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Pearl Harbor and Baseball

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
DECEMBER 7, 2001
(On the 60th Anniversary of the Attack on
Pearl Harbor an edited encore presentation)

As predicted by President Franklin D. Roosevelt December 7, 1941 was a day that has lived in infamy. Sixty years ago the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor drew the United States into World War II.

In Sportsworld it was baseball that felt the greatest shock over the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. For over two decades the baseball establishment had carried on an active campaign to spread the national pastime to Japan, Asia and around the world. During the 1920s and 30s this effort had been quite successful, and much was written about the power of baseball to spread the virtues of democracy to the people of Japan.

In the 1920s the progress of baseball in Japan was viewed as a sign that the Japanese were proceeding along the highway of civilization. Japanese college teams toured the U.S. and U.S. colleges reciprocated. Professional players also joined the parade of baseball diplomats to Japan.

In the 1930s major league baseball stars made two large tours to Japan. In 1931 Lou Gehrig led a group of all-stars, and returned to praise the tremendous enthusiasm of Japanese fans.

The second big tour came in 1934 when Babe Ruth led a group of all-stars to the Orient. In Tokyo 100,000 screaming fans waving American flags greeted Ruth and his teammates. This tour was seen as a great boost to international peace and friendship, and Connie Mack called it "one of the greatest peace measures in the history of nations." It certainly didn't appear that the U.S. and Japan were headed to war.

Although this would be the last major league contingent to go out to Japan before the war, teams from Harvard and Yale toured the island nation in 1934 and 1935, while the Tokyo Giants came to the U.S. for spring training in 1936.

Through it all were reports of the increased popularity of baseball in Japan, with the clear implication that the advance of baseball in Japan, and elsewhere in the world, was part of the advance of civilization.

But by the late Thirties there was little of this sort of thing being written. Instead attention had turned to Europe, where

people who had not experienced the civilizing effects of baseball were headed down the road to war.

Then in 1940 ominous news began to come from Japan. First, radio broadcasting of professional baseball in Japan was ended. Then such baseball terminology as "ball" and "strike" were eliminated from the Japanese game and replaced with corresponding Japanese words. Nicknames such as Giants, Tigers and Senators were replaced by Japanese symbols.

In August of 1941 came the most alarming news of all. Japanese authorities had abolished baseball. This seemed especially unfortunate because baseball was developing into the national sport of Japan, and because it had done so much to promote good relations between the United States and Japan. The Emperor of Japan was dubbed "Mr. Herohater" by The Sporting News.

Less than four months later came the attack at Pearl Harbor. Along with the rest of the nation the sporting press was appalled. But for the baseball writers the news was particularly galling, as for almost two decades many of them had been writing about the positive effects of baseball on Japan. Now all of that seemed to have been for naught. What had gone wrong?

Several theories were put forward. One line of reasoning suggested that the Japanese had never been fully converted to the game, had never acquired the soul of the game. Americans would never "stab an 'honorable' opponent in the back," or crush out his brains with a bat while he is asleep..."

For the publisher of The Sporting News, The Bible of Baseball, J.G. Taylor Spink there were more important lessons to be learned. First, the gift of baseball should be withdrawn from Japan, and more care should be taken in the future when deciding who would receive such a gift. Major league baseball should acknowledge its mistake, and announce to the entire world that Japan was unworthy to retain baseball. The revocation should be made retroactive to December 7, when "the Jap agents of Hell treacherously attacked Pearl Harbor."

One New York writer warned the Japanese that they could not beat the United States in War, baseball or marbles, and that they had made a great mistake at Pearl Harbor. "Mr. Tojo will wake up some night with the feeling that he got into this thing with two strikes against him and Feller having one hell of a day."

Clearly the sportswriters saw the attack on Pearl Harbor as a result of some flaw in the Japanese character rather than a failure for baseball. Of course it was neither. But the point is that an era was passing. The extravagance of claim and the gross naivete would shortly be toned down. The world of three-year-old cynics was not that far off and then sportswriters would have to tell-it-like-it-is!

But on this sixtieth anniversary of the attack on Pearl Harbor it is interesting to look back on the simpler world of 1941, and contemplate a world whose causes were all noble and whose enemies were clearly the embodiment of all that was evil. It is not likely that such a world will ever return.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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