More Than Just A Game

Japanese Americans and Baseball

by Gary Otake

Stockton Yamato Field, ca. 1920s. Courtesy of Takeo Utsumi.

The popcorn man is doing big business. The day is hot. Everything is all set for a perfect day at the ball park. Everything is here, no matter what the outcome may be. The outcome of the game and the outcome of the day do not matter. Like the outcome of all things, the game and the day in Lil' Yokohama have little to do with this business of outcome. That is left for moralists to work on years later...

Toshio Mori from *Yokohama, California,* ©1949. The Caxton Printers, Ltd. Caldwell, Idaho.

With a baseball heritage that begins at the turn of the century, Japanese Americans have cultivated a love for the game of baseball that has endured for almost one hundred years. Though this history is set firmly in the roots of the Japanese American experience, its rich legacy has remained unknown outside of the scrapbooks and memories of former players and fans. Truly, baseball has played an important role in the development of Japanese America, and Japanese Americans have played a fascinating, if overlooked, role in the history of baseball in the United States.

Diamonds in the Rough: Japanese Americans in Baseball presents for the first time this hidden history of Japanese American baseball, from the earliest teams to the present day legacies. In so doing, *Diamonds in the Rough* not only adds an important voice to the annals of baseball history, but also illuminates the historical context that existed beyond the boundaries of the playing field.

When we see the photograph of the all-Nisei Alameda Taiiku Kai team in the 1920s, we must not only recognize the creative adoption and adaption of America's national pastime by the Japanese American community, but we must acknowledge the discrimination and segregation from the larger society that forced the Japanese American community to build leagues of their own. Moreover, when we see an old pinstriped baseball uniform on display, we should not only celebrate the pride with which the player wore the uniform to represent his community, but we must also remember the player's mother who made this uniform out of the fabric taken from an old mattress so that her son could play his

Alameda Taiku Kai, ATK Stadium, ca. 1920s. Courtesy Setsu Nomura.

San Francisco KDC. ca. 1904. One of the first Issei teams. Courtesy of the Frank Tsyaki Family. NJAHS collection.

mes on the internment camp baseball field. Where we recognize the ingenuity of a people, we must also never forget the injustices they confronted in their lives.

When someone asks, "Were these guys good enough for the major leagues?," we should point to the photo of the four Fresno Nisei standing besides Babe Ruth and Lou Gerhig and marvel at the possibilities, but also remember that the prospects of leaving home to pursue a career playing baseball was rarely more than a passing consideration. Leaving home, after all, meant abandoning family, friends, and the community. In the everyday lives of most Japanese American baseball players, it was enough to be the hometown hero and to wage battle every Sunday against opponents from the next town down the road. From this perspective, we cease to see Japanese American baseball as a shadow of the 'real thing' and to accept it on its own terms as a product of a unique time and place.

The Japanese Connection

Ironically, when Japanese immigrants made the voyage across the Pacific to America during the last decades of the nineteenth century, they not only brought with them dreams of success, they brought a knowledge and appreciation for baseball back to the land of its origins. This knowledge made them unusual among other immigrants at the time, as most countries in the world had no prior exposure to or understanding of America's national game.

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Japan, in contrast, had adopted baseball in the 1870s during the ambitious years of the Meiji era, when the Japanese were recreating a national identity to fit the needs of the modern times. Baseball was seen as a bridge between two cultures, as it embodied Japanese values such as harmony, perseverance, and self-restraint while simultaneously reflecting the ideals and spirit of the rising West.

By the turn of the century, baseball had firmly caught on among Japanese students who were eager to prove their skill and competitiveness to the world. The team from the First Higher School (Ichiko) in Tokyo in particular, became a powerhouse within Japan. Demonstrating how quickly they had learned the finer points of baseball, they beat American teams stationed in Yokohama in ten out of twelve games between the years 1896 and 1904. These victories were highly celebrated in the Japanese press and served to solidify a national commitment and passion towards baseball.

In the next couple of decades, baseball caught the imagination of the

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Tule Lake, April 4, 1944. National Archives, NJAHS collection.

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Japanese public when the top university teams around Tokyo- Meiji, Keio, Waseda, Hosei, Rikkyo, and Tokyo (dubbed the "Big Six") - waged battle for the national championship of Japan. These games often attracted over 60,000 fans and were matched in competitiveness and intensity only by America's annual "World Series."

The First Teams: 1899 to 1919

Coming from a country with such a strong interest in baseball, it is not surprising that the Issei started their own teams shortly after settling in the U.S. In 1899, the first known Japanese American team - the Excelsiors - was organized in Honolulu. Within a decade, many more teams were formed across the islands and highly competitive leagues developed. Mirroring the ethnic divisions in Hawaiian society, these leagues formed along ethnic lines, with Japanese American teams competing against Chinese American, Portugese, Hawaiian, and *haole* teams.

The earliest known mainland Japanese American baseball team is the San Francisco Fujii club, a team of Issei players which formed in 1903, the first year of the modern World Series. Other cities with large Japanese American populations also developed Issei teams around this time. Seattle, Los Angeles, and Honolulu, for instance, all had teams by 1905 and organized leagues by 1910.

Alamedo Kono All Star Team aboard the Korea-Maru en route to Japan, 1927. Courtesy of Vicki Kawakami.

These first teams were primarily organized for the enjoyment of the players wishing for some much needed recreation. But there were other motives as well. Many Issei were aware that baseball could provide a common bond between the Japanese immigrant community and the dominant white society. Through a shared love of baseball, it was hoped communication and perhaps even respect could be established.

The Los Angeles Nippons, made up of Southern California's top Nisei players, competed in the local semi-pro league against mostly white competition. Los Angeles, CA, ca. 1931. Courtesy of George Matsuura Family.

However, except in isolated instances, these diplomatic goals were not always achieved through baseball. Despite playing baseball with All-American fervor and ability, Japanese immigrants continued to face hostility from the general public that could not readily be overcome.

The Golden Era: 1920 to 1941

The 1920s and 1930s were the heyday of Japanese American baseball. With the rise of the America-born Nisei generation, baseball activities grew to new heights, reflecting a renewed optimism in finding a place in America. Every community with enough players had a baseball team, and leagues flourished in Japanese American settlements all over the West. From San Diego to Seattle, San Jose to Salt Lake City, people were going baseball crazy.

Naturally, top notch teams developed in cities with large Japanese American populations. But many small towns, boasting home grown talent, also fielded powerhouse teams which were the communities' pride and joy. Friends, fans, and families packed the grandstands on Sunday afternoons and crowds often numbered in the thousands for the "big games." No other social event could match the power of baseball in bringing people

together. But more than just recreation, baseball played an important role in the development of social and cultural concepts like "ethnic identity" and "community" for a rapidly growing Japanese American population. As former sports writer Fred Oshima recalls, "Japanese American baseball served a meaningful socio-economic role and entertainment lifestyle for this closely knit ethnic group on the wrong side of the tracks."

Building Bridges...

Like the Negro Leagues for African Americans, Nisei baseball was a vital and vibrant way for Japanese Americans to participate in America's "National Pastime." Excluded from mainstream life, Japanese Americans created their own baseball institutions in response to the discrimination and hardship they faced in their daily lives.

Yet, more than any other activity, baseball provided a much needed common bond between Japanese Americans and other groups. In the spirit of friendly competition, Nisei teams sometimes played against teams made up of white, Black, and Mexican players, as well as other Asian Americans like the Chinese and Filipinos. Despite the segregation that kept groups apart during these times, baseball brought people together who shared a love for the game.

Moreover, some Nisei were given the chance of a lifetime to play on competitive goodwill tours to Japan. These tours were important in many ways for the Nisei. First, they were able to visit the land of their parents and to meet family for the first time, a rare opportunity that many ballplayers still recall with fond memories. In addition, the baseball skills, knowledge, and "American" style of play Nisei ballplayers took with them to Japan were critical influences in the development and improvement of baseball in Japan. Teams from Fresno and Los Angeles, for instance, dominated play in Japan and set high standards for Japanese teams to emulate.

Baseball Behind Barbed Wire: 1942 to 1945

With the entry of the US into World War II, the federal government in 1942 ordered 120,000 Japanese Americans living on the West Coast to be forcibly removed from their homes and detained in ten internment camps in desolate areas of America.

In every camp, internees attempted to counter the boredom and harsh conditions of internment life by developing thriving sports activities. Baseball, in particular, provided a much needed diversion for players and fans alike. Internees at Gila River, for instance, developed a year round baseball league with 32 teams and championship games drawing crowds into the thousands. As George Omachi recalls, "It was demeaning and humilating to be incarcerated in your own country. Without baseball, camp life would have been miserable."

Sports and competition, however, were not the exclusive activities for boys and men. Camp life gave women and girls the opportunity to also participate heavily in sports. Softball, basketball, and volleyball were all played with enthusiasm and genuine stars developed from the challenges of competition.

Post War

Japanese American baseball did manage to continue through the difficult resettlement period after the conclusion of World War II. In fact, some areas saw a resurgence of Nisei baseball in the 1950s that continued through the 1960s into the 1970s.

Yet, social conditions after the war forever altered the dynamics of baseball in Japanese American communities. The passing of the Issei, who were baseball's most passionate fans, severely altered the composition of community support and baseball lost the function and meaning it had prior to the war. In addition, more opportunities in mainstream culture for the younger Nisei and Third-generation Sansei eroded the social need for baseball as they found interests in areas previously denied to them. Although many fine teams and players developed during this era, Nisei baseball eventually faded to the background as the younger generation left the ethnic communities in record numbers.

Legends and Legacies

Though the heyday of Japanese American baseball may have passed, it still has the remarkable power to bring people together. With the resurgence of interest in baseball history, families are looking again at the old scrapbooks with renewed interest, and the stories of grandparents are being told to curi-

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Kids playing catch in an alley. From the Takuritsu Morita Alameda Taiiku Kai album. ca. 1920s. Courtesy of Sets Nomura.

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After the war, softball leagues continued to provide a common ground for women to display their talent and skills.

Nance Ito

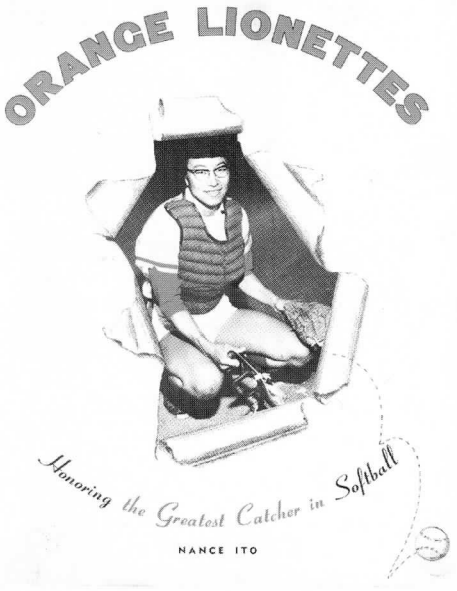
Softball champion

Nance Ito, on 1st base, Courtesy of Virginia Ito.

Nance Ito, the "Skipper," is a legend in Women's Softball. Ito was a catcher for the Orange Lionettes (San Diego) for 14 years, participated in 18 national championships. She was placed on the National All Star Team 13 times from 1960 to 1970.

Nance Ito, was raised in Denver, Colorado and started playing baseball at age 13. She played in the Japanese Softball League, and in a women's league in Brighton. She went on to play for the Bank of Denver and then went to the National Softball Tournament.

Her extraordinary ability eventually led her to an outstanding career with the Orange Lionettes, a Southern California fast pitch softball team that won four national championships. She



Nance Ito, Hall of Fame Catcher for the Orange Lionettes. 1969, Courtesy of Virginia Ito.

held the record for the most doubles in National championship games. She made only 10 errors out of 1,401 chances. In 1970, Nance played in a World Championship representing the U.S. in a game in Osaka, Japan. Voted All-American thirteen times, Nance reached the pinnacle of success in 1982 when she was inducted into the National Softball Hall of Fame in Oklahoma City, OK.

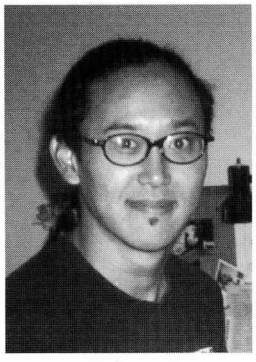
Following her career with the Lionettes, she and Nancy Welborn took on the managing of a professional team in San Diego after which Ito managed the team for another year.

"We didn't have any superstars...but everyone gave 110% and we came out on top," recalled Nance. Her quite determination and hustle was an inspiration to younger players.

ous grandchildren. For a people whose history has often been so painful to recall, it is with pleasure that memories of those distant Sunday afternoons are relived.

Nowadays, baseball may not be the only game in town, but a new generation of Japanese American youngsters still get together to play baseball, forming teams and friendships based on a shared ethnic and cultural background. Significantly, these baseball teams are one of the few ties to the Japanese American community for many youth. As a reflection of the times, these teams are increasingly diverse.

Although the future of Japanese American baseball is uncertain, its legacy will continue. After all, more than any other activity, baseball symbolizes the pattern of inclusion and exclusion from mainstream American life that Japanese Americans have experienced in the U.S. By keeping this history alive, we not only acknowledge the Japanese American baseball pioneers, but we enrich our understanding of this community's resilience, pride, and contributions to the diverse cultural heritage of this country.



Gary Otake recently received his M.A. from San Francisco State University in Ethnic Studies. He worked with NJAHS on the baseball exhibition as project coordinator. He is NJAHS' assistant curator. He is married to Joy Weir and resides in San Francicsco.