

Baseball Around the World with Special Attention to Japan

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
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Baseball, the national pastime, has always had vast international ambitions. Around the world tours led by Albert Spalding, Japanese tours coming and going in both countries, and the grand Ruth-Gehrig tour to Japan in 1934, all speak to a long relationship between major league baseball and the world.

When Mark McGwire refused to go to Japan and then spoke last week about this being an American game, and the need to stay out of other countries, he spoke against well over a century of baseball tradition. While sportswriters justifiably decry the travel rigors imposed on the Mets and Cubs to open the regular season, they should not think that this is some sort of innovation in which baseball is trying to emulate the marketing genius of David Stern.

The relationship between Major League Baseball and Japan has existed for a century, and baseball has been in the Far East, both China and Japan, since the late 1860s. Eager Christian missionaries used the game as part of the international imperial mission of taking Christianity, Civilization and Commerce to the peoples of Asia. Democracy was seen as an integral part of Civilization, and baseball was touted in the sporting press as the quintessential game of democracy.

While the response to the "Three C's" was not overwhelming, the response to the game of baseball was, in both China and Japan. In 1919 reports circulated that Japanese wrestlers were developing a passion for the game. In 1920 the University of Chicago baseball team toured Japan, and the next year a Japanese team toured American campuses. Even anti-American Japanese college students were said to be enthusiastic about baseball as they welcomed U.S. players who toured their homeland.

Following the 1922 season a group of professionals toured Japan receiving the blessing of President Warren G. Harding who thought "the great American game may have real diplomatic value." At the end of the tour the Bible of Baseball, The Sporting News, praised the efforts of the group as a force for world peace.

These visits continued in both directions through the 20s and into the 30s. In 1931 Lou Gehrig led a post-season tour to Japan that played before a sellout crowd of 65,000 in Tokyo where the scalpers did a heavy business. The Japanese Minister of Education Tanaka threw out the first ball to U.S. Ambassador W. Cameron Forbes.

This was but a glimmer of the outpouring that came in 1934 when Babe Ruth joined Gehrig on a tour through the Orient. Ruth received the greatest welcome ever accorded a foreign visitor and Fred Lieb reported that the "Japanese urchins" knew all about "Ruth and his mighty deeds." This tour was termed both a baseball and diplomatic success at a time of deteriorating U.S.-Japanese relations. The Sporting News looked forward to the day when Americans and Japanese could join together in singing "Take Me Out to the Ballgame."

The 30s would see teams from Harvard and Yale touring Japan, and in 1935 the Tokyo Giants took part in spring training ending their visit with a game in Tulsa.

Similar attempts to spread the game around the world were undertaken by Albert Goodwill Spalding, the man who invented Abner Doubleday. In 1874 Spalding led the Boston and Philadelphia teams on an English tour, and then in 1888-89 Spalding along with Charles Comiskey, John Montgomery Ward and "Cap" Anson led a World tour which started in Hawaii and ended in England. The highlight may have been the game played at the Pyramids. Although these efforts to spread the game were not a great success, baseball did take hold in Europe and today baseball in Italy enjoys considerable popularity.

In the Western Hemisphere from the 19th century on baseball followed the American imperial flag into Mexico and throughout the Caribbean and Latin America. Today of course it has a strong hold in many Latin American nations with many players in the Major Leagues from these areas.

After World War II baseball returned to Japan as did the Americans. General MacArthur encouraged major league involvement in helping to rebuild Japanese baseball as part of the cultural rehabilitation of Japan. Lefty O'Doul, who had made a number of consulting trips to Japan over the years, returned to help reconstruct the Japanese baseball leagues.

Japan is now baseball country and baseball has spread all around the Far East. It has been played in The Peoples Republic of China surviving even the Cultural Revolution.

So as we enter a new century it should surprise no one that baseball continues to display itself around the world. In this age of a worldwide American popular culture it is as natural to send major leaguers to Japan as it is for a Michael Jackson concert in Tokyo or a McDonalds in Moscow.

Baseball fans in Japan and elsewhere want to see baseball played at its very best, and a regular season game offers much more in that respect than an exhibition game. It is unfortunate that Mark McGwire doesn't understand the traditions of the game, and can think only in the narrow perspective of us and me and now. Our national pastime is much more than a North American phenomenon and has been for over a century.

So Sammy Sosa, a living example of the international character of baseball, goes to Japan rather than McGwire, and Bobby Valentine returns to a Japan whose culture and baseball he fully appreciates. It is a shame that the critics are not able to see outside their own white lines to the larger meaning of the game.

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

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