

Baseball

without Borders

The International Pastime

EDITED BY GEORGE GMELCH

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The Hanshin Tigers & Japanese Professional Baseball

As Dan Gordon's chapter describes, Kōshien Stadium's opening in 1924 as Japan's first full-dimension baseball park was sponsored by the Asahi Newspaper Company as the new venue for the national schoolboy tournament that the newspaper had inaugurated in 1915 and had so rapidly gained popularity. But the prime mover in the stadium's construction, and then its owner and operator, was the Hanshin Electric Railroad Company. Why a railroad firm?

Particularly in Osaka and Tokyo but also in other growing Japanese cities, this was an era of fierce competition between private urban railroad companies to build terminals and commuter rail lines through the metropolitan regions, vying for riders, for customers at the department stores and other retail businesses built around their terminals and stations, and for residential land they bought and resold along their rail lines to ensure a steady ridership. Building tennis courts, swimming pools, amusement parks, and athletic stadiums were additional projects to induce riders, and this fueled a boom in recreational and spectator sports in the 1910s and 1920s. In the Osaka-Kobe-Kyoto metropolis, five major rail companies crisscrossed the region with rival lines, and four of them built sports stadiums that featured baseball. Amateur baseball at this time moved from being a purely school sport to becoming urban entertainment.

Companies began to sponsor employee teams around this time, and there were a few attempts at fully professional clubs, but it was not until the mid-1930s that a professional league of

six teams was established. The main force was the Tokyo-based Yomiuri Newspaper Company and its powerful owner, Shōriki Matsutarō, who had sponsored several visits by U.S. All-Stars (including Babe Ruth in 1934) and was stunned by the huge welcome and attention given the series. He then sent a group of Japanese players on an extended exhibition tour of the United States in 1935. The core of that team returned to become the Tokyo Yomiuri Giants. Several other newspaper and railroad companies joined in sponsoring teams that began tournament play in 1936. Among these was the Hanshin Railroad Company, which immediately recognized the opportunity to find more commercial use for its Kōshien Stadium and formed a team, the Hanshin Tigers.

The small league shifted from tournament to league format in 1938 and played into the wartime years before ceasing at the end of the 1943 season. Its revival was encouraged in 1947 by General Douglas MacArthur as a means of fostering an American spirit in occupied Japan. A two-league structure was inaugurated in 1950 in part because MacArthur believed it was a more democratic format than the original single league. The Hanshin Tigers chose to remain in the Central League with the Yomiuri Giants while other Osaka-area railroad teams (Hankyū, Kintetsu, and Nankai) joined the new Pacific League. After some fluctuation, eventually there were six teams in each league, with the league champions meeting in a postseason best-of-seven-games Japan Series. Japan Professional Baseball (JPB) has remained at twelve teams and never expanded as MLB did through the second half of the twentieth century.

Thus, before and after the national high school tournaments in April and August, for a season that now runs from early spring through late fall, Kōshien is home to another level of baseball, the professional game. And the team that calls the stadium home, the Hanshin Tigers, evokes the same intense media attention and fan feelings that Gordon has described for the schoolboy tournaments. There are few stadiums in the global baseball world like Kōshien that are so powerfully central to the parallel worlds of amateur and professional baseball.

The difference is the national sentimentality that has made Kōshien the country's mecca of high school baseball and the schoolboy athletic spirit versus the local and heavily partisan passions that Hanshin fans

throughout the region invest in a team that is deeply beloved but seldom successful. The team, many have observed, is the Boston Red Sox or the Chicago Cubs of Japanese professional baseball. In particular, because it chose to remain in the Central League with the powerful Tokyo-based Yomiuri Giants, Hanshin has come to bear the burden of Osakans' rivalry with the national capital in what remains the country's predominant spectator sport. The Giants have always been Japan's most popular and prestigious team, by success and by clout. Yomiuri had the first private television network in the 1950s and used to broadcast its team to the far corners of the country and then used that popularity and revenue to assemble an overwhelming team that ran through nine straight Japan championships from 1965 to 1973, consolidating Yomiuri control of the baseball world and hold on the national spectatorship.

Thus the Giants-Tigers rivalry is one of intensity rather than balance. In the fifty-four years since the two-league system, the Giants have won the Central League pennant thirty-one times and have been Japan Champions twenty times. In the same period, Hanshin has won the league title but four times and has taken only a single Japan Series. In the eighteen seasons since its sole 1985 championship, Hanshin finished in last place ten times and next-to-last three times. Its stunning league championship in 2003, under a manager brought in from the outside, was the most electrifying regional event of recent years. In 2004 it fell back to a distant fourth-place finish.

In this chapter I want to use Kōshien's other team, the Tigers, to fill out the reader's view of Japan's most venerable stadium and to sketch some of the more general features of professional baseball in Japan and its importance to Japanese society. There is some danger in relying on a single team—and a team as singular as the Tigers—and I shall try to distinguish its unique elements from its more generic characteristics.

Club Organization

One of the first things a visitor to Kōshien's other team will notice is its name—not that of a city but of a company. 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 business individuals or partners. Only recently have corporations begun to own and operate

clubs. In Japan, however, the teams have always been owned by major companies and run as subsidiaries. Public information about club balance sheets is as scarce in Japan as it is in the United States, but it is widely believed that most JPB clubs have always run deficits. They serve instead as publicity vehicles for the owning company and thus bear the names of their corporate owners, not the cities in which they play—the Hanshin Tigers and not the Osaka Tigers, the Chūnichi Dragons, not the Nagoya Dragons, and so forth.¹

Another distinctive feature of JPB is that the clubs themselves are very large organizations. JPB 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 (in 2004 Hanshin had sixty-eight). The seventy players are divided into two squads, a first team and a second team. The first team is the actual Major League team, with a roster limit of twenty-eight players. The remainder are registered to the “farm” team, which plays a short season of games against the farm teams of the other clubs.² Injuries and performances result in much up and down movement between the first and second teams during a season (in 2004 fifty-three of the Hanshin players appeared in a Major League game, including twenty-five different pitchers).

Such team sizes have several consequences, one of which is a 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 Kōshien; the ballpark there has been laid out in the exact dimensions of the parent park. Tiger Den also has a modern dormitory for bachelor players, which used to be mandatory but is now optional—and not particularly popular.

And because the seventy players range from the most talented stars to raw rookies, the Hanshin staff must devote a lot more time to teaching fundamentals than they would for a MLB club (which depends on its largely independent farm system to prepare and winnow young players). This is not just drill time but also coordination—there are constant structured practices and it takes detailed scheduling to coordinate the drills of a hundred players and staff. In this regard, JPB resembles less

MLB than the NFL, with its large staffs, highly orchestrated practices, and often dominant head coaches.

Above those on the field is the Hanshin “front office,” the club’s management and support staff (whose offices are actually underneath the center- and left-field bleachers at Kōshien). The large team size requires a large front office; Hanshin’s sixty-five employees compose a much larger organization than a typical MLB club, with positions ranging 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 an organization of over 160 employees.

The Hanshin Tigers club is embedded in an even larger corporate nexus. In Japanese business shorthand, the club is a “child company” or wholly owned subsidiary of the Hanshin Electric Railroad Corporation. The parent company preserves its original business, but it now controls a family of businesses, including department stores, travel agencies, air transport companies, land development companies, 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 and the Commissioner’s Office. In the case of Hanshin, Kuma Shunjiro served imperiously as owner for twenty years, from 1984 until his resignation in late 2004; he was replaced by the company’s CEO.

Thus, the business of Japanese baseball is more corporate than entrepreneurial, but this elaborate organization does not ensure harmony despite notions that Japanese prefer supportive collectivism. Indeed, the Hanshin organization is 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 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.

All clubs encounter these difficulties, although Hanshin is especially liable to them tensions because the club has always been the tail that wags the dog. Although Hanshin was the earliest of the surviving electric rail companies in Kansai, it lost out in the race to expand; it found itself with but a single twenty-mile east-west rail line from Osaka to Kobe, boxed in by the sea to the south and the powerful Hankyū Railroad to the north. Its most valuable corporate assets are Kōshien and the Tigers, and the club and its finances loom much larger than they do with other companies. The club’s fortunes very much determine those of its owner.

The Baseball Season

The rhythms of the professional baseball season in Japan would be familiar to any fan of U.S. baseball, although Japanese baseball has several distinctive features. Spring training is in the “south”—Okinawa and the southern island of Kyushu are current favored locations—and month-long camps open on February 1. Preseason exhibition games are played from late February through March. The 140-game regular season begins around April 1 and continues into mid-October. The best-of-seven Japan Series usually overlaps with the World Series. Most clubs have a postseason camp and rookie leagues in October and November. The off-season is busy with personnel issues: the player draft, free agent and team trades, and player salary negotiations.

The short distances between ballparks, 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 at Kōshien is 6:00 p.m.), and there are no doubleheaders. Teams play three-game series twice a week (Tuesday-Wednesday-Thursday and Friday-Saturday-Sunday), with Monday as a travel day. Given the six-team leagues, each team faces its five opponents twenty-six times, which gives an intensity and frequency to the five league rivals that is largely lost in MLB.

It is frequently said that Japanese players put in many more hours of practice than MLB players. 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 Caribbeans and North Americans alike.) 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 NBA and the NFL.

In Japan—indeed in most places—the situation is fundamentally different. The U.S. sports world is 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 hockey in Canada, and with soccer in many European and South American countries, baseball in Japan is the center sport. Sumo, soccer, golf, horse racing, and other sports fit around and within the baseball calendar.

What this means is that JPB 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 name; the media, which have invested resources in baseball reporting, need to generate nonstop news; and the players themselves, even those on the lowest rungs of the second squad, are playing for the club. The pressures—and the profits—for keeping the operations of baseball before the public even in the off-season (and even during breaks in the regular season) are enormous and go a long way toward 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 being standardized across wider regions, then being nationalized

and eventually “transnationalized” across societies. The earliest Japanese baseball organized itself around American rules, and the regulations and patterns of game play have changed in tandem with the American game. The JPB rulebook remains largely identical to the MLB rulebook; the innovation of a designated hitter by the American League was copied by the Pacific League in Japan. Equipment is also much the same; for instance, as in the United States, amateur associations allow metal bats, and learning to hit with the required wooden bats in the pros in both countries is a difficult transition.

Kōshien itself, as Gordon describes in his chapter, 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 infield play.³ 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. Managers select slightly livelier or deader baseballs according to their teams’ strengths.⁴

JPB 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 set-up time, and Japanese umpires are more indulgent toward 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 JPB games in the last fifty-four years). It is the time limits, of course, which offend the sensibilities of MLB purists for whom the sport is limitless: the foul lines continue out into infinity and the game continues as long as required to produce a winner.⁵

But JPB has constraints. As with most stadiums, Kōshien is in the city, and almost all fans come by public transportation—indeed, largely by Hanshin railroads and buses. Almost all games are evening games, urban transit shuts down late at night, and the clubs cannot risk inconveniencing tens of thousands of spectators of extra-inning games that extend into the early morning.⁶

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 JPB has tended to borrow such features of 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 must negotiate salaries with the club. And as independent contractors, they have no pension or other company benefits.⁷ 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 that of MLB, 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 career. There is less player movement among Japanese teams than in the American Major Leagues, but there is more than one might think. In 1998 eleven of the Hanshin Tigers' sixty-nine players were traded or otherwise signed from other Japanese teams, and with new foreign players and rookies, twenty-one of the sixty-nine were on the roster for the first time.

In general, compared with MLB, 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. In 2004 several JPB players broke through the 50-million-yen threshold (about \$4.55 million), although the highest Hanshin salary was \$2.7 million. At the other end of the scale, though, players are drafted 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 (the average U.S. professional club drafts forty-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 the Tiger roster hovers around 26–27, and there were only five older than 35 in 2004. Only fourteen of the sixty-eight players on the 2004 opening day roster had ten or more years in the pros; forty players had five years or fewer.

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 exactingly measure player performance as the basis for annual adjustments of salaries. In tracking the reported salaries of Hanshin players over the last ten years, I have calculated that fewer than half of the annual re-signings 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 sixty-eight-player roster. In 2004 a quarter of the players, those starting out or permanently stuck on the farm team, made \$40,000 to \$90,000; most made between \$100,000 and \$1,000,000, and only ten players exceeded the \$1 million mark. But 36 percent of the club's total payroll of about \$30 million encompassed the top five salaries.

The top salary in 2004 went not to Hanshin's outstanding thirteen-year veteran All-Star outfielder, Kanemoto Tomoaki; his \$2.36 million was second to the \$2.7 million paid to infielder George Arias, whose résumé included only three undistinguished years in MLB before heading for Japan. This draws attention to the pivotal but controversial place of foreign nationals in JPB. Professional baseball is multi-ethnic almost everywhere (except in Castro's Cuba), but the deployment and treatment of foreign players varies. In the early years of Japanese baseball little was made of Japanese Americans, White Russians, Taiwanese, and 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 a category of “hired bats” brought over with large salaries, special perks, and separate treatment. At present, about seventy-five of the eight hundred players in JPB are foreign nationals. In 2003 the Hanshin roster had six (from the United States, the Dominican Republic, and Australia), which is about average. Only three of them may be registered on the major team roster at any one time; the others keep in shape, sometimes impatiently, on the farm. All were given luxurious condominium housing, interpreters, separate hotels on road trips, and the freedom to follow their own training routines.

All but one of the Hanshin foreign players were released during or after the season (including Arias). Mercenaries are well compensated, but patience is short, adjustment is difficult, and their time is brief. A few find what it takes to succeed 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 warmups, 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 send reporters, photographers, announcers, and commentators to the ballpark. Such attention is welcome but also problematic for the club. The Yomiuri Corporation, which 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. 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 finds itself at the center of (and often at the mercy of) an intensely competitive Kansai region

media whose dominant yearlong subject is the team 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 from the Hanshin train station the several hundred yards 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 *kankeisha iriguchi* (official persons' entrance) for players, team officials, and the media, all of whom are funneled into a single 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 waits in the pressroom of the club offices and hangs 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 warmups. 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.⁸ However, as with all stadiums in Japan, they are banned from the team locker room and 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.⁹

Professional baseball's popularity rose with the increasing prominence of national media, and it became the national sport through television in the 1960s and 1970s. Of all the media, those which have come to drive the gathering and reporting of Tiger news are the daily sports newspapers, an important feature of other countries like Italy, France, Brazil, and Mexico, although not the United States.¹⁰ There are five national sports dailies, four of which date from the late 1940s, although the big jump in their circulation and notoriety occurred in the 1960s. Their circulations are 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. Professional baseball tends to dominate the papers' daily 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 the 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, and 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 who 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, they are not coordinated by either official cheerleaders or the stadium announcer. 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, marches, and chants for individual players (when first announced and when coming to bat) and for specific moments in the game (at the start, at pitching changes, for home runs, at the end of each victory, and so

forth), all of which are composed and copyrighted by the lead association, not by Hanshin.

In this, too, the chanting and cheering parallels the support given the school teams in the spring and summer tournaments, and indeed 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 cheerleading 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, which 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 games. 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 hypocritical provincialism. 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, indeed 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 “tenth player,” trying to intervene energetically.

Yet the discerning visitor will note one further aspect of Kōshien cheering: it is only done for 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 opportunities 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.

“Samurai with Bats”: Sporting Style in a Transnational Sportscape

Large player forces mobilized around a stern and commanding manager and panoply of coaches, engaged in extended seasons of coordinated and arduous training, deployed in contests that are drawn out by methodical probing for tactical advantage, egged on by coordinated cheering of the passionate spectators—all of this may well convince the spectator that s/he has come upon a sporting battlefield of “samurai with bats.” Indeed, the dominant image of Japanese baseball is that of a society that has actively and forcefully reshaped baseball’s original forms and spirit to fit a set of purposes that turn play into pedagogy, that subordinate the excitement of the contest to the demands of character building. We play baseball; they work baseball—and they are worse for it.

This is a powerful image, especially in the transnational world of baseball, because it is a vividly oppositional metaphor (setting the Japanese East against the U.S. West) that clarifies the often confusing task of sorting out what is common and what is different. That is, as a singular image and a universal label for baseball in Japan, it allows us to ignore important and intriguing differences across teams, across levels of play, and across history (that is, the differences and changes that fans often find most absorbing about the sport in their own society). It is also conveniently all-purpose. In one simple opposition (group work versus individual play), it purports to describe Japanese baseball (this is how they play it over there), to explain it (they play it that way because they’re samurai), and to judge it (usually negatively, because although we idealize cowboys, we castigate samurai). This is sport reduced to eternal, essential national character.

So what are we to make of such imagery? To what extent should we look out on the Kōshien field and see figurative warriors giving their all for the team? As our most perceptive writer on Japanese baseball, Robert Whiting, has shown, samurai baseball may be a stereotype, but it is one with real grounding in Japanese baseball. In part, this is due to historical legacy—Japanese baseball was an amateur school game for

fifty years before turning pro. In this regard, it is less like baseball in the United States and more like soccer and rugby in Great Britain and like football in the United States. All of these sports came out of elite schools in the late nineteenth century, a place and time that bred an ethic whereby games playing inspired virtue, formed character, and developed manliness. Sports were used to cultivate loyalty and obedience as well as the confidence to lead, and to channel men's military spirit toward service to the state. To make itself palatable and profitable with a public warmed toward sports as character building, pro baseball in the 1930s tried to adopt some of this amateur spirit into its own image. Famous managers, famous teams, and famous players all have appealed to reputed samurai qualities to explain themselves, to exhort others, and to distinguish themselves from the foreigners who fall outside this noble heritage.

But we must keep in mind three aspects of all this samurai talk over the decades. First is the amount of deliberate fabrication in modern Japanese notions of their "samurai," not unlike the selective amnesia that modern Americans have given to cowboy types. The samurai images that coaches and commentators hold up to their players as examples to follow bear about as much resemblance to warriors of the past as the Marlboro Man does to the original "cowboy" ranch hands of the 1870s and 1880s. To be sure, loyalty to the point of sacrifice to one's superior, the single virtue promulgated by samurai baseball, was central to the codes by which warriors lived in epochs past, but what is conveniently forgotten are the many forms that could take and the other virtues ennobled in the warrior's code, including overweening pride, moral purity, and sheer opportunism.

Second, loyalty itself has been redefined over baseball's history to suit the times. The "original" baseball samurai were the boys at the most elite prep school in the new nation, the First Higher School of Tokyo, celebrated for their victories over resident American teams in the late 1890s. However, this was a proudly self-run school club, free of adult authority—and soon replaced by a new orthodoxy of an autocratic adult-manager of college teams and early pro teams. This remains the high school model (where often a single adult coach must direct up to seventy aspiring high school kids), but the pro ranks have corporatized player standards; loyalty now is demanded to the impersonal authority

of a large organization. If today's pro player is a samurai, his bat is more a briefcase than a sword.

Third, we must note—because most Japanese inside and outside the baseball world certainly do note—the difficulties of actually coaching and performing “samurai” baseball, especially at the pro level. For every legendary example of 1,000-fungo drills, of pitchers' overextending their innings, and of unwavering obedience to managerial whims, there are undercurrents and counterexamples of petulance, irreverence, and outright resistance to these practices and demands. As is often the case with moral injunctions, the frequency with which they are demanded is a clue to the difficulties of eliciting acceptance.¹¹

This is where the Hanshin Tigers offer an instructive and entertaining angle. A number of its outward features—the overt hierarchies and proud inbreeding—are those idealized as virtues of Japanese-style baseball. But they have long coexisted with factional infighting, inept management, and disgruntled players, to which the media have devoted equal attention. The game at Kōshien is not samurai baseball as farce, but it does reveal samurai baseball as futility. And much of the allure of the Tigers for its long-suffering fans—especially the millions of Kansai residents into whose daily lives the team's fortunes and foibles percolate even when they are not paying attention—is in savoring and in hand-wringing over the constant efforts and inevitable failures to perform baseball as noble “samurai” sportsmen.

The Future

Kōshien Stadium is aging. The years have taken their toll on its physical condition, and as with the few classic grounds that remain in the United States, what is endearing tradition to some is an obstacle to modern comfort to others. A debate rages in Osaka about whether the stadium should be renovated or replaced, much like the controversial reconstruction talk about Fenway Park in Boston. For the near term, neither is likely because the Hanshin Group, the stadium's sole owner, lacks the capital for any major project.

But even more broadly, Japanese professional baseball is in turmoil. We must be careful about such inflammatory claims because crying wolf about crisis and impending doom is common—and useful—rhet-

oric across most professional sports. But there are three reasons to believe that several years into the future we may look back on 2004 as a watershed.

The first is the continuing “bright flight” to professional baseball in the United States. The increasing success of prominent stars, from Nomo and Ichirō to Matsui, only enhances the allure of MLB to Japanese players and to Japanese fans, who follow the games on ever-widening television coverage in Japan. And though the numbers are still small, another migration is perhaps even more portentous—that of young Japanese amateur players coming out of high school and college who are avoiding JPB altogether for rookie contracts and free agent tryouts with U.S. organizations. There are currently thirty-five Japanese playing in the United States; only a dozen or so are on Major League rosters and the rest are riding the buses and living off of meal money in the minor leagues. The Japanese clubs are understandably unhappy about this trend but are relatively impotent to slow the migration; the JPB agreement with MLB is a stopgap measure to regulate the sale of players under contract.

Second this external threat only exacerbates the longstanding financial difficulties of most of the corporate owners, including Hanshin. Large deficits, and parent company misgivings about them, are not new, but in 2004, after more than a decade of national economic stasis and corporate doldrums, several companies finally decided to throw in the towel. In February 2004 the two other Kansai-area teams, the Orix Blue Wave of Kobe and the Osaka Kintetsu Buffalo (both in the Pacific League), announced their intention to merge, and this precipitated months of warnings, proposals, and debates about further club sales, relocations, and mergers, about league realignments and retrenchment to a single-league format, and about the reorganization of baseball administration. Owners fought owners, the players union charged the owners with malfeasance and called the first strike in Japanese professional baseball history—a two-day walkout in September—and fans across the country organized in support of the players and against the owners.

When the 2005 season started, the two-league structure was intact, but little has been settled. The two clubs did merge to become the Orix Buffalos, and a new club, the Rakuten Eagles, was admitted to the Pacific League as its sixth team. Rakuten is sponsored by a new software

company and will play out of the northern city of Sendai. Meanwhile, the beleaguered Daiei retail chain sold its Fukuoka Hawks, winners of two of the last three Japan Series, to Softbank. Change will likely not end there, as other companies are trying to dump their teams and key owners are resisting approving new companies who want to buy in. A schedule of interleague games has been added to the 2005 regular season schedule, but there are still many demands and proposals under discussion (lowering the free agency requirement, renegotiating the agreement with MLB, strengthening the Commissioner's Office by consolidating some broadcast rights contracts, and so forth). Already the changes are having particular consequences for Hanshin because Orix and Kintetsu were the other two Kansai teams. Whether this will strengthen or threaten Hanshin's local preeminence and loyalty is uncertain.

As if American baseball and the Japanese economy don't offer sufficient dangers, a third factor that now faces JPB is a renewed threat from professional soccer. The opening of J. League professional soccer in 1991 scared the baseball world, which mobilized to minimize the soccer challenge by dissuading corporate support, keeping J. League teams out of major stadiums, and limiting soccer's access to television and press coverage. It worked, and the initial "new product" effect of J. League wore off by the late 1990s. Soccer interests hoped that Japan's cohosting of the World Cup in 2002 would fuel a second soccer boom, but this did not happen despite the publicity, the initial success of the Japan national team (soon outshined by the South Korea team), and the construction of soccer stadiums across the country.

Now, however, the 2006 World Cup in Germany and the 2008 Beijing Olympics loom. The enormous investment of resources and national prestige that China is making to strengthen its sports teams, in the context of its explosive economic growth (and Japan's continued weakness), has already inflamed the passions of the region's sports fans. And soccer will be a much more popular sports venue for East Asian rivalries than will baseball, still undeveloped in China. Combined with the effects of the issues above, this may be the moment when soccer is finally able to challenge and dismantle the hold baseball has had on Japan for more than a century.

All of these factors have precipitated heated debates in baseball cir-

cles, in the press, and among fans. Issues that have percolated for years are coming to the surface again—including the reform of free agency and the player draft, salary caps, interleague play, reorganizing front offices, instituting general manager positions, strengthening the Commissioner’s Office, and consolidating television rights and branding. Watching Japanese pro baseball try to reassert and reinvent itself over the next few years will be fascinating, and these arguments will be as consequential as the players’ contests on the fields themselves.

Notes

1. When professional J. League soccer began in 1991, it emphasized naming its teams for their home cities, which proved popular with fans. Some jpb clubs have now added their city to the team name (thus, Fukuoka Daiei Hawks for a team based in Fukuoka and owned by the Daiei retail chain).
2. The farm teams of the twelve clubs are organized into two leagues, Eastern and Western, which are geographically determined and thus do not coincide with the Central and Pacific League composition.
3. The reason for the all-dirt infield is improved drainage for the rainy season that runs from June through early July. Tarpaulins are not spread over the infield during rain, as they are in the United States.
4. All manufacturers must meet the common specifications of the Commissioner’s Office, but small differences are possible. A team can only use balls from three manufacturers during a single season and must use those of a single manufacturer per series, and samples must be given in advance to the opponent.
5. Of course such commentators fail to recognize the hypocrisy of complaining about time limits on game length while also bemoaning the time taken by long counts, mound meetings, and other ways of taking advantage of the very time limitlessness that they invoke as the essence of the sport’s purity.
6. For many clubs, neighborhood complaints (and lawsuits) about the disruptions of noise, stadium lighting, and large crowds are also constraining.
7. The club does provide medical treatment and insurance for job-related injuries.
8. Most stadiums in Japan have enclosed and air-conditioned press boxes, but Kōshien’s facilities remain unchanged. This is largely at the insistence of the

Asahi Newspaper Company, which wants to preserve the old-fashioned atmosphere of the schoolboy tournament.

9. In part this is because the locker rooms of older facilities like Koshien are barely big enough for the players, who are packed into a room of hooks, baskets, and open lockers that is less well-appointed than my old high school gym.
10. The United States and Canada are notable exceptions, for reasons that include the expansion of sports news desks within the regular urban and now metropolitan and national papers, the early development of television sports journalism, and the near disappearance of public transportation for commuting to work. Sports dailies in Japan are designed to be read on the rail and bus commute to work and on breaks at work.
11. Japan's all-time greatest catcher and later successful manager, Nomura Katsunori, has opined that during the 1960s, the era when the Yomiuri Giants were held up as a model of "samurai baseball" to the country and the world, the most important job of most managers was keeping their players out of jail.

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