

# J-League—A Whole New Ball Game

By Ekusa Ato

The Japan Professional Soccer League, which kicked off in mid-May as Japan's first professional soccer league, is expected to develop into an enormously popular sport that could bring changes to the very cultural foundations of the nation. In terms of league management, training methods and the disposition of the players, the J-League differs completely from the national sports of *sumo*, which is steeped in tradition, and professional baseball.

Whereas baseball developed on the basis of Japan's prewar national values and spiritual environment, soccer is taking off on the basis of a mood and spiritual climate created by a new breed of Japanese brought up in a democratic society which was implanted by the U.S. Occupation under General Douglas MacArthur.

When absorbing cultural forms from other countries, Japan traditionally has brought them into harmony with her own national tradition. In the case of professional soccer, however, European and South American styles have been imported virtually intact. This development seems to reflect the emergence of a young generation of Japanese with a new consciousness. As such, the growth of the J-League should be seen as a barometer of the Allied powers' policies toward Japan at the end of World War II.

First of all, take a look at the higher echelons in sports. In the tradition of prewar authoritarianism in Japan, professional baseball chooses prominent people from business or government circles as its commissioners. But they are only nominal leaders; real power lies with the teams' owners, who run the game imperiously behind closed doors. In contrast, pro soccer is run democratically, with decisions made by representatives of the teams in meetings coordinated by J-League Chairman Kawabuchi Saburo, not exactly a household name.

In Japan the focus of attention tends to be the company rather than the local community—so much so that the hometown of Toyota Motor Corp. in Aichi Prefecture actually goes by the name of Toyota. Similarly the names of pro baseball teams

carry the names of the companies that operate them, such as the Yomiuri Giants (a newspaper) and the Hanshin Tigers (a railway). The companies thereby exploit the teams as a form of advertisement.

Professional soccer teams have adopted a different approach, however, seeking to gain local support and community identity by using the name of their hometown. Thus, for example, the team owned by Nissan Motor Co., Ltd. is called Yokohama Marinos. By giving its teams the names of the cities, like professional baseball in the United States, the J-League seems to be taking the side of decentralization in the provinces in the battle against centralization in Tokyo.

The league's managerial policy also seems to be more modern. Whereas pro baseball calculates its revenue first and then decides on players' salaries, pro soccer has put players' salaries first. In other words, investment comes first. This approach explains why the J-League has been able to attract so many stars from other countries. More than five foreign players are said to be earning more than ¥100 million a year, including Gary Lineker, the former English international player who is raking in an estimated ¥265 million with the Nagoya Grampus Eight, and Zico, the former Brazilian star who is pocketing an estimated ¥140 million at Kashima Antlers. All the teams expect to lose money this year, but nevertheless they have put profitability aside for the first season and forked out lucrative salaries instead. This ambitious managerial policy runs counter to the traditional Japanese way of reckoning revenues first, then determining expenditures.

In addition, whereas Japanese pro baseball teams hunt for players who have passed their prime in the United States and lure them over with hefty salaries, the J-League teams have attracted younger, first-rate players from around the world who could still make a big impact at home.

Another difference lies in the players' attitudes to training. While pro baseball players in Japan undergo very intensive training, spending 24 hours a day holed



Audience enthusiasm is spurred by the sale of fan paraphernalia as the new J-League's initial popularity has yet to wane. A short-lived fad or here to stay? Only time will tell.

up in training camps with no private time at all, pro soccer players concentrate on training for a few hours a day and then are free to do as they please. Some baseball teams control their players very stringently, expecting them to behave like gentlemen and serve as models of discipline for their fans at all times. In contrast, some soccer teams allow their players to wear whatever hairstyles they please and to travel between games in their own clothes. Indeed, this liberal approach even sparked some discord immediately after the league's opening.

Differences can also be seen in game strategy. While baseball teams analyze every pitch and hit by computer and place the emphasis on defense to avoid defeat (this approach has been called "managed baseball"), most soccer teams concentrate on intuitive, sharp attacking football. The speed of play has been the main reason for soccer's immense popularity.

Yet another difference concerns the fans. Whereas the rule in baseball is to cheer your team when it is batting but maintain silence when it is defending, soccer fans cheer from start to finish, blowing on megaphones and singing boisterously until they become hoarse.

Whereas baseball became Japanese and followed the path of the martial arts, soccer has imported the styles of Europe and South America with little change. Japan's traditional approach of maintaining the Japanese spirit while learning from the West, apparent ever since the opening of the country in the 19th century, appears to be crumbling on the soccer field. In a sense, therefore, the success of the J-League deserves attention as a measure of the Japanese internationalism. ■

*Ekusa Ato is a free-lance reporter based in Tokyo.*