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Hardball

January 8, 2010 in [Tales from Taiwan](#) by [prkatz](#) | [Permalink](#)
By Paul Katz



This year's holiday cheer has been dampened by a series of events that have shaken Taiwan's sporting world – the [abrupt release](#) by the Sinon Bulls (興農牛) baseball team of All-Star catcher [Yeh Chun-chang](#) 葉君璋, as well as the fishy circumstances surrounding his aborted attempt to resume his career with the Brother Elephants (兄弟象).



Almost an iconic figure in Taiwanese baseball, Yeh is known as the Iron Man (無敵鐵金剛) for his grit and dedication. He was never renowned for his offense (what with a lifetime .233 batting average and just 6 homers in 14 seasons), but he has strong caught-stealing percentage (36%; nearly 50% for two seasons) and is adept at handling pitchers.

Yeh also possesses an outstanding knowledge of the game, and many players [attributed their enhanced skills](#) to Yeh's tutelage. A constant starter for Taiwan's national team, Yeh saved the game-tying run in a key 2008 Olympic qualifier against Canada by blocking the plate against a much larger player.

Yeh turned 37 just over two months ago, making him far older than most of his peers who don the "tools of ignorance", yet Bulls fans had expected the team to reward his 10 years of service with a retirement ceremony and appointment as assistant coach. Those [dreams have now been dashed](#). What is particularly disturbing is that of the three players the Bulls released during the past year (the other two are 郭勇志 and 曾華偉), all had assumed key roles in the recently formed players union. While the other two had struggled with less than stellar seasons, Yeh enjoyed a strong year in 2009, especially after having to take over all of the backstopping chores when the other catcher he had been platooning with was injured. This has led to considerable speculation that Yeh may have been singled out for harsh treatment due to his decision to [lead the new union](#). It is also worth noting that the Bulls management was vehemently opposed to the union, and had initially threatened to disband the team should any players join, only to back down when the entire team signed up.

The circumstances surrounding Yeh's failed attempt to join the Elephants are equally controversial. Initially, the Elephants claimed to be uninterested, but shortly afterwards stated that Yeh would sign after agreeing to a [30% pay cut](#) but being allowed to keep his players union post (a rather striking development in light of the fact that the Elephants are the sole team whose players have not joined). This was followed by the Bulls rapid-fire issuance of a [statement threatening to disband](#) should any other team sign former players who had been released for "moral and disciplinary problems" (因道德及風紀問題). "Moral problems" is a euphemism for being involved in match-fixing, but Yeh has a sterling reputation. This suggests that he was branded as having a "disciplinary problem", most likely due to his defying management's wishes by helping to organize the players union.

The Bulls higher-ups subsequently claimed that the above statement did not apply to Yeh, but negotiations between Yeh and the Elephants quickly fizzled. There are also claims that some form of [collusion involving Bulls and Elephants management](#) may have occurred, and some members of the Elephants staff have admitted to being contacted by their Bulls counterparts. Regardless of what the facts may be, Yeh's [career appears to be over](#). [Revenge has indeed been served cold](#), in what seems a shabby way to treat a great player who has given so much to Taiwanese baseball.

The above events have sparked a storm of protest, with the [Bulls website](#) being inundated with comments by distraught, disappointed, and disgusted fans. Many are vowing not to buy Bulls tickets, while others are calling for the team to follow through on its repeated threats to disband or at least allow a change of management. The long-term extent of damage remains to be seen, and the Bulls are blessed with a crop of exciting young players, but for the moment the organization's reputation [appears to have been tarnished](#). Some young players are now [postponing plans to sign with the Bulls](#).

All this indicates that [systemic failures](#) continue to plague Taiwanese baseball. While the league (the CPBL) has instituted some reforms, including a restricted form of free agency and minimum monthly salaries, it is apparently powerless to persuade some teams to treat their players with greater respect or commit to effectively cultivating new talent by implementing a viable minor league system. In many ways, the current situation reminds one of American baseball in early 20th century, which also witnessed its share of controversy and scandal.

As for the government, its response seems limited to ["taking note"](#) (關注、了解) of the situation. The Presidential Office recently organized a "blue-ribbon" commission to reform Taiwanese baseball (President Ma's wife is a loyal Elephants fan), and a number of meetings have been held, but not a single player has been invited to take part. One must also note the recurrent [failure to imprison the gangster kingpins](#) at the root of the gambling problem. Teams have been disbanded, and careers ruined, but when it comes to match-fixing in Taiwan it seems that crime does indeed pay, so long as one is not a player.

It now looks like the players have finally decided to stand up and fight for their rights. The players union is threatening to [expose unfair practices](#) such as collusion, while Yeh is contemplating a [lawsuit](#) despite the risks involved. Through the years, he has sacrificed himself for team and country. It may now be time for him to do so for the good of the game he loves.

Note: As I was completing this post, a news flash appeared stating that [the other Bulls catcher has confessed](#) to involvement in match-fixing. One wonders who will catch for the Bulls now...