

BASEBALL

America's most successful export to Japan



Professional baseball

Professional baseball games take place in two leagues: the Central league and the Pacific league. (Photo courtesy of Nippon Professional Baseball)

Baseball (*yakyu*) was introduced into Japan from the United States around 1873. As schools established their own teams for club activities, its popularity spread rapidly. Although professional baseball is Japan's largest spectator sport, the game still has a strong appeal for amateurs, particularly at the high school and university levels. Many major corporations also sponsor their own amateur teams. In Japan's two professional leagues, games are televised almost daily during the April to October playing season, and popular players stand out as national heroes.

Amateur Baseball

In terms of participation, baseball is the most widely played sport among male elementary schoolchildren and junior high school students (for safety reasons, both use a rubber ball, the same size as a regular baseball). Competitions are generally limited to the local level.

High school baseball attracts nationwide interest. Twice each year, during the spring and summer, the best high school teams in Japan compete at Koshien Stadium, in Hyogo Prefecture, where the tournaments have been held since 1915. After elimination rounds, in which more than 4,000 teams participate every year, the top teams from all of Japan's 47 prefectures vie for the national championship.

Tournament games from Koshien are broadcast nationwide on NHK television and

High school baseball

A nationwide high school baseball tournament is held twice a year, in spring and in summer, at the Koshien stadium in Hyogo prefecture. (Photo courtesy of Photo Kishimoto)



radio. Hordes of classmates and players' family members travel to Hyogo to attend the games. In the course of each tournament, as many as 1 million spectators fill the stands. Back in the hometowns of teams competing in the finals, it is not unusual to see business activity and even traffic on the streets come to a halt while people gather in front of their television sets or tune in to the radio.

Many of Japan's most talented high school players forego entering university and are recruited directly by professional teams. As a result, the ranks of top-level professionals are to a large degree made up of former heroes of Koshien tournaments.

University baseball also has a large following. The so-called "Big Six" teams—Hosei, Keio, Meiji, Rikkyo, University of Tokyo, and Waseda—enjoy an enthusiastic response among their students and alumni. The annual game between Keio and Waseda university teams is a famous rivalry that dates back to 1903. Among the university players who went on to have brilliant careers as professionals are Nagashima Shigeo of Rikkyo University, Tabuchi Koichi of Hosei University, and Egawa Suguru, also of Hosei University.

Many corporations have their own amateur teams, and a nationwide corporate tournament is held annually. They use metal bats and have adopted the designated hitter rule. Top players on these teams are often drafted by professional teams in early rounds and are expected to make a significant contribution the following season.

Japan's amateur teams compete in regional and international events, such as the annual collegiate series between Japan and the United States. Following baseball's introduction as an Olympic event, Japanese teams have taken part, winning a silver medal at the 1996 Games in Atlanta.

The first of many goodwill visits to Japan by American all-star teams began in October 1931, when a team led by the New York Yankees' star player, Lou Gehrig, played against Japanese university all-star teams, as well as others. The Americans won all 17 games, but fans were nevertheless thrilled by the action, and the defeats convinced the Japanese of the need to elevate the level of the sport. This led to the establishment of professional baseball, in December 1934, and the organizing of the Dainippon Tokyo Baseball Club. Two months later, the team began a tour of the United States and soon afterwards changed its name to the Tokyo Giants.

League competition was inaugurated in 1936. In the first professional game, played in Narumi Stadium in Nagoya on February 9, 1936, a team named the Golden Dolphins defeated the Giants with a score of 10 to 3.

A system of two leagues, with six teams in each, was adopted in 1950. Three of the teams are owned by railway companies, two by newspaper organizations, and most of the others are under a type of corporate-sponsorship arrangement. At present, the Central League is made up of the Chunichi Dragons (Nagoya); Hanshin Tigers (Osaka); Hiroshima Toyo Carp (Hiroshima); Tokyo Yakult Swallows (Tokyo); Yokohama Bay Stars (Yokohama); and Yomiuri Giants (Tokyo). The Pacific League is composed of the Chiba Lotte Marines (Chiba); Fukuoka SoftBank Hawks (Fukuoka); Hokkaido Nippon-Ham Fighters (Sapporo); Orix Buffaloes (Osaka); Saitama Seibu Lions (Tokorozawa); and Tohoku Rakuten Golden Eagles (Sendai).

The Tokyo Dome or "Big Egg," in Korakuen, Tokyo, was Japan's first domed stadium. It has been followed by others in Fukuoka, Nagoya, and Osaka, enabling many games that might otherwise be postponed to be played during Japan's rainy season.



Children's baseball
Baseball is a popular pastime for children. (Photo courtesy of AFLO)

Professional Baseball

A baseball stadium

Baseball is one of the most popular sports in Japan, and professional games often attract tens of thousands of spectators. (Photo courtesy of Nippon Professional Baseball)



Stars of the Game

The greatest professional baseball players in recent years have set records that rival the U.S. Major Leagues. Best known is Oh Sadaharu, who played as an infielder for the Yomiuri Giants. During his 22-year career, Oh hit a total of 868 home runs, surpassing Babe Ruth's 714 and the 755 of U.S. Major League record holder Hank Aaron.

The greatest pitcher in postwar professional baseball is almost certainly Kaneda Masaichi, a left-hander with pinpoint control and dazzling speed, who won 400 games during his career. Another player to achieve great distinction in the sport is Kinugasa Sachio of the Hiroshima Carp. An "Iron Man" who appeared in 2,215 consecutive games, Kinugasa surpassed the U.S. Major League record of 2,130, formerly held by Lou Gehrig of the New York Yankees.

Probably the most popular player in baseball's modern history is Nagashima Shigeo, formerly a star player with Rikkyo University, who spent his career as an infielder with the Yomiuri Giants. Known as baseball's "Mr. Giants," Nagashima led his team to nine consecutive national championships between 1965 and 1973.

Internationalization

American professional all-star teams have been making goodwill visits to Japan since the 1930s, and all professional baseball teams in Japan have foreign players on their rosters today.

Japanese professional teams have scouted players from the United States, Korea, Taiwan, and several Latin American and Caribbean nations. Many of these players have enjoyed successful careers and set records; others failed to fulfill their promise or adjust to the different playing style, and left after one season.

The national baseball team

Japan's national baseball team in a huddle before a game at the 2008 Beijing Olympics. (Photo courtesy of Photo Kishimoto)



A little-known fact is that the first Japanese to play the sport for money was a man named Mikami Goro. While a graduate student in the United States, he played on a multiracial team in the now-defunct Federal League, in 1914 and 1915. Although Mikami returned to Japan and became a businessman, he stands out as the first Japanese professional, having played several decades before a professional league was established in his own country.

In modern times, pitcher Murakami Masanori spent two years playing for the San Francisco Giants during the early 1960s. More than two decades were to pass before another Japanese was to play in the U.S. Major Leagues. That player was Nomo Hideo, a former star pitcher of the Kintetsu Buffaloes. After joining the Los Angeles Dodgers in 1995, Nomo was nicknamed "Tornado" for his unique delivery and voted the National League Rookie of the Year.

Today, many players from Japan's professional league have signed as free agents with Major League teams and play in the United States. Some of these players have become stars there, including Suzuki Ichiro of the Seattle Mariners, Matsui Hideki of the New York Yankees, and Matsuzaka Daisuke of the Boston Red Sox. Recently some young high school or college graduates have been scouted directly by American teams.

Elsewhere, the Japanese national team has won consecutive championships at the 2006 and 2009 World Baseball Classic, an international baseball competition of national teams from around the world.