yankees' George

Steinbrenner and the Dodgers' O'Malley family are famous examples. The Dodgers' recent sale to Rupert Murdoch's corporate group is only the most recent sign of an ongoing corporatization of U.S. baseball ownership.

However, just because Japanese pro teams are corporately owned, it is wrong to assume that Japanese baseball players are like regular salaried men, with lifetime employment and automatic seniority advancement. Japanese players are on annual contracts, which by the national tax code makes them independent contractors, not company employees: there is no tax withholding and no company pension plan. The salary spread between the highest- and lowest-paid players on the same team can be as much as 30 times. First-round [in the draft pick] rookie bonuses average ¥100,000,000 (plus more rumored under the table). But a player who doesn't perform, doesn't play, and if he doesn't play, he doesn't last long even under the most indulgent coaching. An average player will be released after six years in his mid-twenties into an economy with few openings for "mid-career" transfers!

Thus Japanese professional baseball is not just about connections; it is also about ability, like pro sports everywhere. This may seem obvious to Japanese fans, but foreigners may not appreciate the harshness of competition in Japanese baseball. Of course, Americans always point to the tough practices run by some teams (the notorious 1,000-*fungo* (catching fly balls) drill, for example, but this points to something else—the difficulty of success as a professional player. Baseball is a profession for which you need very special talent, for which there are few openings, and in which the chance of serious injury is always high. Mired in a severe economic recession, some Japanese corporations are beginning to embrace talent-based personnel policies. For better or worse, that has been the principle in Japanese professional baseball for a long time! Ⓜ

The author is professor of anthropology and chair of the Department of Anthropology at Yale University. He has been doing fieldwork in Japan for over twenty years on a variety of topics, and for the last two years has been working on a book, tentatively titled *The Hanshin Tigers and the Practices of Professional Baseball in Japan*.