

# Realignment of Japanese Pro Baseball Looming

JAPANESE professional baseball has been rocked by the fiasco triggered by a planned merger between the Orix Blue Wave and Osaka Kintetsu Buffaloes in the Pacific League. In addition, Seibu Lions owner Tsutsumi Yoshiaki revealed on July 7 at a meeting of the owners of the 12 ballclubs that another merger plan is being mulled among Pacific League teams. "I hope that there will be 10 teams and one league beginning next season," Tsutsumi said. His revelation prompted speculation that a move toward the realignment of Japanese professional baseball will accelerate and heightened the possibility of a shift to one league from the two-league system that has been in place since 1950.

At the meeting, the owners effectively approved the merger between Orix and Kintetsu. They decided that the merged club can sign 25 players in the off-season preferentially from the combined rosters of the Blue Wave and Buffaloes. The new team will also be allowed to be based in both Hyogo and Osaka prefectures for three

years, although baseball bylaws currently limit a team's hometown to within one prefecture. Orix is based in Kobe, Hyogo Prefecture, while Kintetsu is based in Osaka. The owners will give formal approval to the merger in September after working out pending issues related to the merger plan.

In late June, start-up IT services provider Livedoor offered to purchase the Buffaloes. But Kintetsu rejected the offer outright and no discussion was held on the offer at the owners meeting, stirring up criticism from baseball fans.

In reaction to the move, the Japan Professional Baseball Players Association (JPBPA), a labor union, has adopted a set of resolutions against the merger. The association proposes to set up a special committee to discuss how to handle the contracts of players affected by the merger. It also calls for putting off the merger by one year after allowing Kintetsu to sell the naming rights for the Buffaloes to a third payer in a bid to help reduce the cumulative debts at the ballclub. The creation of another committee is

also being demanded by the association in order to assess the advisability of the merger, with a call to invite experts on related issues from outside baseball circles.

The management side argues that the baseball business is in a grim situation and is seeking understanding from the association for the move toward approval of the merger. Yakult Swallows catcher Furuta Atsuya, who heads the JPBPA, says he sees no reasons for reducing the number of teams and does not rule out the possibility of exercising the right to go on strike.

An increasing number of star players leave Japan for the major leagues every year to ply their trade in North America, while a small number of rich clubs continue to wield their clout to acquire amateur prospects and big-name veterans from other teams.

Such a trend has created an inequality in wealth between ballclubs and eroded the popularity of Japanese baseball, adding to the predicament of the financially troubled teams which make up the majority in Japan.