

“THIS time around,” commented one international news agency concerning Japan’s taking the title in the World Baseball Classic (WBC), “it was not baseball, but *yakyu* that was outstanding.”

Baseball was introduced into Japan in the late 1870s and was translated as *yakyu*, literally, “field ball competition.” Japan’s professional baseball league has the second longest history in the world, second only to the US Major League. *Yakyu* has become completely indigenous, and recently the words *kyushun* (baseball spring) and *naita* (night game) have even become seasonal words in the world of *haiku* poetry. There has been a visible improvement in skills, however, only a few people expected Japan to be the world’s best team in the tournament. Winning the crown of victory left the Japanese bubbling over with excitement.

The journey to victory was filled with drama and absolutely thrilling. In Japan’s game with the United States in the second league game, a dubious call on a touch-up at third base resulted in the cancellation of the run scored, leaving an unpleasant after-taste with Japan’s loss in the game. Then with the consecutive

defeats at the hands of Japan’s Asian rival South Korea in the first and second league games, it looked like Japan was on the verge of being eliminated during the semi-finals. However, Mexico upset the United States and Japan reached the final. In the past international games against Cuba, Japan had marked a paltry 4-32 record, but Japan came out on top this time. “I thought we were done for,” Manager Oh Sadaharu confessed, “but fortunately we were able to push forward.”

TV ratings set a new record when the final was broadcast live in Japan, with 56% of viewers tuning in at the moment the game came to an end. In downtown Tokyo, some 500 people stampeded to obtain copies of a newspaper extra edition reporting Japan’s victory. Immediately after the tournament ended, stocks of baseball equipment like Mizuno and Zett rose in price.

There were many heroes during the tournament, but none were as outstanding as Oh and his superstar Ichiro. These international big stars – Oh, holder of the world record of 868 home runs, and Ichiro,rewriter of Major League history with the most safe hits in a

Yakyu Wins Out Over Baseball

By Matsunaga Tsutomu

photo: Kyodo News

season – did big jobs in the Classic.

Despite the fact that the Classic was held just prior to the professional season in Japan and a large number of prominent players declined to play in the WBC, Oh unified his team without uttering a single complaint. “We are no match in terms of power, so we will compete on the basis of speed and precision,” declared Oh, taking charge and hoisting the banner of a “small ball.”

“We can not bring shame on Mr. Oh,” declared Ichiro, taking on a major portion of the leadership role and casting off his usual cool, reticent image. He provoked the South Koreans, saying, “I want to win in such a convincing way that no one will dare to challenge Japan for another 30 years.” When the South Koreans won, he said in frustration, “It is the most humiliating day of my life.” When Japan won the tournament, he exulted, “Today is the best day in my entire baseball career. Never in my life have I experienced such a spirit among my teammates, all directed toward a single goal.” He also added, “If it were at all possible, I would love to play a full season in the Major Leagues with this team.” Ichiro motivated his team with his passionate comments off the field, as well as with his bat at the plate.

For a long period following the end of World War II, baseball was Japan’s national sport, but recent TV ratings for professional baseball have floundered. Amusements have diversified, and the day is long over when baseball served as a central topic of conversation both at home and work. On top of that, those children who are interested in sports are more often interested in soccer than in baseball.

Following the WBC victory, however, a survey carried out by a

textile manufacturer found an increase over last year in the number of children who replied that they wanted to be professional-baseball players. Ticket sales for regular season professional baseball games, which kicked off right after the WBC, also got off to a good start.

At a press interview, Oh linked the event with future hopes for Japanese baseball; “I believe that many people who are not even baseball fans watched the games, and I hope that this sparks an interest in playing baseball among children.”

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Team Japan outfielder Ichiro holds the WBC champion trophy

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