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Articles

Imperial Fastballs: The Cultural Imperialism of American Baseball

By Cameron Van Note

Abstract: From the eighteenth and nineteenth century Imperialism was a major instigator for conflict across the globe, being split into many different subcategories such as economic, cultural, and military imperialism. This paper looks at the aspect of American Baseball being used as a tool of cultural imperialism over Japan prior to, and well after, World War II. Baseball in Japan was different than other examples of Imperialism because of how Japan accepted and integrated baseball culture into their own, resulting in Japanese and American players bonding over the culture surrounding the game. It was not easy to form these bonds however, and the change of ideals towards race, nationality, and culture, would be required to make the sport as we know it today.

Politics has been intertwined with sports for generations. Colin Kaepernick protesting racial inequalities in the US, national pride in global events such as the Olympics or the World Cup, and exhibition matches of US sports being played in London are all examples of the current ways politics and civil rights are tied to sports. Since the nineteenth century baseball has played a role in US expansionism particularly in Japan. However, in Japan, the

imperialist push for baseball took a different turn leading up to and post-World War II. Instead of merely adopting American imperialist views of baseball, the Japanese adopted and transformed the American culture of the sport and created their own relationship with baseball. Doing this was not what Americans envisioned when teaching Japanese citizens baseball during the Meiji reforms in the late nineteenth century. The Meiji reforms period, 1868-1912, was a massive nationalist movement that also wanted to adopt certain western ideals—including cultural products such as baseball—to modernize Japan.

So how and why did the Japanese assimilate American baseball culture into their own? The Japanese were resistant to foreign influence but would eventually adopt the sport as their national pastime, creating new political connections due to Japanese players making their way to the American leagues and with American players playing in Japanese leagues. One of the first American players to play in post-WWII Japanese leagues, Glenn Mickens, experienced this firsthand. Mickens was a pitcher for the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1958 before he moved on to play for the Kintetsu Buffaloes where he would be when international baseball laws were introduced, “When Ron Bottler and I got invited over there, Japanese baseball was an outlaw league. After I had been there about a month, they called me into the office and wanted to know what the reserve clause was and the whole bunch of other things...”¹

The reason his managers wanted to know was because of the backlash that came from American teams, specifically the Brooklyn Dodgers. The Dodgers would regret that decision and demand that future Japanese teams ask for permission before signing an American player. “They showed me a letter from the vice president of the Dodgers that said the Dodgers were highly regretful that the Buffaloes had taken one of their players and signed him to a Japanese contract. From then on, the Japanese had

¹ Robert K. Fitts, *Remembering Japanese Baseball: An oral History of the Game* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005), 68.

to get permission from the United States before they signed any American players.”² Mickens, alongside Japanese players such as Wally Yonamine and Hirofumi Naito, would be one of the first players, American or Japanese, to experience the strange circumstances around the culture and politics of baseball in Japan after World War II, which helped form the sport we know today.

Baseball & Cultural Imperialism

The imperial age of the nineteenth century by western powers was a major issue for Asian countries. During this period western powers wanted to spread economic, political, militaristic, and cultural influence to control the populations of “lesser nations.” However, Japanese culture would act differently towards this imperialist expansion. Japan would adopt certain American ideals because they would benefit from them or they followed a similar set of rules and honor-based ideals already. Satoshi Shimizu analyzed this concept by looking at the historical research of baseball done by Ki Kimura, “He analyzed how the spirit of professionalism was established in the development of baseball from the Meiji era to the establishment of professional baseball...”³ During WWII baseball was played by prisoners on both sides in prisoner of war camps, creating an unusual bond between the soldiers and their cultures. This bond would be one of the few connections that lasted through the post-WWII cultural “revolutions” and changes that came to the country.⁴ For decades the Japanese leagues and American leagues would stay separate other than occasional exhibition games with American teams in Japan, but the culture gap between the two leagues would continue to widen until the leagues crossed paths on a large scale, with the

² Ibid., 68.

³ Satoshi Shimizu, “The Creation of Professional Sports Leagues in Japan: A Cultural History of Human Network,” *International Journal of the History of Sport* 27, no. 3 (2010): 556.

⁴ John W. Dower, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999).

transition of Japanese players to the Major Leagues in the US, something which had an uncertain effect on US baseball fans. However, Japanese players quickly proved themselves to be just as talented and gifted as American players, with many baseball fans considering Japanese all-stars to be some of the best players to have ever lived. This includes Wally Yonamine, Kenichi Zenimura, Hideo Nomo, Ichiro Suzuki, and most recently Shohei Ohtani. Their stories and experiences in the transition from Japanese baseball to American baseball details the ever-growing history, national pride, and culture of the sport of baseball.

Sports play a vital role in the lives of billions of people from all backgrounds. Sports such as football—soccer in the United States—and rugby are two sports that influence the most countries in the world. These sports are a massive, borderless community, connecting people with one another from opposite sides of the planet. Postcolonial and revisionary historians ask, “have sports been used as a form of cultural imperialism?” This question is discussed when looking into the sport and practices of American Baseball and how it was spread to Japan. Gerald R. Gems states that the past “manifest destiny” rhetoric of the United States would carry over to sports once the US cemented its global power, “...the United States has been in a continual imperial mode since its colonial status, pushing ever westward. Once assured of continental dominance, it proceeded to international aspirations, and by the end of the twentieth century, to global expectations...”⁵ Global expectations were what the US looked for, be it militarily, economically, or culturally, and all three of these are isomorphic in a sense, in that they interact with each other in order to spread faster.

Culture is what defines the people of a nation, their entertainment, their politics, and their social interactions. Edward W. Said states that there are two definitions for the word culture; first, that culture is often explained as an aesthetic view into a

⁵ Gerald R. Gems, "The Athletic Crusade: Sport and Colonialism in the Philippines." *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 21, no. 1 (2004): 1-15.

nation, the economic, social, political, and pleasures of that nation.⁶ Culture is a narrative look into the lives and daily routines of citizens in a nation. The second point that Said references about culture is that it is a “refining and elevating element,” allowing that society to show what they can offer the world and how they can counter the aggressive modernization and capitalist ideals of the world.⁷ When Said examines the system of imperialism he analyzes the work of Conrad and states, “imperialism is a system. Life in one subordinate realm of experience is imprinted by the fictions and follies of the dominant realm.”⁸ Imperialism has been debated plentifully, from how it started to the different types of imperialism. However, imperialism has always been a system of imposing a dominant nation’s will upon that of a weaker nation. Imperialism spreads through the military, economy, and culture, but it stems from a greater sense of nationalistic pride.

Nationalism, the pride someone feels for their country, the nation they feel connected to through religion, language, or race, creates a competitive mindset for many citizens. The communities that form around nationalism according to Benedict Anderson in his book *Imagined Communities* are imagined and should have no merit behind them, “Nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it invents nations where they do not exist.”⁹ The formation of nations leads to so called “competition” between them. This “competition” is seen as one nation being the dominant power through industrial, technological, military or moral means, which the non-dominant nation does not have, making the non-dominant nation inferior in the minds of the dominant nation.¹⁰ This imposition of cultural influence, as with baseball in Japan, is woven into the everyday lives of the people primarily through

⁶ Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf: distributed by Random House, 1993), xii-xiii.

⁷ *Ibid.*, xiii.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Benedict R. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* Revised ed. (New York: Verso, 2006), 6.

¹⁰ Said. *Culture and Imperialism*, xii.

entertainment and the daily news. By doing this it ensures that the maximum amount of people of the so called non-dominant nation will be exposed to these new cultural activities, to assimilate the people.

Cultural imperialism means a culture spreads in some way, the most prominent way the US has spread its influence is through war, conflict, and most importantly, established military bases around the globe. This spreading of influence is important to the US, as Noam Chomsky references in his book *Hegemony or Survival*, in that the US has a “grand strategy” for gaining global power.¹¹ This grand strategy is an attempt to maintain the world in such a way that the US has no competition and states it has the right to declare a “preventive war” in the face of threats to the country.¹² This strategy is a modern development, although this practice of expansion has been used, and is a common part, of US history, “the ideological need to consolidate and justify domination in cultural terms that has been the case in the west since the nineteenth century, and even earlier.”¹³ US cultural imperialism and global influence increased post-World War II due to the Cold War and the competition between the capitalist US and communist USSR. Said indicates that in 1963 scholars knew and argued that imperialism still played a major role in US economic, political, social, and militaristic global influence.¹⁴ The spread of US culture in the terms of baseball can be seen even in the middle of WWII when US troops would play baseball in prisoner of war camps, which helped to create a bond between those soldiers and Japanese soldiers. This type of imperialism could be seen in every conflict during and after WWII in Japan, Korea, Vietnam, and Western Europe.

¹¹ Noam Chomsky, *Hegemony or Survival: America's Quest for Global Dominance*, 1st Owl Books ed. American Empire Project (New York: Henry Holt, 2004), 11.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 184

¹⁴ Ibid., 282.

There is a difference when looking at Japan. Japan was absorbing western culture and influence during the Meiji period which lasted 1852-1912. This period saw major changes to the country with the adoption of western modernization, industrialization, forms of government, models of education and art, and, of course, sports.¹⁵ Japan brought western culture to their nation through western teachers employed to aid in the transition to western ideals. Many Americans traveling to Japan saw the country as having a cultural weakness and expressing racist sentiments in some cases due to not having athletic clubs or sports.¹⁶ The first to see the need for physique and health of Japanese students was Horace Wilson, who brought baseball equipment with him to Japan in 1871.¹⁷ Wilson, among other western teachers in Japan, thought that baseball would work as a great tool to break down cultural barriers between the two nations. The adoption of western ideals was poorly negotiated, allowing multiple ports to be granted to American authority, and many scholars in Japan at the time felt no need for western ideals in Japan including athletic programs in schools.¹⁸ Sport was seen as a way to overcome the tensions involved with change, and the ideals of loyalty, honor, practice and skill were traits in team sports that the Japanese admired. These traits translated well for the Japanese because they were similar to traits they practiced before the Meiji reforms.¹⁹ During an interview at a Japanese baseball game, a fan said that if America did not invent baseball, then Japan would have. This shows how drawn towards and close to baseball the Japanese feel.²⁰ However, as with any imperialistic force, a backlash to the reforms and American influence would arise. This

¹⁵ Gems, "The Athletic Crusade," 30.

¹⁶ Donald Roden, "Baseball and the Quest for National Dignity in Meiji Japan," *The American Historical Review* 83, no. 3 (1980): 520.

¹⁷ Gems, "The Athletic Crusade," 31.

¹⁸ Roden, "Baseball and the Quest for National Dignity in Meiji Japan," 512.

¹⁹ Gems, "The Athletic Crusade," 31.

²⁰ "Begin Japanology – High School Baseball," filmed 2016, YouTube Video, 27:59, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A3puTgRqZ48>.

resistance was not entirely like traditional resistance to a dominant nation however, the resistance of a culture is set by a series of tasks. These tasks, as stated by Said, were to first reclaim, rename, and re-inhabit the land. This to be followed by the search for the culture's own authenticity, assertions, and identification.²¹ The US was already successful however; Japan had already integrated baseball and western culture into their own.

Japan would soon begin to change the culture that the US was trying to import with baseball. Japan to this day has different rules, leagues, respect, excitement, concessions, and mindset about baseball compared to American baseball. Because of this alteration to baseball by implementing their own culture, could this be a form of cultural exchange? Looking at how baseball was brought to Japan it can be seen in that fashion, "thinking about cultural exchange involves thinking about domination and forcible appropriation: someone loses, someone gains."²² Cultural exchange clearly has its faults, because one way or another someone suffers from it. However, this exchange has been theorized as useful in terms of adopting only certain aspects of American culture into Japanese culture, choosing what they want to incorporate as Ho Chi Minh believed in Vietnam.²³ Ho Chi Minh, stated Said, had originally believed that aspects of Western culture could help end the power of colonialism; this theory was never tested however and resistance in Vietnam would change.²⁴ This theory, however, would work in cases like baseball, becoming essentially two sides of the same coin; Japanese on one side, American on the other, and baseball the metal in between.

Early Japanese Baseball Expansion

Baseball has always been considered the national pastime of the United States, and this idea of having a national sport where one's

²¹ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 226.

²² *Ibid.*, 195.

²³ *Ibid.*, 196.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

patriotism could be expressed helped the process of assimilating baseball into Japanese culture. It was not just the culture of baseball that influenced the people of Japan; economic influence would soon follow. Surrounding sports is a large economy of players, coaches, equipment, fields, and more—the economic upside of spreading sports to other countries was clear to the US Money spoke to the people, “The marketing of American popular culture, athletes, and leagues themselves greatly expanded under the shrewd guidance of corporate-minded commissioners.”²⁵

Baseball and sports would also be used in the twentieth century as a way to accommodate high school students through baseball and softball scholarships. It was also a way to increase the reach of commercial capitalist culture.²⁶ Companies would form around the sport in order to supply the equipment needed, creating a new and large market. Japanese citizens would return from the US bringing home with them equipment and a new love for the game of baseball and they shared that love in their home nations.²⁷ This practice would not work for long. In 1906, Japan would establish their own companies, like the Mizuno Company, to supply equipment in order to resist the high import costs of American equipment.²⁸

Baseball was the athletic embodiment of the American people, the original idea of spreading the sport was based on enlarging American cultural influence around the world.

There was an implicit assumption that, if British, French, Or Egyptian youth could begin to experiment with baseball on their own, they would also come to appreciate the depth of American ingenuity and determination. In this sense, baseball

²⁵ Gerald R. Gems, Linda J. Borish, and Gertrud Pfister, *Sports in American History: From Colonization to Globalization* (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 2008), 308.

²⁶ Gems, “The Athletic Crusade,” 36.

²⁷ Roden, “Baseball and the Quest for National Dignity in Meiji Japan.” 524.

²⁸ Gems, “The Athletic Crusade,” 37.

could enlarge the American cultural sphere of influence and bring greater respect for the nation around the world.²⁹

This was a change in the talks of cultural imperialism when discussing Japan and baseball. The game was catching on in Japan as Americans felt it should around the world, but Japan changed the plan by fully absorbing baseball into their culture, and through this making their own baseball culture.

The next stage of adopting American baseball culture was sending eager Japanese college students to the United States to learn baseball technique from its creators. The American side of this was to stage exhibition games between two American teams, like the Chicago White Sox and the New York Giants in 1913, in Tokyo.³⁰ This would be the opening of inter-league play between professional American teams and Japanese teams. This fueled nationalistic powers in both countries. However, Japan was on the rise in the baseball world in the terms of skill and size; the people of Japan would begin to turn away from American players and teams that would visit, and turned to their own teams and players for the first time.³¹ Nationalistic pride began to sweep the country, people wanted the autographs of Japanese players not American. Japanese sporting goods companies offered equipment sponsored by Japanese players and not American stars. This along with the racist sentiment the US still held against the Japanese led to the deterioration of the political bonds pushed in the years prior. The culture of baseball was still there and always will be, but the connection that the US was trying to establish with the people of Japan failed. The new imperialistic view of Japanese politics saw capitalist intervention as a problem. Baseball would now be used as a tool for prewar-time politics.

From 1909-1934, American exhibition games were being used to spy on, gather information about, and build political

²⁹ Roden, "Baseball and the Quest for National Dignity in Meiji Japan," 518.

³⁰ Gems, "The Athletic Crusade," 37.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 41.

relations with Japan, such as in the last pre-war tour that included all-star players Lou Gehrig, Babe Ruth, and Moe Berg.³² The Japanese side of this was more divisive; author Robert K. Fitts writes in his book *Banzai Babe Ruth*, that during this same tour there were foiled assassination plots on the American all-stars.³³ Baseball players on both sides truly became ambassadors for their respective countries. The Japanese nationalism that was spawned from baseball was now a tool of “resistive force” as Gems calls it. Resistive force through baseball would reach its peak when newly formed Japanese professional leagues wanted a “true world series” to beat the US at baseball on the global stage.³⁴ The US response to this was to support a true world series as the start of a surrogate war, but the imperialist military campaigns against China would change that and the view of Japan as a whole at the global level. Baseball, by the start of World War II, was used as “preparation for hostilities” against those that introduced them to the sport.³⁵

Baseball started out as a way for the US to increase their influence over Japan, and to say that it did not make an impact is an understatement. In Japan, baseball was seen as good and bad, their quest to prevent a foreign power from gaining influence in their country played a part in the resistance to baseball, while it also helped establish a larger sense of nationalism and athletic skill in the country.³⁶ Japan became infatuated with baseball, but the conflict over a sport forced upon them by foreign imperial powers, leaves a lingering question about its influence. Whether baseball was used as a form of cultural imperialism is unquestionable, but the outcome of its spread is not what most expected. Alan M. Klein states, “The Japanese have succeeded in making baseball their game, despite the feudal impulse to do so in isolation. Insularity

³² Ibid., 42.

³³ Robert K. Fitts, *Banzai Babe Ruth: Baseball, Espionage, & Assassination during the 1934 Tour of Japan* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012).

³⁴ Gems, “The Athletic Crusade,” 42-43.

³⁵ Ibid., 43-44.

³⁶ Alan M. Klein, *Growing the Game: The Globalization of Major League Baseball* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 125.

has never really been possible, all the less so in a globalizing world.”³⁷ In the modern age baseball is now what it was originally intended to be, a way to break down the cultural barriers between the two nations, allowing Americans and Japanese to bond over the sport.

The 1909 and 1934 American Baseball Tours of Japan

Baseball was first introduced to Japan in 1871 by American teachers who would travel there as foreign advisors to help modernize their education system. One of these teachers, Horace Wilson, saw a problem with the education system in that there was no free time for students, “He immediately saw a growing need for time away from the classroom and suggested the American pastoral game of baseball.”³⁸ On one of his trips he brought with him baseball equipment and started to teach Japanese students the sport as a way of increasing physical education and to fill the void of pastime games.³⁹ The sport was enjoyed by some, but others saw it as a foreign problem for Japanese culture. “As far as the Japanese are concerned, Major League Baseball is a ‘tar baby.’ They want desperately to be rid of it but can’t separate from it. They want to vanquish it, yet they slavishly follow it. They invite it in the front door and toss it out the back...”⁴⁰ Another American teacher, Albert Bates would help increase the sport’s popularity by creating the first formal game in 1873 at Tokyo’s Kaitaku University.⁴¹

The early relationship with baseball was confusing to many of the Japanese. The Meiji reforms, however, saw the willingness to try western influence, but it did not stay that way. The resistance

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Joe Niese, “Voyage to the Land of the Rising Sun: The Badger Nine’s 1909 Trip to Japan,” *NINE: A Journal of Baseball History and Culture* 22, no. 1 (2013): 14.

³⁹ Gems, “The Athletic Crusade,” 30.

⁴⁰ Klein, *Growing the Game*, 125.

⁴¹ Niese, “Voyage to the Land of the Rising Sun,” 14.

to western influence started with the resistance to the Christian presence being forced upon their country which was protested by and eliminated by the Tokagawa shogunate.⁴² This period from the 1870s to 1890s saw constitutional reforms in the government, primarily at the end of the Sino-Japanese War, but unequal negotiations started with western powers affected the global view of Japan. Author Donald Roden states in *Baseball and the Quest for National Dignity in Meiji Japan*, “Suddenly, ‘Japan the exotic’ became ‘Japan the competitor’ in war, diplomacy, commerce, and, one may add, baseball.”⁴³ With the Meiji reforms that would follow, Japan started to see a tactical advantage in taking what they learned from the western influence in their country and using it against them. In the context of baseball, it started when more Japanese citizens began to play baseball, primarily high school and university students. The popularity of baseball among students carries over into today’s age with high school tournaments drawing large crowds in Japan, although baseball did not become serious as a sport until the turn of the century, after the original teachers of baseball left Japan.⁴⁴

When baseball eventually made its push into Japanese universities the US began to see potential foreign opponents for their Major League Baseball (MLB) teams. Firstly, to have a better sense of the international appeal for the sport, Secretary of War and future president William Howard Taft saw potential bonding through the University of Wisconsin-Madison’s team the Mendotas, who wanted to set up a college series in Japan.⁴⁵ In 1909, Genkwan Shibata, a native of Toyama, Japan, dreamed of having a series between the Mendotas and Japanese ball clubs. The second such exhibition series, he would be the student to start negotiations between his home country and the university⁴⁶ Tokyo’s Keio University would be the Japanese university to make

⁴² Klein, *Growing the Game*, 125.

⁴³ Roden, "Baseball and the Quest for National Dignity in Meiji Japan," 519.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 519.

⁴⁵ Klein, *Growing the Game*, 126.

⁴⁶ Joe Niese, “Voyage to the Land of the Rising Sun,” 13.

the plan plausible, making this 1909 series one of the earliest American-Japanese baseball games. Professors and other US diplomats saw the trip as a great way to learn more about current Japanese affairs, “University of Wisconsin professors were also praising the trip as a great educational experience for the students...”⁴⁷ Shibata did warn the confident American students however that Japanese culture does not like playing or fighting weak opponents, but the series would prove to be an exciting one. The Wisconsin team, now known as the Badgers, started off the series poorly because the Japanese teams were playing the older, dead-ball era of baseball where they did not focus on power hitting but on base running and defensive plays.⁴⁸ One of these lost games, the Badgers felt, was the fault of the Japanese umpire Takeji Nakano. However, with this game the Badgers earned the approval of the Japanese people because they accepted the ruled outcome.⁴⁹ The Badgers started the series poorly but would fight their way back despite many errors and, in some cases, bad luck. Their luck was discussed in the newspaper the *Japan Advertiser*, “The fortunate hitting of the Keio team when a hit was most needed won the game for them.”⁵⁰ From the social connections they made off the field, to the games on the field, the Badgers hoped to reconnect with the Japanese ball club players in the future as friends. The importance of this intercollegiate trip is summed up by Wisconsin Secretary of State William A. Frear, “Wisconsin unlocked the door of social fraternity with Japan in a manner never before equaled.”⁵¹

American University teams were not the only ones traveling across the Pacific to play baseball. Japan had teams as far back as 1905 traveling to the United States to play and learn from

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 16.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ “Wisconsin’s Ball Players Find Japs Hard to Beat,” *Washington Post*, (November 21, 1909).

⁵¹ Harold Seymour and Dorothy Seymour-Mills, *Baseball: The People’s Game* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 171.

American teams. The problem in the early years of the Japanese teams was that they were amateur in skill compared to professional American teams. “As Japanese baseball was primarily an amateur endeavor until the mid-1930s, the touring Americans played lopsided games against university and amateur teams. From 1908 to 1934, American professional teams won 87 of the 88 contests in Japan.”⁵² Pre-WWII Japanese baseball was a purely amateur sport, but what would help change that, and form the first Japanese Professional Baseball League, would be the Major League All-Stars tour of Japan in 1934 which included American stars such as Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig, Connie Mack, Moe Berg, and other all-stars.⁵³ However, due to the times and the political climate in Asia, politics, culture, and national dignity would be intertwined with this tour.

November 2, 1934 was the day the American All-Stars made it to Japan for a series tour of the country. This tour would be unlike any other tour previously, as during this tour a Japanese Professional League would finally come to fruition. This tour was a gamble for the Japanese government because issues were starting to arise across the Pacific involving Japanese imperialism. A Japanese newspaper writer, Shigenori Ikeda, saw an opportunity while looking at the success and failures of previous American baseball tours to Japan. The idea Ikeda had was to sponsor an All-Star American baseball tour in Japan so that he could cover the tour in his newspaper to make more sales, especially if they could convince Babe Ruth to be a part of the tour.⁵⁴ It was towards the end of Babe Ruth’s career, his skills had started to fade and he was ready to move on from the New York Yankees, with whom he had been for a large portion of his career. What Ruth still had though was his charisma and presence in baseball culture, one of the handful of players that transcended the cultural borders between Japanese and American baseball. Babe Ruth was needed to make this tour successful as he was a global name in American culture,

⁵² Fitts, *Remembering Japanese Baseball*, xx.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Fitts, *Banzai Babe Ruth*, 10.

although the current greatest player at the time, Lou Gehrig, was included in the tour.⁵⁵

The American ambassador in Japan at the time, Joseph Grew, knew an all-star tour would benefit the United States in creating mutual respect and friendship between the two countries. However, the opposite could occur, due to how the Japanese treated American tourists:

The Japanese tended to overschedule American visitors, seeing historical sites, museums, and industrial centers and filling in the remaining time with banquets, receptions, and formal speeches, all while spouting transparent propaganda. Visitors often left exhausted and suspicious of Japanese intentions. Grew had spoken to the Japanese about tailoring the tours to the American temperament, but he found habit and custom too entrenched, and the pattern continued.⁵⁶

Along with suspicious treatment of American visitors, inflammatory speeches and the comparison of Japanese and American Naval powers by Japanese military leaders led to an increase of tension between the countries. Grew witnessed the swinging of Japanese and American relations for two years prior to the tour, including incidents that would spark WWII in the Pacific. Grew took his position as ambassador nine months after Japan invaded Manchuria, three months after they attacked Shanghai, and three weeks after an attempted coup; nine months into his stint as ambassador, Japan would withdraw from the League of Nations.⁵⁷ With these major events happening Grew saw an opportunity for mutual respect and entertainment with the all-star tour.

By the time the all-star tour started anti-American articles and rhetoric began to die down, with fans swarming pier number 4

⁵⁵ Ibid., xiv.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 86.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

in the Yokohama Harbor, but as Grew noticed with tourists, the Japanese were overscheduling the players leaving them exhausted. Continuing their tour, the All-American players would be introduced to the All-Nippon team—the Japanese Professional Baseball team—to become acquainted with their Japanese counterparts. The All-Nippon team felt they were talented enough to win against the American team, as stated by Tokio Tominaga, the All-Nippon Third Baseman, “The Japanese are equal to the Americans in strength of spirit.”⁵⁸ The Nippon team was also favored by many Japanese fans to win the series against the American team, but still watched the American stars in awe.⁵⁹ The mutual respect many of the players and fans had for each other started to work as Grew envisioned, but not all Japanese citizens agreed on the need for harmony with the Americans.

Capt. Koji Muranka had devised a plan to save Japan; a coup was being planned in Japan. Knowing that past coups fell apart because of inside betrayals, he kept his group of assassins to a minimum.⁶⁰ This assassination plot against Japanese leaders would be foiled by an unlikely person, Capt. Masanobu Tsuji. Tsuji would become known as an unstable leader and would help orchestrate a massacre in Singapore and multiple executions during the Bataan Death March. Tsuji would be the one to uncover the plot and prevent a possible coup that would have interrupted the All-Star tour of Japan.⁶¹ The coup plot that was foiled during the tour was not the only problem, unknown to the Japanese one of the American players was working for the US government to gather information, a spy. Moe Berg saw an opportunity to slip away on the morning of November 29, 1934. He left while claiming to go visit Ambassador Grew’s newly-born granddaughter, but really traveled to the top of the building hiding a recording camera, and filmed the surrounding area and bay.⁶² Ambassador Grew would

⁵⁸ Ibid., 153-156.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 104-112.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 182.

⁶¹ Ibid., 183.

⁶² Ibid., 203-205.

send a memo on December 26, 1934, about the Japanese military's paranoia on spies:

In a confidential memo...reported to Secretary of State Cordell Hull, 'During recent months there have been renewed manifestations of spy hysteria in Japan...Whereas the tendency to suspect foreigners...of nefarious prying into military secrets seems to be ingrained in the Japanese race and had always existed to an exaggerated degree, it is believed that recent spy scares...are largely the result of...the military to foster public apprehension.'⁶³

Even with this worrisome news, many described the tour as a diplomatic coup that did more for the understanding of each other's culture than any previous diplomatic mission. The problem in the US started after the tour was over when newspaper articles spewed racial bigotry towards Japan by using racial slurs, racist cartoons, and stereotypes.⁶⁴ On the Japanese side, Ambassador Grew believed the tour was a success in the development of Japanese-American relations, but nationalist groups in Japan saw the tour as treason. An example of this came in 1935 when Katsusuke Nagasaki would be a part of an assassination plot against Yomiuri official Matsutaro Shoriki, the plot would become realized when Nagasaki would slash a hidden samurai sword into Shoriki's head.⁶⁵ Nagasaki would turn himself in with a detailed confession, "The Primary reason for the assassination: Shoriki had defiled the memory of Emperor Meiji by allowing Babe Ruth and his team to play in the stadium named in the ruler's honor."⁶⁶ Moe Berg would write on the day war would be declared between Japan and the United States, that during his trips to Japan the people were

⁶³ Ibid., 205-206.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 230.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 237.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 237.

kind and hospitable as a whole, but like America's nationalistic Ku Klux Klan, every country had their own version and in Japan their nationalistic group had control over the government.⁶⁷ Even with the confidence stars such as Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig, and the rest of the All-Stars tour of Japan in 1934 had that they had formed a lasting friendship between the countries, WWII had begun, and baseball would be an afterthought for both sides on the professional level until after the war had ended.

The First Baseball Stars of Post-WWII Japan

Post-WWII baseball would return in full force for both sides and would introduce baseball superstars not only in the US, but Japan as well. The power baseball gained after WWII was thanks to the Allied occupation forces that wanted to help restart the professional Japanese leagues to boost morale.⁶⁸ Two major factors helped to restart Japanese baseball after occupational forces had left: American players signing contracts with Japanese teams, like Glenn Mickens, and the continuation of American baseball tours in Japan. The American tours were more successful than the tours prior to the war because these tours would lead to two league systems in Japan, and create Japanese all-star players.⁶⁹ One of these players was Hirofumi Naito, an infielder for the Tokyo Yomiuri Giants and the Kintetsu Buffaloes.

Naito was a Japanese star that started in 1949 at second base. As Naito states however, he did not want to originally play baseball, and his family and the public perception of baseball had not fully returned to what it once was, "I didn't want to be a baseball player. I wanted to be the captain of a ship... Then, suddenly, I got an acceptance notice from the Giants... I hadn't even I told my parents I took the test [To join the Tokyo Giants].

⁶⁷ Ibid., 245.

⁶⁸ Fitts, *Remembering Japanese Baseball*, xxi.

⁶⁹ Ibid., xxi.

So I told my parents, and one word they said was ‘No!’”⁷⁰ At this time, at the end of the war, baseball players were seen as low status and not respected, Naito even compares the public view of baseball players to that of the Yakuza, Japanese gangsters.⁷¹ His interest in being a naval captain was not possible however because of the US occupation of Japan, part of the rules of the occupation was that the US had complete control over all naval vessels. This occupation also had an impact on the equipment the ball clubs used, “In those days, we didn’t have sufficient equipment to play baseball, and there wasn’t enough food to eat...After practice, I gathered the equipment and took care of it. Balls were very valuable in those days.”⁷² He goes on to state that they had go so far as to count balls before practice and again after practice. If any of the balls were missing, they had to go through “every single stand and corner until I had them all.”⁷³

After the war Naito changed the feelings of many of the older players, and the freedoms they had changed as well. Naito did not appear in any of the Giants games until his second year where he started as shortstop. During one of his first games a routine double play to the second baseman Shigeru Chiba went wrong when Naito mis-threw the ball. In Chiba’s response to this play after the game, he told to the news, “I’m not bullying the young boy. I’m not being mean to him on purpose. I’m teaching him what it is to be a professional player. Teaching him to be a real Giants player.”⁷⁴ Naito’s presence was, unofficially as he states it, seen in the American leagues as well when in 1953 he was invited to join and play with the Dodgers during spring training.

During this period he was able to experience baseball the way Americans play. What he experienced during spring training with the Dodgers made him realize transitioning to the MLB was

⁷⁰ Ibid., 11-12. The test that Naito is referring to is the open tryout tests for the Tokyo Giants ball club.

⁷¹ Ibid., 12.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid., 13.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 14.

not for him, “I knew they were such big guys and so much more powerful that I wouldn’t be able to do it over there. So I said no.”⁷⁵ Naito also stated one of the big differences between American and Japanese players was that American players try to prevent double plays at all costs, to the point of sliding into base at full speed with their cleat spikes pointed at the baseman, something he still had scars from.⁷⁶ Hirofumi Naito’s career spanned from 1949 as an infielder to being the team manager for the Yakult Swallows farm team manager in 1982. While Naito was a notable infielder in Japan, one player that was big because of his transition from America to Japanese baseball was Wally Yonamine.

Wally Yonamine was known as the Jackie Robinson of Japan because of his fast-paced style of play that credited him with changing Japanese baseball and bringing it into a new age. What made Wally different from other Japanese players was that he was a Japanese-American that traveled back to his ancestral home of Japan to play.⁷⁷ Wally was born on June 24, 1925, in Maui, Hawaii, and started his early sports career in American football. Wally enjoyed both football and baseball and dreamed of playing in Honolulu Stadium, which he achieved his junior year of high school.⁷⁸ After Wally graduated high school, he continued to play both football and baseball when he was drafted into the military in 1945, two months before the end of the war. Wally was talented in football, drawing enough attention to earn a scholarship to Ohio State, but he would receive a better offer. “After I got discharged from the army, I had a scholarship to go to Ohio State for football. But the San Francisco 49ers offered me a two-year contract for fourteen thousand dollars. In 1947, fourteen thousand dollars was a lot of money, so instead of going to college, I signed right away.”⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Ibid., 19. Naito is talking here about a reporter who stated that American teams would love to have more players like him come over to the United States.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 18.

⁷⁷ Robert K. Fitts, *Wally Yonamine: The Man Who Changed Japanese Baseball* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008).

⁷⁸ Fitts, *Remembering Japanese Baseball*, 22.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

Wally would play for one year with the 49ers, after which he would have an accident during off-season where he broke his wrist while playing baseball for fun. His contract with the 49ers required he stay healthy however, and because of that he would be dropped ten days into his second season.⁸⁰ After Wally was dropped by the 49ers he played for a team in Honolulu for a short time until he signed with the San Francisco Seals, then went to Salt Lake City in 1950. The next step for Wally came when he met Lefty O'Doul:

He told me 'Wally, I think that you should go to Japan. The Japanese are going to love your style.' I decided to go because I had hurt my shoulder playing football. So if I stayed in the States, the best I could do was AAA ball because of my shoulder...The Tokyo Giants offered me a two-year, guaranteed contract, so I came to Japan in 1951.⁸¹

The transition between the play styles of baseball intrigued Wally, because in Japan it was a slow game compared to the aggressive style they played in the US Wally would be encouraged by his manager, Mr. Mizuhara, to play as he would in the US This led to outrage from other players and from fans believing he was a dirty player. The aggressiveness came in the form of breaking up double plays, which Japanese players didn't do.

In those days, when they were turning a double play, the second basemen would stand right on the base and throw to first. So, I'd knock them down. Naturally, they were very surprised. The fans for other teams thought that I was a dirty player and would yell, 'Go back to Hawaii!' But that was my style of baseball.⁸²

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid., 23.

⁸² Ibid.

Wally explained the fans would throw rocks at him while he was on the field and would treat him horribly because of how he played and because he was an American, which is where the comparisons to Jackie Robinson came from. However, Wally does not think that's the reason fans hated him; it came down to the team he played for. The Tokyo Giants were a strong team in the years he played for them, so the fans wouldn't just pick on him but the team as well.⁸³ What shocked Wally the most about playing in Japan was how his teammates and people accepted him although the war only ended six years prior, "I came to Japan in 1951 only six years after the War, and some of my teammates had fought against the United States...But I didn't have any problems whatsoever. The players didn't talk about the War, just baseball."⁸⁴ The comradery between his teammates lead to a cultural acceptance by them as well, because he did what they did, slept where they slept, ate what they ate, and did so without complaining.

After playing baseball in Japan from 1951-1962, he moved on to managerial and coaching positions with multiple ball clubs across Japan, with his final coaching position being with the Nippon Ham Fighters from 1985-1988.⁸⁵ Wally strove to be the best he could in the Japanese Nippon League, and did that and more; being inducted into the Japanese baseball Hall of Fame, earning the MVP award in 1957, three batting titles, and a lifetime high batting average of .311.⁸⁶ Wally was able to achieve all of these goals by changing the way baseball is played in Japan, leading the way for more American players to travel to Japan to play, and by the turn of the twentieth century paving the way for Japanese stars traveling to the US and playing in Major League Baseball.

⁸³ Ibid., 23-25.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 25.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 21-31.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 21.

The New Generation of Japanese All-Stars

The new generations of Japanese baseball players and baseball culture have created an entirely new feel to the sport. Author Robert Fitts is one of the many American tourists that have traveled to Japan and attended Japanese baseball games, observing the difference in the energy and the pride they express at their games is huge. Fitts states that what he expected at the baseball game he went to in 1993 was not what he experienced. “Forty-thousand fans began beating noisemakers in unison and chanting fight songs...fans in the bleachers waived giant flags bearing team insignia and pounded drums in hypnotic rhythm.”⁸⁷ Another cultural difference at baseball games are how stars are remembered. Fitts recounts the times he traveled the back roads of Tokyo and the baseball stadiums there looking for books, cards, and anything about the history of Japanese baseball, but they did not have the same stories and memorabilia for former stars, just oral memories of a different era of baseball.

The many major Japanese stars at the turn of the twentieth century are definitely remembered in the US because some of these stars were—and in one case are—players that add an aspect to the game of baseball Americans never thought possible. One of the biggest of these stars is Ichiro Suzuki, who any baseball fan knows brought greatness to the US from Japan. Ichiro was an important milestone in MLB because he would become the first Japanese position player to make the transition to America after seven years playing in Japan.⁸⁸ American baseball had no idea what was coming, but Japanese fans knew and were ecstatic about his debut. In 2000, Ichiro would be approached with the opportunity to play in the MLB, and the team that he would join was the Seattle Mariners. The transition to the team was a tough challenge for him however, “It’s been such a dizzying experience ever since I joined the Mariners. Sometimes it feels like several years have gone by,

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, xv.

⁸⁸ “In the Time of Ichiro: Ichiro Suzuki Story,” uploaded by photo beautiful, (Dec. 31, 2014): 1:04, www.youtube.com/watch?v=emkT42WGe6o.

and sometimes like it's just been a few months. It's the most dramatic change I've ever gone through."⁸⁹ The cultural differences between the sport were just as Wally noticed when he played in Japan. Ichiro states that from how fans watch the game, to how the stadium is designed, and even to how the grass is mowed, is different in Japan and required adjustment. These differences can affect the game even down to how the ball will bounce when it hits the ground, "As soon as the ball is hit I try to pick up where the ball's going and how it's going to bounce, and I like the grass flat so the speed doesn't change; it's easier to play defense that way... The stress it puts on your body is [also] different... The difference in the grass can make baseball more interesting, or less interesting."⁹⁰ The style of game was changing for Ichiro and he had to adapt, which he would do quickly in his career in the MLB.

Ichiro would soon become one of the best base hitters and base runners the game has seen.⁹¹ Ichiro was watched by not just his team or Japan, but the whole league and the world of baseball. Ichiro's batting is what stood out the most: "As the season progressed Ichiro displayed an uncanny versatility at the plate... he can hit any pitch at any place, he can pull it, he can hit it to left, he can slap it, he can bloop over the infield."⁹² Ichiro became one of the most prolific hitters baseball has seen, leading to his career 3,089 hits across his 18 years in the MLB. Ichiro in his debut season in America would break the record for most hits in a rookie season with 242 hits, and was the first position player to lead both batting average and stolen bases since Jackie Robinson in 1949. His debut season would end with him winning the Rookie of the Year award and the American League's Most Valuable Player Award.⁹³ Ichiro's follow-up seasons would further his baseball

⁸⁹ Ichiro Suzuki, *Ichiro on Ichiro* (Seattle: Sasquatch Books, 2004), 2.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁹¹ "In the Time of Ichiro, Ichiro Suzuki Story," 2:48.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 3:12.

⁹³ Robert Whiting, *The Samurai Way of Baseball: The Impact of Ichiro and the New Wave from Japan* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2005).

stardom by being the first Mariners player with two consecutive 200 plus hit seasons, the third player in history with three consecutive 200 hit seasons, break an 84-year-old record for the most hits in an entire season, and become the second youngest player to reach 3,000 career hits across Japanese and American leagues.⁹⁴ After his stint with the Mariners he was traded to the New York Yankees, moving him up to a bigger stage and a better-known team. After two years playing for the Yankees, Ichiro would have another short stint with the Miami Marlins, where even in old age he still managed to make amazing plays. Finally, Ichiro would return to his home American team, the Mariners, to play before taking on an office and coaching role for the team, where he is to this day.

Ichiro was just the beginning of Japanese position players making a move to MLB. Before him, Japanese pitchers had been coming over to show their skill, players like Hideo Nomo. Nomo, however, was one of the many Asian players to be mismanaged and treated poorly by the Dodgers. Nomo and Ichiro would meet a few times in MLB, and every time they did Japanese fans all over the world were filled with pride. Having two amazing Japanese players facing each other in what many consider to be the highest level of baseball was a major change from how baseball in Japan first started. Nomo and Ichiro both faced major cultural changes when transitioning to the MLB, like food and entertainment which Ichiro describes as one of the biggest challenges: “I had to adapt, to learn to live in an environment completely different from what I was used to, which naturally wasn’t easy.”⁹⁵

The transitions for both Ichiro and Nomo were dramatic changes, but they would lead the way for the newest Japanese start to transition to the American baseball leagues, Shohei Ohtani. Ohtani was one of the most watched players in baseball in the 2018 season because he is one of the first consistently good two-way players since Babe Ruth. Two-way players are players that can hit

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Suzuki, *Ichiro on Ichiro*, 4.

and pitch well, which Ohtani can do. The future of baseball, American and Japanese, will be interesting to follow for sports fans, especially in looking at the way it works with the relationship between Japan and the United States.

The Cultural Power of Baseball

The way baseball was intended to be used is quite different from what it ended up being, moving from cultural imperialism to the assimilation of the sport into Japanese culture. The relationship the Japanese have with baseball is an important study in how a nation adopted the influence of another nation and incorporated it in their culture. To this day baseball is considered an American sport, with many people not knowing that it is greatly enjoyed and played in not just Japan, but many Asian and South American countries. The story of baseball as a way to connect with people on a global scale, however, is not over. A true World Series has yet to come:

One oft-voiced objection to the World Series is, simply, that it excludes most of the world. Outside of the United States and one city in Canada, people quickly point up the combination of arrogance and defensiveness in suggesting that the rest of the world does not really matter when it comes to baseball.⁹⁶

The globalization of baseball is something that many fans and scholars are discussing today in the context of the World Series, but how the sport originally spread could be considered an early attempt of globalization. During the nineteenth century baseball spreading to Japan could be cultural imperialism, or globalization, or even Americanization, but the assimilation and change of the sport by Japan creates a different perspective. From the accounts of former and current Japanese players, researchers, and fans,

⁹⁶ Klein, *Growing the Game*, 215.

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baseball has its own culture across the world, but can still be identified by all. Players today do not necessarily see it that way however; to players such as Ichiro Suzuki, that understand the importance and complexities involved in the culture, politics, and life of baseball, baseball is not just a sport, it is a way of connecting communities and fans together, and to break cultural barriers.

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Author Bio

Cameron Van Note graduated at the end of the fall quarter of 2018 with a Public and Oral History degree from CSUSB. He is currently looking into Master's degree programs. History has always been something that Cameron found fascinating. While not wanting to become a teacher, wanting to be able to help others understand history better led him to become interested in archives, collection rooms, and libraries. He also enjoys baseball, which is what inspired me to find a topic related baseball history.

