

Baseball

By Takashima Hatsuhsa

I have not been a very good athlete since my childhood. The sport that made me realize how my athletic abilities lagged behind other kids was baseball. The balls that the pitcher threw would pass above or below the bat I swung. The balls that came rolling on the ground or came flying in the air would always escape my glove. Being such a bad player, I was always a benchwarmer and was not given many opportunities to play in a game.

After graduating from university, I began working for the Nippon Hoso Kyokai (NHK, Japan Broadcasting Corp.) as a reporter. After five years of service in a local station, I was assigned to a post at the Tokyo headquarters' foreign news department. What was waiting for me there

was baseball. Foreign news departments of six Japanese media companies had organized league matches and had been playing twice a year, in the spring and fall, for more than 10 years.

Those who were allowed to participate in the games were reporters of each company's foreign news department and up to three copy boys. As many of the staff members in foreign news departments were already middle-aged experienced reporters, the stamina of young staff members who had just come back from their local assignments was counted on as major forces in their respective teams. A young man at the age of 27 with a sturdy body, I made a debut in the league as a promising new force for the department.

However, soon after I took to the field, the truths were unveiled. When I was a batter, I would strike out. Even when I was able to hit the ball, the best



Hoshino Sen-ichi (left), new manager of the Hanshin Tigers, has brought new life to his team

I could do was an infield fly. When we were out in the field, I defended the right field, hoping no ball would come. But when a fly came, I was helpless. The ball would fly above my head and roll all the way down to the end of the field, allowing the batter an inside-the-park homer.

Despite those drawbacks, I was glad to be out on the field. Also, because it was difficult to make up a baseball team in the foreign news department where there were only a few young men, our manager, a senior colleague, let me join every game. I defended either the right field or first base. The manager always let me be the ninth batter as well.

Surprisingly, during the six years I played in the team, NHK's foreign news department team won the league for four consecutive years both in the spring and fall. This is attributed to our

teammate Yanagisawa Osamu, a master baseball player, who later became a correspondent at NHK's Rome and Cairo bureau.

Yanagisawa was a legendary pitcher and fourth batter in his high school days. His school team was so powerful that one summer it made it to a prefectural level final game preliminary to the nationwide high school baseball tournament, which is an annual summer event held at the Koshien stadium in Japan.

It was more than 10 years after that when Yanagisawa played on our team. But the balls he threw were faster and heavier than any other pitcher's in the foreign news department league. When he put a spin on a ball, the way it spun and fell was just amazing. Furthermore, his batting

technique was something else, and when he was in the batter's box, our team was sure to gain more points.

Becoming a pitcher as well as a fourth batter was an unreachable dream when I was a child. It also meant being a hero. That is what Yanagisawa was, a hero. The head of the NHK's foreign news department in those days started to receive pleas from other teams in the league requesting Yanagisawa be assigned to an overseas post, because with his presence they could never win the league.

During my overseas assignments in such places as Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City), Washington and London, I occasionally met reporters from other newspapers and news agencies that used to play in the league. We looked back at our fond memories of our past games. No one talked about the errors and strike-outs we made. We simply

Photo : The Mainichi Newspapers

praised each other's skills and remembered how good beer tasted after a game.

Lately I am reminded of these stories from the old days, because there has been more public interest in baseball games this year, and television and newspapers have had a wide coverage of baseball-related topics day after day. Every time I hear such stories, I am drawn closer to baseball, and reminded of the feel of the balls and bats that I played with as a child and a young man who had just joined the NHK.

In the past, I did not take particular interest in the coverage of baseball games, because it was centered on the Yomiuri Giants – which is the most popular professional team in Japan – and the summer high school baseball games at Koshien stadium. Last year, I was a little more intrigued because of Suzuki Ichiro's great accomplishments in the Seattle Mariners in the U.S. Major League Baseball (MLB). The coverage of domestic games, however, was still centered on the same old Giants' games, which did not interest me at all.

But this year has been a different story. With 13 Japanese players, MLB games have literally become closer. Every day, NHK airs live coverage of the MLB games where those Japanese athletes play. The viewer ratings have been rising day by day. This year, as there are so many games in which Japanese players participate, sometimes we need to broadcast two or three games within a day.

What has been even more interesting this year is the professional baseball games in Japan. The Hanshin Tigers, which had been a regular tailender, has been incredibly powerful this year and has brought a change in the coverage of baseball games, which used to be totally centered on the Yomiuri Giants.

By coincidence this year, a fine movie by the title of *Mr. Rookie* has been drawing public attention. The Hanshin Tigers, which is nicknamed "dame tora" (useless tigers), have been notorious for losing games after upsets in the last innings. But in this fantasy movie, a rookie pitcher, who wears a

tiger mask, suddenly appears and leads the team to victories by making sure things work for them during the last inning of every game. Eventually, the team wins the league.

As a movie fan, I have seen a lot of Hollywood baseball movies and have many favorites among them. The recent Japanese film has reminded me of one of such Hollywood films, *Damn Yankees*, in which an old man who is a Yankees fan is rejuvenated by a witch and leads the Yankees to a league victory.

Amazingly, what takes place in the movie *Mr. Rookie* is actually happening in real life this year. But the main character is not the pitcher but the manager, Hoshino Sen-ichi, who was the manager for Chunichi Dragons in the same Central League as the Tigers till recently. Hoshino had led the Dragons to a league victory.

Until last year, the Hanshin Tigers was under former manager Nomura Katsuya, who led the team with a style of baseball planned and calculated in the mind. As the relationship between the manager and the players was not very smooth, the team's record continued to be at the bottom of the league. This year, Hoshino, who has been known as a hot-blooded man, replaced Nomura. Hoshino has brought life into the team by raising the morale of those players who were left out during the Nomura years. As a result, the team has achieved a record seven consecutive victories, the first accomplishment in 64 long years for the team. The way the team has changed has been amazing even to the fans.

As a consequence of the Tigers' achievements, their games have attracted full stadiums of spectators, tabloid sports newspapers are selling well, and the stocks of the team's owner, the Hanshin Electric Railway Co., have soared. There have even been serious speculations that if the Tigers win the league, there will be an economic effect worth more than ¥100 billion.

It is astonishing what a difference a change in the manager can make. As I look back at my childhood and those days I spent in the NHK's baseball

team, I remember trying very hard to bunt or hit when my manager instructed me. Remembering such feelings, I want to send my heartfelt cheers to those Hanshin Tigers players who are making accomplishments by diligently following their manager's instructions.

There is more. The Tigers' rise from the bottom has begun to change the public's view of the political leaders of the nation, which is suffering from the lingering economic slump.

It has been said that what has brought victories to the Tigers is Hoshino's policies of doing what he wants to do instead of making compromises as well as carrying through his beliefs instead of getting caught up with emotions or fetters. These are the very philosophies that many Japanese wish their political leaders had.

Recent opinion polls conducted by the nation's newspapers have found the support ratings of Prime Minister Koizumi Jun-ichiro falling. It has been generally said that this is because Koizumi has made no particular achievement more than a year after his taking office while, if anything, making a lot of compromises with the old guard.

Many Japanese people are frustrated with the nation's scandal-ridden politics, economy and social issues where reforms are hardly making progress.

It is awesome to see how the Hanshin Tigers' manager revived the team and to see the achievements of those Japanese Major Leaguers including Ichiro, Sasaki Kazuhiro, Ishii Kazuhisa, Irapu Hideki and others. While Japan has so many pitchers who are at the same time fourth batters in high school baseball teams – and of course the foreign news department league – I wonder why the country cannot produce such ideal players in its political, economic and social scenes. **JTI**

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