

It's a Whole New Yakyu Game

By David Wiggins

I couldn't believe my ears. Booming was actually coming from a Japanese baseball crowd.

The scene was the bi-annual, post season all-star series between players from the Major Leagues and their counterparts from Japanese Pro Baseball. The Chicago Cubs' Sammy Sosa, he of 66 home run fame, was at the plate.

Ball one. A distinct mumbling became somewhat audible from the overflow crowd packed into the Tokyo Dome.

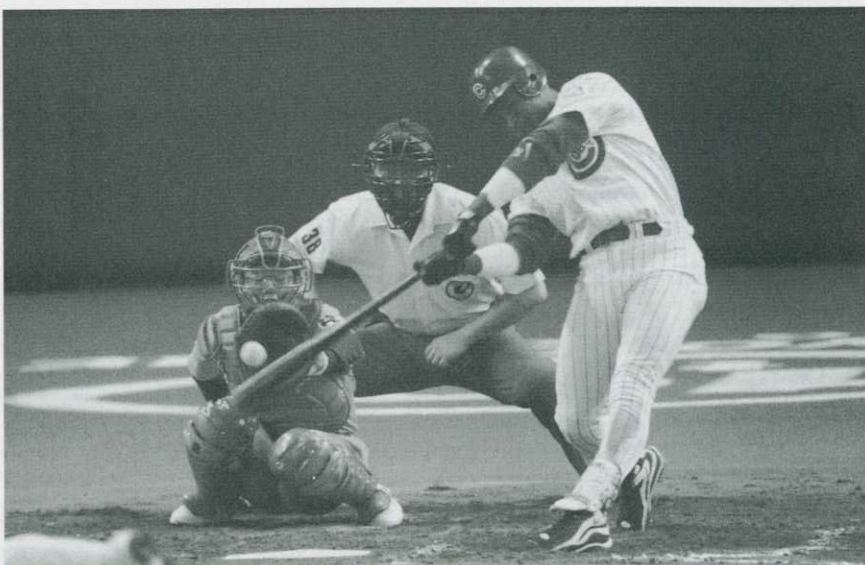
Ball two. The mumbling had turned into a rumbling that sounded like booming. I couldn't be sure. If they were boos, they would be the first I had heard in 11 years of *yakyu* (the Japanese word for baseball) watching.

When the count reached three balls, there could be no doubt — the rumbling had grown into a roaring avalanche of boos that came cascading down on the startled Japanese pitcher. The fans were indeed booming him — for not giving Sammy a chance to hit one out, go deep, blast the ball into tater territory. They wanted to see a “*homu-ran*” (home run).

Visibly shaken, the Japanese pitcher proceeded to groove a pitch that Sammy just got under, resulting in a warning track flyout.

I had been witness to a shocking turn of events. Booming by the normally relatively polite Japanese fans (relative to U.S. fans of America's pastime, my compatriots, who it seems were born to boo).

Not to be alarmed though. This would turn out to be just a momentary lapse in behavior on the part of the *nihonjin* fans. Upon Sosa's return to the U.S. they would revert to their usual mannerly ballpark ways. One can only chalk up their out-of-character behavior to watching too much American TV coverage of the



The bi-annual all-star series between Major Leagues and Japanese Pro Baseball

home run chase by Sosa and Mark McGwire (carried live here). Home run derby fever — the Japanese temporarily caught it.

Rest assured, the uniqueness of the Japanese baseball fan experience remains intact.

For while there are subtle differences in the way *yakyu* is played on the field (for example, there are lots of sacrifice bunts because *yakyu* is played in a more base-to-base style; early runs are deemed precious, that sort of thing) in the stands, well, the difference between American and Japanese baseball viewing is much more pronounced. You could say it's a whole new ball game.

The differences hit you as soon as you walk in the ballpark or *yakyu-jo*. For starters, the old American program hawker's cry of “you can't tell the players without a scorecard” is nowhere to be heard. That American staple — the scorecard or program — is conspicuous by its absence. So, it becomes, instead, an unspoken case of

“you can't tell the players without the public address announcer's introductions.”

At first, you'll be startled to find out they're women! And every one of them sounds like a Minnie Mouse wannabe. All speak in the same high-pitched falsetto voice as Mickey's mate. But I'll take them any day over an American P.A. man who sounds like a top 40 radio station disc jockey.

When you attempt to find your assigned seat, pray that it's anywhere but the bleachers. And not just because, as my father used to say, “the players look like Singer's Midgets (an old vaudeville act)” from way out there. If it's your fate to have ducats in such faraway environs, you're likely to exit the game hearing-impaired.

For it is in the bleachers that you are exposed to non-stop trumpet blaring and organized cheering by the hard core fans of each ball club — the home team faithful always occupy the right-field bleachers, while the visiting

team diehards can be always found in the left-field stands.

But at least Japanese bleacherites are not as obnoxious as many of their often beer-chugging, loud-belching, obscenity-yelling brethren in the majors are prone to be. And, hey, everyone keeps his shirt on, too!

However, they are deafening. It's a "choose your poison" situation, I suppose, trying to compare the two. Dion James, the former Atlanta Braves player who later played here with the Chunichi Dragons, once told me he used to have to don ear plugs when assuming his left-field position. That's how bad the din was.

The bleacher faithful here, though, must be applauded for their well-behaved loyalty and spirit. Their willingness to cheer themselves hoarse, led by male cheerleaders in traditional Japanese *happi* coats is kind of admirable — when viewed from the box seats with the general admission seats in between as a buffer.

If you choose to go the box seat route, though, you WILL pay for sanctuary. Box seats at the Tokyo Dome run about U.S.\$60 a pop for Yomiuri Giants' games, slightly less at other stadiums. Look at it this way: you'll save on the cost of a hearing aid and batteries.

The patrons of these box seats around the country are a more subdued and sophisticated lot. There are as many highball vendors as hawkers of draft beer. (You'll recognize the beer salesmen — they're the ones who look like ghost busters toting around backpack-type tanks of brew with hoses and nozzles.) Polite golf-clapping only is the unwritten rule here.

Don't dare show up in a mere shirt and slacks in the boxes either — or almost anywhere else in the stadium for that matter except for the bleachers — lest you be guilty of underdressing. The ol' *yakyu* yard is pretty much suit and tie country — unless it's a weekend. But this isn't out of choice, it's out of necessity. With a 6 o' clock start at most



Japanese fans in happi coats at a night game

stadiums, many fans in the more expensive seats come directly from work — and late. Put it this way, they make those fashionably late Los Angeles Dodgers fans look like early birds by comparison. Most of the expensive seats go vacant, for the first three or four innings. For the late-working salarymen, it's "shoganai" (can't be helped).

Got a baseball hat of your favorite team? Or a snazzy T-shirt or sweatshirt with a team logo you like to wear to show your rooting loyalty? Leave it home, Spike Lee-breath. Unless of course you like making a fool of yourself.

I wore a Yakult Swallows hat to a game I attended with a Japanese friend. "Puh-leeze, will you take that thing off, you're embarrassing me," he said. "Only little kids wear hats and team apparel."

Proof, I suppose that's what chic or hip in one culture is the fashion equivalent of wearing brown shoes with a tuxedo in another.

Now that we've got you seated and dressed properly, how to act at a Japanese ball game? The first thing you have to understand is that the Japanese folks have fun at ball games and take it seriously but in a curious — to outsiders — way.

The first thing you notice is, of course, the absence of American-style booing — or whistling, its universal equivalent. The worst thing that will happen when, say, a home team batter

strikes out with the bases loaded is a loud groan, followed by a large sigh, which in turn gives rise to a collective rumbling noise that comes from the assembled multitude grumbling and grousing in groups.

When things go wrong for their team, the Japanese also have an odd — again, to Westerners — way of cocking their heads sideways and, of all things, SMILING! It's kind of like the Japanese gesture for "Oh, well..." They may be discontented but rarely will they vent their dissatisfaction in an outward way, such as via a bellicose burst. Oh, there's an occasional tipsy-type who will rise and unleash a loud, long string of insults delivered in a gravelly samurai-type voice. But this usually only elicits chuckles from those assembled — it merely serves as sort of a tension breaker, if you will.

This is because anything else would be basically against the Japanese nature. And more importantly because they are a more loyal lot than most. They may grouse and grumble a bit but they are not too fast to jump off the bandwagon. Mostly they're just happy if things are going good, resigned to their fate if things are not — and prepared to exhibit tons of "gaman" (perseverance) until things improve.

It's basically a "root, root, root for the home team (although crowds are generally not as raucous as in the U.S.), if they don't win it's a shame" environment — as opposed to the vitriolic atmosphere found in many U.S. baseball and world soccer stadiums. The crowds are basically happy and in a word "civil."

The bottom line is that a Japanese baseball stadium, for all its differences, is a delightful place. One Sammy Sosa — with his heart to lips love gesture — just, well, loved. **WJI**

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