

*Baseball Diplomacy in the United States and Japan:  
From Ichikō to Ichiro*

To many Americans the game of baseball has a deeper meaning. It is a national symbol right next to the flag and apple pie. Baseball represents more than just the national game of the United States; it is the country's national pastime. Albert Spalding, noted baseball historian and equipment supplier, once claimed "that baseball owes its prestige as our National Game to the fact that no other form of sport is the exponent of American Courage, Confidence, Combativeness, Discipline, Determination, Performance, and Success."<sup>1</sup> The game has paralleled the history of the relatively young nation and today the globalization age has exported the game to various countries. When Japanese outfielder, Ichiro Susuki made his way across the Pacific to Seattle as the first Japanese position player (non-pitcher) to play in America, every one of his games was broadcasted live in Japan. The Japanese media hounded him to the point that he issued a restraining order. Nevertheless, at the close of the 2001 baseball season in America, it was a Japanese native that took home both the Rookie of the Year and Most Valuable Player honor. Wait; surely this must be a mistake, a foreigner beating Americans at their own national game? Well it most certainly happened, and the adoring Japanese public has 120 years of baseball in Japan to thank for the success.

During the latter 19<sup>th</sup> century, the game of baseball found its way to the island of Japan and eventually assimilated itself into the culture. As the game progressed on its unique Japanese timeline, it showed that it could flourish despite competition between the two nations. Therefore, the success of the game can be attributed to its ability to

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<sup>1</sup> Albert G. Spalding, *America's National Game* (New York: American Sports Publishing Company, 1911), 4.

transcend national borders. More importantly, however, are the implications behind this capacity; not the least of which is the fact that baseball serves as a diplomatic tool between nations, especially the United States and Japan. In order to realize the phenomenal nature of the game, it is necessary to understand how baseball became so popular in Japan. From there, one will see that historically the game promoted acceptance and tolerance and eventually maintained friendly relations between the two vastly different cultures. Finally, by looking at the effects of baseball diplomacy one will be able to conclude that the sport is a microcosm of U.S.-Japan relations and must be continually supported.

Historians generally agree that baseball holds a special place in U.S.-Japan relations, and has had serious implications in the development of the two countries. Donald Roden understands that the Japanese used the sport as a rallying force around the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In his piece, “Baseball and the Quest for National Dignity in Meiji Japan,” he attempts to “link sport, first, to the ideal social character of a governing elite and, second, to the strength of a nation.”<sup>2</sup> Kenneth Pyle, President of the National Bureau of Asian Research, agrees that during the Meiji era the Japanese rulers were grasping for a national identity and looking to the West for ideas.<sup>3</sup> From the Japanese perspective, baseball was seen as a means for nationalizing the populace. However, across the Pacific, the United States had a slightly different idea for baseball. While the Americans recognized Japan’s thirst for distinctiveness, they wanted to make sure that it would be quenched with the taste of democracy. Richard Crepeau recognizes this quest

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<sup>2</sup> Donald Roden, “Baseball and the Quest for National Dignity in Meiji Japan,” *The American Historical Review*, vol. 85, June 1980: 511.

<sup>3</sup> Kenneth B. Pyle, *The New Generation in Meiji Japan, Problems of Cultural Identity 1885-1895* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1969), 167.

and claims that the game of baseball should play an active role in carrying out the mission of spreading democracy.<sup>4</sup> This dichotomy of baseball as a means aptly characterizes its history on the banks of the Pacific. Throughout this piece, this notion will act as a guide in understanding the impact baseball has made on U.S.-Japan relations. Therefore to begin, one must naturally start with the American ideal of baseball, as it was the birthplace of this great game.

The sport of baseball took the idea of the British game of cricket and gave it a distinctly American spin. During the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Albert Spalding claimed that the English style did not encapsulate the true spirit of the America. He felt that Cricket was too slow and passive for the more modern and rustic Americans. In speaking of American and baseball, he said “The spirit of our national life is combative; baseball is a combative game. Baseball is War!”<sup>5</sup> This sense of ferocity is also sustained by the fact that the inventor of the modern game, Abner Doubleday traded in his baseball cap for a general’s beret during the Civil War. Likewise, in the American mindset baseball was seen as a natural arm of the greater institution of democracy.

To say that baseball acts as a direct harbinger of democracy may be an overstatement. Certainly, the sport has a role as an ambassador of American ideals, not the least of which include a democratic civilization. When team of major leaguers from the United States traveled to Japan in 1922, President Harding hailed the trip as having a “real diplomatic value.”<sup>6</sup> Far from the diplomacy seen on a state-level between ministers, baseball diplomacy acts as a cultivator of the common man. This bottom-up

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<sup>4</sup> Richard C. Crepeau, “Pearl Harbor: A Failure of Baseball?” *Journal of Popular Culture*, vol. 15, no. 4, Spring 1982: 67.

<sup>5</sup> Spalding, 6.

<sup>6</sup> “President Harding Sees Value in Tour,” *New York Times*, Oct 6, 1922, 18.

development of the masses in most cases has a higher success ratio than top-down diplomacy. Americans realized this, and in true missionary form brought the game to Asia. Thus, the exportation of baseball has greater implications than simply teaching foreigners a new game.

The idea that baseball traveled the world inextricably linked to democracy can be seen as early as 1919. When Adachi Kinnosuke noticed that Japanese sumo wrestlers passionately turned their attention to baseball, he suggest that “when these heavyweights take to baseball, you might just as well, make up your mind that Japanese, as a race have gone pretty far in the right direction, on the highway of civilization!”<sup>7</sup> The basis of this argument lies in the theory of Social Darwinism, that a nation’s success is determined by the survival of the fittest. Japan also subscribed to this notion as it grew militarily, economically, and socially. During this period the Japanese surpassed the Chinese as the most complex people of Asia.<sup>8</sup> The United States began to see Japan as a rival and sought to frame its development within the context of American democracy. This is where baseball takes over.

During the period prior to World War II, the U.S. took advantage of Japan’s growing interest in baseball and sent several baseball all-stars across the Pacific on goodwill missions. Although these trips were not government-sponsored propaganda; they nonetheless had a distinctively pro-American flair. The point was to promote friendly relations through a common interest. It also fed the growing Japanese demand for baseball sparked by the few Americans already stationed there and teaching the game. In the first expedition in 1922, a team of semi-pro U.S. ball players brought their act to

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<sup>7</sup> Adachi Kinnosuke, “Attaboy Japan,” *Everybody’s*, vol. 40, May 1919: 68.

<sup>8</sup> Elanor Tupper and George E. McReynolds. *Japan in American Public Opinion*. (New York, 1937) 4-5.

China, Japan, and the Philippines. Though the mission was nominally successful in its own right, it opened the door for future players to make the trip. After the Major League Baseball season of 1931, several All-Stars and members of the Philadelphia Athletics took their game to the Meiji Shrine Stadium. In front of 65,000 rowdy fans paying upward of 40 yen (about \$20), the U.S. team took the series opener by a score of 7-0.<sup>9</sup> The following year, Yankee superstar, Lou Gehrig led a team of barnstormers to the Pacific in the name of competition and education. He commented to the *New York Times*, “the enthusiasm of the Japanese for baseball just about borders on fanatical.”<sup>10</sup> A team of interpreters followed the ballplayers to Japan’s six leading universities so that the students, as well as Prince Chichibu of the royal family, could learn the intricacies of the game.<sup>11</sup>

In the final and most important U.S. baseball invasion of Japan the ultimate baseball ambassador, Babe Ruth, led a superstar cast including renowned Athletics manager Connie Mack, straight to the capital of Japan. Over 100,000 rabid Japanese fans showered the home run king with confetti along the Ginza in Tokyo. The Babe, with his gargantuan home runs already approaching legendary status in the States, was surprised to receive the same homage in Japan. Nonetheless, his sparking personality played to the adoring Japanese public and the tour was a huge success on many levels. The *New York Times* claimed, “The Babe’s big bulk today blotted out such unimportant things as international squabbles over oil and navies.”<sup>12</sup> Connie Mack agreed stating that the final

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<sup>9</sup> “Tokyo Speculators Charge \$20 for Tickets As 65,000 See U.S. Major Leaguers Win, 7-0,” *New York Times*, Nov. 8, 1931, Sec. X, 1.

<sup>10</sup> “Interest in Japan Amazing to Gehrig,” *New York Times*, Dec. 23, 1931, 24.

<sup>11</sup> “O’Doul, Back From Orient, Believes Japanese Soon Will Rival Americans in Baseball Skill,” *New York Times*, Dec. 22, 1932, 25.

<sup>12</sup> “Tokyo Gives Ruth Royal Welcome; 100,000 Acclaim Home Run King,” *New York Times*, Nov. 3, 1934, 9.

visit was one of the greatest peace measures in the history of nations.<sup>13</sup> Even at the dawn of World War II, the Japanese, in a letter to Ruth, claimed that it was “one of the best means of promoting the Japanese nation’s understanding of true Yankee spirit.”<sup>14</sup> The fact that Babe Ruth could erase the anti-American hostility in Japan with the swing of a bat spoke volumes of the power of baseball diplomacy.

This form of low-level diplomacy intended to build a U.S.-Japan friendship and ideally sought to counter the growing hostilities of the two Pacific governments. By securing the Japanese citizens that came out in droves to the baseball stadiums, the United States thought that it could prevent war. However, the masses no longer controlled the government and military in the years leading up to World War II. Richard Crepeau posed the question that the Pearl Harbor attack may have been the result of the failure of baseball.<sup>15</sup> While it is clear that baseball captivated the general Japanese population, it would be presumptuous to suggest that it was at fault. Most historians agree that militarist control over the island nation specifically triggered Pearl Harbor and the ensuing war. In the summer of 1941, the Japanese government ordered the disbanding of Japan’s professional baseball league much to the chagrin of the public. The absence of baseball was a reflection of the Japanese war machine. Certainly, if the Japanese people had their way, (as the numbers of spectators during the American tours give an inkling of) baseball would be alive and flourishing in a peaceful Japanese society during the 1940s.

Although the U.S. intended to export its political and social doctrine to the fledgling state, many in Japan saw the role of baseball differently. During this period of

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<sup>13</sup> “Mack Hails Ruth as Peace Promoter,” *New York Times*, Jan. 6, 1935, Sec. 3, 7.

<sup>14</sup> “Japanese Praises Ruth,” *New York Times*, Feb. 24, 1935, 25.

<sup>15</sup> Crepeau, 67.

self-strengthening the Japanese looked to the West to develop a national identity. Building on its new idea of *Fukoku Kyohei* (rich nation, strong army), the Japan broke from its Asian lineage and developed its civilization based on Western standards. Fukuzawa Yukichi, a lower samurai, used his knowledge in Dutch and Western sciences and experiences in Europe and America to spark a civilization and enlightenment movement in Japan. Similarly, Japan began to use Dutch railroad technology and British military advisors gained through the Anglo-Japanese alliance to retool their nation in order to compete with Western imperialism. Walter LaFeber characterizes this period with following the maxim, “Japanese spirit, Western things;” with Americans only comprehending half that motto.<sup>16</sup> This distinction is precisely the divergence of baseball roles as seen by America and Japan. For Japan, baseball was simply an American thing not an American spirit as the U.S. had hoped. Japan used its own spirit to create a rallying force to unite its citizens under a common identity.

Thus nationalism, not democracy, was the byproduct of baseball in Japan. Evidence of this schism is twofold. First, the actual style of Japanese baseball is testament to the dichotomy of the international effects. The Japanese play a much different games than their American teammates and shows their distinctive “Japanese spirit.” Second, the reasons for adopting the game were vastly different than what Americans expected. As noted before, the Japan made their business in adopting Western practices, but more importantly the Japanese saw baseball as means to get back at their Western aggressors. With the treaty-port system heavily favoring Western nations, the Japanese sought to level the playing field with bats and gloves. Nationalism

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<sup>16</sup> Walter LaFeber, *The Clash* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 1997), 37.

is a necessary force in strengthening a country; and as one will see, the Japanese facilitated this end through baseball.

The fact that the Japanese had begun to emphasize “assimilation” rather than “adoption” of Western culture made it clear that they were groping for a Japanese identity.<sup>17</sup> This process of assimilation is no more evident than in the style of Japanese baseball. The American game is dominated by flame throwing pitchers and burly home run hitters, while the Japanese game is more intricate and concerned with fundamentals. Ichiro Suzuki hit just 8 home runs in 152 games but led the major leagues with a .350 batting average and 56 stolen bases, and only committed a single error. On the other hand, Jason Giambi (a close second to Ichiro in the MVP voting) smacked 38 home runs but stole a mere 2 bases while at the designated hitter position.<sup>18</sup>

Even at an early stage this disparity in the two styles of play was apparent. Albert Spalding characterized the 1909 Keio University team as first-class fielders and adept in learning and perfecting particulars such as the bunt and double play. But they were still “no match for the best American batsmen and have not developed pitchers equal to our stars.”<sup>19</sup> Later Lou Gehrig, commenting on his 1931 excursion, reiterated Spalding stating:

The Japanese surprised us with their skill, although most of this runs along defensive lines. Being naturally agile, they already have developed themselves into marvelous fielders and on several occasions showed us some ingenious defensive plays. In batting, however, they are still weak, although they are absolutely fearless at the plate. They stood right up to Lefty Grove’s fastest pitches

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<sup>17</sup> Pyle, 167.

<sup>18</sup> MLB.com, “American League Hitting Stats - All Category Leaders, 2001”  
<[http://www.mlb.com/NASApp/mlb/mlb/stats/mlb\\_league\\_leaders.jsp](http://www.mlb.com/NASApp/mlb/mlb/stats/mlb_league_leaders.jsp)> (Nov. 14, 2001)

<sup>19</sup> Spalding, 399.

and never batted an eye, but then, maybe, they never saw the ball.<sup>20</sup>

These different approaches to the game may be the reason why it took 120 years for a Japanese position player to break into the American Major League. But with the unimaginable success of Ichiro, one may suggest that although the Americans invented baseball, the Japanese may have perfected it. Although Major League Baseball still only claims two Japanese position players, the uniqueness of the Japanese game is testament to their quest not just learning Western practices, but transforming them into something distinctly Japanese.<sup>21</sup>

After looking at how the Japanese used baseball as a part of a greater nationalization movement, it is now necessary to determine why the sport of baseball was particularly chosen over all others. One can see that even from an early age, Japanese children satisfied their curiosity by learning about foreign cultures. Fannie Caldwell MacCaulay, principal of Kindergartens in the Girls' School at Hiroshima during the 1910s, noted that the greatest wish of every boy and girl in Japan is to know of foreign countries, people, and customs.<sup>22</sup> Though a bit overstated, this nonetheless supports the idea that the Japanese choose to globalize their society. The sport of baseball entered the Japan based on this principle but was more than a simple novelty game played by the Japanese. It was a means for the Japanese to beat the West at their own game and prove themselves in the international arena.

In keeping with the doctrine of Social Darwinism, Japan from 1870 to 1900 transformed from an introverted island nation east of China to a fierce competitor in war,

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<sup>20</sup> "Interest in Japan Amazing to Gehrig," *New York Times*, Dec. 23, 1931, 24.

<sup>21</sup> The other Japanese born position player is Tsuyoshi Shinjo of the New York Mets.

<sup>22</sup> Fannie Caldwell Macaulay, "To Japanese Children," *America to Japan*, ed. Lindsay Russell (New York: The Knickerbocker Press, 1915), 125.

diplomacy, commerce and even baseball. Responding in a large part to the opinions of American educators, the Ministry of Education decided in 1878 to establish a school to train physical education instructors for the various Japanese primary schools. Menial sports such as tug-of-war and capture the flag failed to captivate the schoolchildren who were more interested in competition and adroitness. Though crew first caught young athletes' attention, baseball was the sport that ultimately won the hearts of the student community in the 1890s and 1900s.<sup>23</sup> During these decades ten universities founded baseball teams but none was more dominant than that of *Ichikō*, (First Higher School of Tokyo). On May 23, 1896, after regularly defeating their Japanese peers, the *Ichikō* team finally found a new opponent in Yokohama Athletic Club.

The Yokohama Athletic Club was a product of East-West diplomatic system on the late 1800s known as the treaty-port system. The United States leased a relatively large plot of Japanese land to serve as a base for its trade with Japan. In the eyes of many Japanese intellectuals this was a point of contention based on Western imperialism and a series of unequal treaties. Although nationalistic tendencies may have transported baseball to Japan, once assimilated it was seen as a way to drive out foreign aggression. The American team from Yokohama realized the importance of the game to Japan and originally would not agree to play such a nationalistically charged game. However, they consented and agreed to a game on their home field at the club figuring the young men from *Ichikō* could be no match for natives of the game. Much to their dismay the Yokohama Athletic Club was embarrassingly handed a 29-4 defeat. In the rematch featuring several Navy ringers recruited from the crews of the *Charleston* and the *Detriot*, the *Ichikō* team one again 32-9. Across the country the Japanese public shared in the

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<sup>23</sup> Roden, 517.

defeat of the Americans. Donald Roden attests to the significance of the win his translation from the history of *Ichikō*:

Underlying the ecstasy of the moment was the awareness that the victory had transcended the playing field. As the student president proclaimed, “This great victory is more than a victory for our school; it is a victory for the Japanese people!” The captain of the team concurred, explaining how he and his comrades had realized that “the name of the country” was at stake in their competition. Since the game was covered in many newspapers around the country the *Ichikō* students were suddenly national heroes.<sup>24</sup>

This new means of proving fitness among international opponents on the baseball diamond explicitly parallels the rise of the Japanese on the international field.

Again, based on the idea of Social Darwinism, the Japanese military successes promoted their civilization as one than can play hardball with aggressive neighbors. In 1895 and 1905 Japan’s success in the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese War bolstered its international reputation to world power status. Increasingly nations, including the United States, began to recognize Japan as a true international player. There existed a newfound respect for the Asian nation’s power, but there was always a fear that competition would draw the Japanese into war. To recall the words of Albert Spalding, “The spirit of our national life is combative; baseball is a combative game. Baseball is War.” Herein lies the connection between Japan’s rise as an international force and the assimilation of baseball. In an article entitled “Thoughts About Our Japanese Neighbors,” American philanthropist and banker, Emerson McMillin exclaims that during the last half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Japanese “have shown the greatest aptitude for

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<sup>24</sup> Roden, 524.

assimilating the best ideas and practices of Western civilization.”<sup>25</sup> Undoubtedly, Mr. McMillin was referring to baseball and warfare tactics, both of which the Japanese imports that ultimately were used against the West.

Apparently there existed a conflict in U.S.-Japanese diplomacy in the half century prior to Pearl Harbor as seen through the perspective of baseball. On the Eastern shore of the Pacific, the United States, looking to groom an amicable neighbor based on Western ideals, promoted the game of baseball as a natural thoroughfare on the highway of civilization. Eventually, the U.S. baseball to interlock Japanese interests with their own so that friendly relations could be maintained. But although the *Ichikō*-Yokohama did not immediately contribute to harmony across the Pacific, it most certainly did contribute to the quest for Japanese national dignity.<sup>26</sup> Thus, while the short-term animosity was showcased at Pearl Harbor, the long-term implications of U.S.-Japan baseball diplomacy have finally taken shape with the explosion of Ichiro-mania.

What this means is that low-level interactions between nations can have serious effects on foreign policy decisions and national identities. Besides baseball between Japan and the United States, ping-pong diplomacy was popular among the Chinese and Americans during the 1970s. This important point of departure, beginning with Zhou Enlai’s invitation to the U.S. table tennis team to visit China in 1971, thawed Sino-American relations and paved the way for future normalization.<sup>27</sup> While the United States were linked to Europe through a common heritage, sports essentially filled this

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<sup>25</sup> Emerson McMillin, “Thoughts About Our Japanese Neighbors,” *America to Japan*, ed. Lindsay Russell (New York: The Knickerbocker Press, 1915), 111.

<sup>26</sup> Dean Merrifield, “University Athletics in Japan,” *University of Chicago Magazine*, 2, (1909-10): 105.

<sup>27</sup> Samuel S. Kim, “The People’s Republic of China in the United Nations: A Preliminary Analysis,” *World Politics*, vol. 26, No. 3, Apr 1974: 299-330.

void with its Asian peers. Though baseball is unlikely to carry the same weight as race and religion, America and Japan have mutually benefited from its byproducts. Currently, the Ichiro craze attracts fans rivaling the intensity of Babe Ruth. But although those two national heroes played the game much differently, their ability to captivate audiences in both nations has proven that baseball transcends national borders. More likely than not, baseball diplomacy will continue successfully bridging culture and hopefully these byproducts translate to a stronger U.S.-Japan alliance for the good of the civilized world.

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