

Baseball in Japan and the US

History, Culture, and Future Prospects

By Daniel A. Métraux



A 1927 photo of Kenichi Zenimura, the father of Japanese-American baseball, standing between Lou Gehrig and Babe Ruth.
Source: *Japanese BallPlayers.com* at <http://tinyurl.com/zzyd3v>.

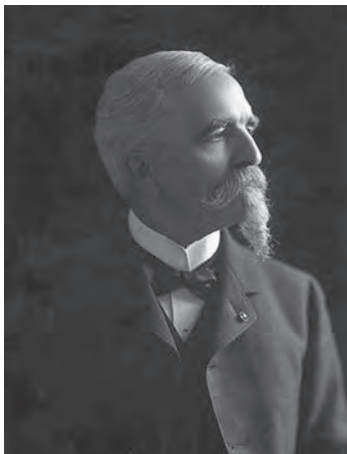
The essay that follows, with a primary focus on professional baseball, is intended as an introductory comparative overview of a game long played in the US and Japan. I hope it will provide readers with some context to learn more about a complex, evolving, and, most of all, fascinating topic, especially for lovers of baseball on both sides of the Pacific.

Baseball, although seriously challenged by the popularity of other sports, has traditionally been considered America's pastime and was for a long time the nation's most popular sport. The game is an original American sport, but has sunk deep roots into other regions, including Latin America and East Asia. Baseball was introduced to Japan in the late nineteenth century and became the national sport there during the early post-World War II period. The game as it is played and organized in both countries, however, is considerably different. The basic rules are mostly the same, but cultural differences between Americans and Japanese are clearly reflected in how both nations approach their versions of baseball. Although players from both countries have flourished in both American and Japanese leagues, at times the cultural differences are substantial, and some attempts to bridge the gaps have ended in failure. Still, while doubtful the Japanese version has changed the American game, there is some evidence that the American version has exerted some changes in the Japanese game. →



1869 lithograph of the 1869 Cincinnati Red Stockings baseball team.
Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at <http://tinyurl.com/jlrdk3>.

Baseball in the United States is essentially a nineteenth-century sport that has made the necessary adaptations to survive in the modern era. The first recognizable teams appeared in the 1850s and 1860s. Professional teams emerged with the formation of the Cincinnati Red Stockings in 1869 and the team that became the Boston (now Atlanta) Braves in 1871. The first organization of professional teams came with the creation of the National Association of Professional Base Ball Players in 1871, which would become the National League (NL) in 1876, and the NL is still part of Major League Baseball (MLB) today. By the late 1800s and early 1900s, baseball had developed a strong national following and became the most popular sport in the country.



Horace Wilson. Source: *JapaneseBallPlayers.com* at <http://tinyurl.com/7xoavn2>.

Horace Wilson, an American English teacher at the Kaisei Academy in Tokyo, first introduced baseball to Japan in 1872, and other American teachers and missionaries popularized the game throughout Japan in the 1870s and 1880s. Popularity among Japanese grew slowly and led to the establishment of Japan's first organized baseball team, the Shimbashi Athletic Club, in 1878. The convincing victory of a team from Tokyo's Ichikō High School in



The Waseda baseball team in 1905. Source: Waseda University website at <http://tinyurl.com/gwp57p5>.



The Keio University baseball team 1928–1929.
Source: *Wikimedia Commons* website at <http://tinyurl.com/zs45zxa>.

1896 over a team of select foreigners from the Yokohama Country & Athletic Club drew wide coverage in the Japanese press and contributed greatly to the popularity of baseball as a school sport.

The rapidly growing popularity of baseball led to the development of high school, college, and university teams throughout Japan in the early 1900s. Important rivalries developed at the high school and university levels, highlighted by the intense battles between Keio University and Waseda University—which started in 1903 as an annual competition between the two schools and continues to this day. Photographs from 1903 onward show large crowded stadiums as Waseda, Keio, and the Imperial universities fought for the annual championship. High school tournaments also gained popularity in the early 1900s and remain immensely popular today.

Despite their cultural differences, the growing popularity of baseball in Japan encouraged Japanese university teams and other baseball clubs, led by a team from Waseda University in 1905, to travel to the United States in the early 1900s to study American baseball more closely and play exhibition games against American teams. In return, American professional teams made annual trips to Japan between 1908 and 1935 after the World Series to play Japanese teams. Japanese baseball teams rarely prevailed against their American counterparts, but their improvement was steady.

Professional baseball in Japan began slowly in the 1920s, and the first professional team, The Great Japan Tokyo Baseball Club, was formed in 1934 by a prominent Japanese newspaper *Yomiuri Shimbun* publisher, Shōriki Matsutarō. The club's success against an all-star American team of professionals that included Babe Ruth, Jimmie Foxx, Lou Gehrig, and Charlie Gehringer encouraged the development of the first professional



All-star US baseball players visited Japan in 1934. From left: organizer Shōriki Matsutarō, US Ambassador to Japan Joseph Grew, Manager Connie Mack of the Philadelphia A's, an unidentified man, and Babe Ruth of the New York Yankees.

Source: *Japan-It's a Wonderful Rife* blog at <http://tinyurl.com/hzu3lfb>.

al baseball league in Japan in 1936, the Japanese Baseball League (*Nihon Yakyū Renmei*). The league disbanded briefly in 1944 due to Allied bombing of Japan, but it resumed play during the Allied Occupation following the war. In 1950, the league would become Nippon Professional Baseball (NPB; *Nippon Yakyū Kikō*) and was large enough to divide into two leagues: the Central League and the Pacific League. NPB still exists today, and the best-known teams in the Central League are the Tokyo-based Yomiuri Giants and the Osaka-based Hanshin Tigers. The most famous Pacific League team is the Tokyo region-based Seibu Lions.

It was only in the 1960s that Japan had enough players to compete seriously against the best in America. American teams again began visiting Japan as early as 1949 with the minor league San Francisco Seals of the Pacific Coast League (PCL), soon followed by visits of MLB teams, including the Brooklyn Dodgers, who played in exhibition games against Japanese teams. Japanese baseball rules allowed each Japanese team to sign a maximum of two foreign players (later raised to four). The result has been a steady flow of American players coming to play in Japan since the early 1950s. Americans continue to play on Japanese teams today, though a growing number now come from other Asian countries such as Taiwan and South Korea. No Japanese players attempted to join Major League Baseball until 1964, when a young pitcher, Masanori ("Mashi") Murakami, made a sensational debut with the San Francisco Giants. By 2015, over fifty Japanese players had played in the major leagues.

American and Japanese Baseball Relations

American-Japanese baseball historian Robert K. Fitts identifies three players who had key roles in developing a strong baseball relationship between the United States and Japan: Babe Ruth (1895–1948), Wally Yonamine (1925–2011), and Masanori Murakami (b. 1944).

Ruth was long past his prime in 1934 when Shōriki Matsutarō announced that he wished to sponsor a tour of American all-stars in November. The editor wanted to boost his paper's sagging circulation with the publicity such a tour featuring Ruth, who was as famous in Japan as he was in the United States, might bring. Prominent citizens in both countries, such as American Ambassador Joseph Grew and Japanese Prime Minister Reijirō Wakatsuki, worried by the already-tense relations between their governments, hoped a goodwill visit by Ruth and other star players would be a critical exercise in soft-power diplomacy that would ease tensions.

In his 2012 book *Banzai Babe Ruth*, Fitts describes the huge and warm reception the Americans received when they arrived in Tokyo. Over a



Babe Ruth with Eiji Sawamura on November 20, 1934, the seventeen-year-old Sawamura struck out Gehring, Ruth, Gehrig, and Foxx in succession.

Source: *gabWorthy.com* website at: <http://tinyurl.com/j5fk9tz>.

half-million Japanese watched the Americans as they made their way in an open-car motorcade from Tokyo Station to the Imperial Hotel where they stayed. The Japanese all yelled, "*Banzai* [long live] Babe Ruth!" and treated him almost as a god. The American players obliged, playing very well and showing maximum courtesy to their hosts and the Japanese ball players. Ruth was an outstanding cultural diplomat, willing to embrace the Japanese players, people, food, and drink. His towering home runs brought warm cheers from spectators. The Japanese people were thrilled when Ruth made many warm comments and gestures about the host nation, and the success of several Japanese players such as pitcher Eiji Sawamura (1917–1944) brought on a wave of national pride. The success of the 1934 tour did much to further popularize baseball in Japan.

Manager Connie Mack (1862–1956) later called the four-week tour, which included eighteen games in twelve cities, one of the greatest peace measures in the history of nations. However, the goodwill eventually wore off. Fitts notes sardonically that several of the Japanese players such as Sawamura went on to serve in the Japanese army in World War II and developed strong anti-American feelings. Sawamura's pitching arm came in handy when hurling grenades at American troops before his transport ship was sunk by an American submarine, with no survivors.

General Douglas MacArthur ordered the reintroduction of the game at the very start of the Occupation he directed, beginning in 1945. MacArthur noted that baseball had been hugely popular before the war and that playing ball might divert the attention of Japanese from the misery of living in a war-ravaged land.

A key figure in the resurgence of Japanese baseball was Hawaiian-born Japanese-American athlete Wallace "Wally" Yonamine. Fitts in his 2008

biography of Yonamine credits this superb athlete as playing an important role in bringing about reconciliation between the United States and Japan in the immediate postwar period. Yonamine was a natural athlete. Yonamine played one season for the San Francisco 49ers in 1947, becoming the first Japanese-American to play in the National Football League (NFL). He also became one of the first Americans to make it big playing baseball in Japan. His natural ability and starring role with the preeminent Japanese baseball franchise, the Tokyo-based Yomiuri Giants from 1951 to 1960, helped create both sporting and cultural bonds between the United States and Japan that remain to this day.

Yonamine was a hero in other ways, too. He came to Japan at the end of the American Occupation, when some Japanese still harbored anger at the United States. Feelings were especially strong against *Nisei* like Yonamine, a second-generation ethnic Japanese born in the United States. Even in 1950, five years after Japan's surrender, living



Wallace "Wally" Yonamine. Source: *Los Angeles Times Afterward* page on March 1, 2011, at <http://tinyurl.com/z6f6bde>.

conditions in Tokyo were still harsh by American standards. High-quality food was difficult to obtain, and fuel for heat was scarce. Some Japanese viewed *Nisei*

mer adversarial nations. Other American players were soon invited to play on Japanese teams.

While American players thrived in Japan in the 1950s and early 1960s, no Japanese national played in the MLB until 1964, when a young pitcher

Japanese Baseball Collectibles

Much like in America, collecting baseball memorabilia became a popular hobby for Japanese as the sport grew in Japan. The first baseball card made in Japan appeared in 1897 as a circular cardboard disc for *Menko*, a game with cards displaying images from Japanese popular culture where players attempt to flip a flat-laying card with their own card. The card displayed a generic baseball player and is the only known piece of Japanese baseball collectible dated from the nineteenth century.

In the early 1900s, Japanese baseball clubs commonly produced postcards of their team as advertising, selling packs of cards featuring players posing, action game shots, and full team images. By the 1920s, *Menko* was on the rise again after a lapse in popularity and new card shapes were developed, including rectangles similar to typical American baseball cards and cards in the shape of their subject, such as an animal or a popular baseball player (for example, a giraffe card is shaped like a giraffe). Other popular baseball collectibles that emerged in the 1920s were bromides, mass-distributed photographs ranging from small and large sizes of popular singers, actors, and athletes; and *furoku*, large magazine inserts that measure up to a foot long.

In 1950, Japanese gum and candy stores, mirroring a US trend, began producing and packing Nippon Professional Baseball player cards with their products. Baseball cards became the most popular baseball memorabilia in Japan, especially as the popularity of *Menko* waned. While only two major gum companies in the US, Bowman Gum and Topps Chewing Gum, were granted rights to produce baseball cards by the MLB, a wide variety of Japanese candy manufacturers produced their own cards. *Dagashiya*, cheap Japanese candy stores, popularly distributed lower-quality baseball collectibles.

The Japanese company Kabaya Leaf produced the first large set of baseball cards in Japan in 1967, featuring 105 players, and only produced for one year. In 1973, the Calbee Food Company produced its first modern baseball card set of ninety-one cards. The company includes a baseball card in every pack of potato chips they produce—a trend they continue today. Calbee card sets have ranged in size from 1,436 in 1975–1976 to 144 cards in 1993, and remain the most widely collected baseball cards in Japan today.

MATTHEW TORMEY AND JEFFREY MELNIK

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GIANTS 22
KOBAYASHI



HAWKS 18
MATSUZAKA

Calbee 2015 card for Seiji Kobayashi.

Source: *Japanese Baseball Cards* blog at <http://tinyurl.com/zu29amg>.

Calbee 2015 card for Daisuke Matsuzaka.

Source: *Japanese Baseball Cards* blog at <http://tinyurl.com/zu29amg.com/h29b3je>

for the Nankai Hawks, Mashi Murakami, made a successful debut as a late-season roster addition for the San Francisco Giants. That year, Mashi was only supposed to play in the American minor leagues, but the San Francisco Giants were so impressed with Mashi that they called him up for the last few weeks of the season.

Mashi's historic moment came on September 1, 1964, against the then-lowly New York Mets. He struck out two and completed a full inning of relief. Mashi's impressive debut drew attention in the American and Japanese press because it was the first time that a native Japanese player had played in the majors—and had been successful, to top it off. Mashi continued his hot streak and appeared in relief eight more times before the season ended in early October. He was a hot commodity with a strong record of strikeouts of opposing players.

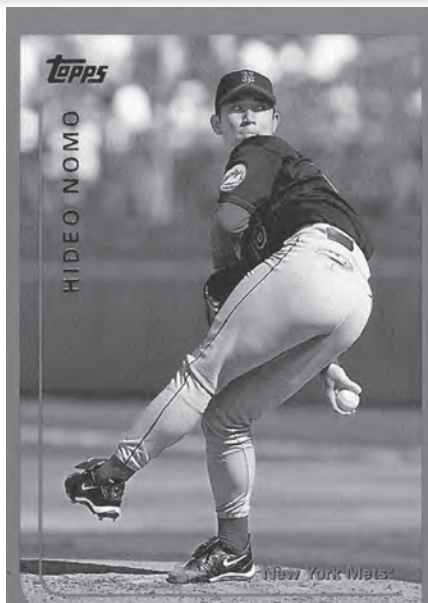
Mashi's success created instant demand for his services in 1965 from both the San Francisco Giants and Nankai Hawks. Each team claimed Mashi, and although he appeared in spring training with Nankai, by the start of the 1965 season, Mashi was back in San Francisco. His full season in the majors was again successful—Mashi appeared in forty-five games, had a respectable ERA of 3.75, and was credited with four wins and only one loss. The Giants were so impressed with their star Japanese pitcher that they wanted him back in 1966, but pleas from his parents to come home and Mashi's sense of responsibility to the Nankai Hawks convinced him to return to Japanese baseball for good.

Although Mashi was good for a short time, thirty more years would pass until the first Japanese superstar, pitcher Hideo Nomo (b. 1968), made his 1995 debut with the Los Angeles Dodgers. Nomo would become an all-star, win National League Rookie of the Year, lead the league in strikeouts in his debut season, and have a successful thirteen-season career in the MLB with various teams. His success would help bring future Japanese stars to MLB, including Suzuki Ichirō, who debuted in 2001 for the Seattle Mariners. Ichirō, still an active major league player in the US, holds both MLB records for hits in a single season with 262 and the longest consecutive season streak of 200-hit seasons at ten.

Cultural Differences between Baseball in Japan and the United States?

One of the most widely known and interesting treatments of the cultural differences between the way baseball is played in the United States and Japan is Robert Whiting's 1989 book, *You Gotta Have Wa*. According to Whiting, despite virtually identical rules, American players arriving in Japan very quickly notice big differences in how the game is played and organized in Japan. The emphasis in the United States is on the role of the individual, but that is not as much the case in Japan, where the focus is on the strength and harmony of the group. The same rules apply for the worker on the assembly line as for the baseball player. Whiting insists that the key difference is *wa*—team spirit or unity. There is a much greater sense of playing for the team and much less emphasis on individual success in Japan than the United States. Whiting has compared the typical Japanese player's ethos to that of samurai in earlier periods of the nation's history.

Whiting's strong assertions regarding cultural differences have not gone unchallenged and are the subject of some controversy. Yale University Professor James Kelly, who has published extensively on Japanese baseball, recognizes Whiting's extensive knowledge of the game. He agrees that some professional baseball in Japan fits the samurai stereotype, "not entirely, not convincingly, not uniquely, but enough to feed the press mills and the front offices and the television analysts." In fact, he says, this "spin"



Nomo Hideo Topps baseball card. Source: Garvey Cey Russel Lopes blog at <http://tinyurl.com/z3nuede>.

is part of the game. Our job is "not to dismiss this commentary as misguided (though much of it clearly is)" but to ask who is putting these ideas about, who is believing them, and why they are appealing: "The myths are essential to the reality. . . ." Japanese baseball is "not a window onto a homogenous and unchanging national character, but is a fascinating sight for seeing how these national debates and concerns play out—just as in the United States."¹

Controversies notwithstanding, famous stars in Japanese baseball receive far lower salaries than in the US and are said to be valued for their contributions to their teams rather than for their individual exploits. Salaries in Japan for NPB players in 2014 ranged from US \$44,000 to US \$6 million, while the range in the United States for MLB players in the same year went from US \$500,000 to US \$26 million.²

Most Japanese professional teams are owned by major corporations for public relations purposes. Team names reflect their owners rather than the cities the teams call home. For example, the Tokyo-based Yomiuri Giants are owned by Japanese media conglomerate, the Yomiuri Group. There is another downtown Tokyo team, the Yakult Swallows, who are owned by dairy probiotic drink company Yakult Hansha Co. Ltd. The Hiroshima Tōyō Carp are owned by the Tōyō Kōgyō Co. Ltd., the owners of Mazda. In a rather unique case, Japanese electronics and entertainment software company Nintendo was majority owner of the Seattle Mariners of the MLB in a similar fashion from 1992 to 2016.

When Americans come to play in Japan, they are often startled by the amount of time that they are expected to stay at the ballpark for what

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seems to them to be endless practice sessions that could last every day for ten or more hours. Players are expected to push themselves to the limit even when they have a day off and have to practice. Even injured American players are told to go out into the field with the team. Not to do so would, some say, destroy the team's quintessential *wa*. Whiting feels that while Americans "play" ball, the Japanese really "work" at it, and suggests that a key difference between American and Japanese baseball is the idea of individual initiative. While American players certainly exhibit some team spirit, they are also playing for their own benefit. If they get a high average, win a lot of games pitching, or hit a ton of home runs, they can earn much higher salaries than are possible in Japan. Many American players are said to lack team loyalty and move on to new teams that offer better salaries and playing conditions. Japanese players at home show far greater team loyalty by playing with the same team much of the time. There are trades and the like, but there is far less emphasis on players changing teams.

The lure of American salaries has altered this tendency since many stars leave or consider abandoning their Japanese squad for the higher salaries and greater fame possible in the MLB. NPB teams have countered this through establishing a posting system between their league and the MLB, where MLB teams must pay a Japanese player's team a fee in addition to negotiating the player's contract for their team after the NPB team has made that player available to the MLB. This allows NPB teams to receive compensation for players leaving to play in the MLB.

However, Kelly and others have justifiably pointed out that in a game where individual statistics can make or break a player, there is always tension between personal and team goals. Also, as is the case in the US, different professional organizations have contrasting expectations and organizational styles that reflect the personalities of their owners.³

Despite differences that preclude sweeping generalizations, Japanese teams are more regimented than their American counterparts. Many Japanese players see their team as family and are expected to show utmost respect and loyalty to their team. The team manager has absolute authority, and it is a major sin for any player to disobey or criticize the manager. Players who show a lack of *wa*, even if they are winning a lot of games with home runs or fine pitching, can be relegated to the bench or even removed from the team.

Although Whiting's book was written in 1989, he feels that little has changed today. In 2012, he wrote:

*Besuboru—or "yakyū" (field ball), as it is also called—is the national sport of Japan, but it is not the game that Americans know and love. Take a trip to a Japanese ballpark such as the Tokyo Dome, home of the Yomiuri Giants, and a completely different baseball culture will reveal itself. It's not just the sake and squid and the beer girls in short shorts carrying draft beer kegs. It is the values of group harmony and discipline that mirror the society at large. Besuboru strategy focuses on tactics like the sacrifice bunt, something most American managers eschew. There is a decided lack of the hard slides and brushback pitches typical of Major League Baseball: A pitcher who accidentally hits a batter will politely tip his cap in apology.*⁴

Bobby Valentine's Difficult Managing Experience in Japan: A Clash of Cultures

Bobby Valentine was a very successful Major League Baseball manager in the 1990s. He gained respect for his ability to turn mediocre teams into pennant contenders. His success in the United States persuaded Japanese baseball team The Chiba Lotte Marines to hire him to manage the team in 1995. Valentine's experiences in Japan clearly illustrate several key cultural differences between American and Japanese baseball cultures.⁵

The Marines had been perennial losers for a great many years, but the management hoped Valentine could transform them into championship contenders. Unfortunately, upon arriving in 1995, Valentine almost immediately clashed with a coaching staff determined to maintain the rigorous

training program that dated back to the nineteenth century, when baseball was first introduced to Japan. It was a system that featured dawn-to-dusk spring training camps that were three to four times longer than in the US. Coaches focused on so-called "guts" drills, where players were made to field balls to the point of exhaustion and on occasion entailed corporal punishment for slackers.

Valentine introduced his own hybrid approach brought from his experience in the United States. During spring training, he conducted short, snappy practices limited to three hours a day, not nine, as in other camps. Valentine contended that the long drills during spring training so exhausted the players that their play suffered when the season began in April. During the season, he reduced the time spent in pregame workouts to conserve players' energy for the games. He reduced the number and length of pregame meetings, and discouraged the use of the sacrifice bunt—long a favorite tactic of most Japanese managers—believing that a sacrifice was just a waste of an out.

Although the overall play of the Marines improved markedly in 1995, the clash between Valentine and his coaches grew in intensity. As the season ended, the coaches complained to management that Valentine did not make enough of an effort to comprehend the psychological value of the traditional approach to Japanese baseball. Management sided with the coaches and fired Valentine.

Although Valentine returned to Japan for another successful stint of managing the Marines from 2004 to 2009, including winning the Nippon Series in 2005, the traditionalist approach to management still appears to dominate Japanese baseball today. By 2009, Marines team management felt Valentine was not performing up to his expensive contract, and the team was losing money after making substantial upgrades to their stadium, including large, HD video screens. One Japanese critic claimed that Valentine's easygoing American approach and lack of discipline had backfired and were destroying team harmony (or *wa*).

The Japanese professional leagues also tried a novel experiment with foreign umpires in 1997, when they hired a young but experienced American umpire, Mike DiMuro, to work in Japan. DiMuro immediately encountered trouble in Japan because his American interpretation of baseball rules often differed from those employed in Japan. His interpretation of the strike zone and what constituted a balk enraged Japanese players and management, and soon led to DiMuro's firing.

Baseball's Future in Japan and the US

Baseball will remain a highly popular sport in Japan and the US for a long time, but scholars, sportswriters, and, most importantly, sports fans know whether they admit it or not that the sport is no longer "the national pastime" in either nation. Japan is today experiencing a soccer boom, and many Japanese college students seem to prefer J1-League soccer over baseball. Japanese overall still regard baseball as the most popular sport, but the popularity of soccer is growing rapidly. According to one survey in 2005, 52 percent of respondents rated professional baseball as the most popular sport in Japan with only 23 percent of respondents selecting soccer. The same survey in 2013 showed 48 percent supporting baseball and 36 percent in favor of soccer. Today, soccer has replaced baseball as the favorite sport among middle school students in Japan according to surveys by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology.⁶ The overall popularity of Japanese baseball is further diminished by the fact that many Japanese leading baseball stars have left for the "greener pastures" of Major League Baseball.

Football today is more popular than baseball with the American public. It is clear that the National Football League (NFL) dominates fan interest in the United States. For example, the 2014 AFC Wild Card game between the Kansas City Chiefs and the Indianapolis Colts was watched by more people (27.6 million) than the World Cup Final (26.6 million), the NBA Finals (15.6 million), the World Series (13.8 million), and just about

every other televised sporting event of 2014.⁷ In 2016, it is estimated that 111.9 million viewers tuned in to the 2016 Super Bowl 50 game, while only 14.7 million watched any part of the 2015 World Series. To make matters worse for Major League Baseball, the median age of Americans watching the World Series is approaching fifty-five, while the median age for the NFL's Super Bowl is well under forty-five.⁸

The situation is somewhat better in Japan. Baseball remains the most popular team sport in Japan, with high school, university, and professional games attracting the public and dominating the media during the spring and summer months. However, as is the case in the United States, other sports such as professional soccer are attracting increasing numbers of younger viewers and fans.

Nevertheless, there is evidence that the "grand old game" will continue to thrive in both Japan and the United States. The recent surge of interest in baseball in South Korea, Taiwan, and even China has sparked further interest in Japan, especially when national teams play each other in tournament games. In the US, professional baseball, despite its secondary status compared to professional football, continues to be popular, and there is encouraging evidence Little League baseball is growing for the first time in many years in inner-city neighborhoods. The game is here to stay in both nations. ■

SUGGESTED ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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3. Professor James Kelly, conversation with Lucien Ellington, June 24, 2016.
4. Robert Whiting, "Diamond Diplomacy," *The Wall Street Journal*, April 13, 2012.
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