

Nippon Ham Fighters: The Stars of Hope

By *Matsuda Tetsunori*

Forty-three Degrees North Latitude. For a northern city like Sapporo, situated almost at the top of the Japanese archipelago, November can be a rather gloomy affair. Around this time of the year, flurries start fluttering against a leaden sky and people stiffen at the thought of the approaching winter. However, the November of 2006 was entirely different. The Hokkaido Nippon Ham Fighters had moved up from Tokyo three years earlier, and something “unbelievable” happened in 2006: For the first time in 44 years the Hokkaido boys of summer won the Japan Series, the memory of their sweet victory still engulfing the entire city a month after the Fighters became the newly crowned professional baseball champions in Japan. On Nov. 18, 150,000 people packed the streets of Sapporo to watch the victory parade of the new Japan champions, and screams of joy thundered as confetti rained down on the baseball players and Nippon Ham team officials. Nippon Ham settled in Sapporo from the start of the 2004 season. Until then, the Fighters had been based at Tokyo Dome, but the team had always resembled excess baggage of the Pacific League. After all, Tokyo Dome was also home for the immensely popular Yomiuri Giants in the Central League. Even though the two teams shared the same baseball ground, there was a world of difference in the size of game attendance and popularity. With the Fighters largely dismissed as a junkie team, their lineup least expected to lay a claim to the Japan Series championship.

Corporate sponsors had already turned their back on Nippon Ham, and the team had to pay sky-high user fees for Tokyo Dome, whether or not people showed up to watch them play. Moreover, in Tokyo, professional baseball no longer enjoyed the kind of popularity it had once commanded. It was amidst such a dire background that, for survival, the Nippon Ham Fighters decided to move to Sapporo, a city with a population of 1.9 million but no professional baseball team. Things had not been easy, however. Sapporo is the heart of Hokkaido, but the heart of the people of Hokkaido had always belonged to the Tokyo Giants. To break up this love affair with the Giants, the Fighters patiently worked hard to cultivate their bond to the local people, such as running baseball clinics for local kids.

Photo: Hokkaido Shimbun Press



Thundering screams of joy and raining graffiti greet Nippon Ham players during their victory parade in the city center of Sapporo.

■ A Dream Come True

After the team settled in Sapporo, Nippon Ham's policy was to award key positions to young talents the team had trained on its own. At the same time, in the annual pro baseball entry draft Nippon Ham officials would pick the most promising young players, fully aware that they might be jilted. In its first season as a Hokkaido-based team, Nippon Ham finished third among the six teams of the Pacific League, using the existing player lineup it had brought from Tokyo. In 2005, Nippon Ham placed fifth in league play, but the young players began to show their potential.

For the 2006 season, Nippon Ham's initial goal was to play the league playoff games at Sapporo Dome, the team's home field. To be able to play at Sapporo Dome in playoffs, the Fighters had to finish no worse than second in the regular season.

The Fighters' dream to bring the pennant series to Sapporo looked anything but assured after the regular season got under way in March, as the team's winning average hovered around 0.500 through June. Enter July and the Fighters went on a stampede. That month, they won 12 games and lost six. August was 16-8. The team became practically unstoppable in September, losing only five games while winning 14. In no time the Fighters leapt to the top spot in the Pacific League, racing toward the goal line as if on cruise control. At the team's driving wheel was an American manager, Tray Hillman. When the Fighters won the Pacific League's pennant-deciding game, Hillman exclaimed “shinjirarenai,” or “unbelievable” in Japanese. That sentiment was undoubtedly shared by many Nippon Ham fans.

■ Young Talents, Moving Stands

In terms of team strength, the rise of young talents was particularly eye-catching. Darvish Yu, the winner of 12 games in 2006, was only 20 years old, a second-year pitcher out of high school. Yagi Tomoya, another 12-game winner and the 2006 rookie of the year, was fresh out of college. The Fighters' offensive lineup also bristled with young power. Morimoto Hichori, the No. 1 batter, and Tanaka Kensuke, the No. 2 batter, are both young players promoted from Nippon Ham's farm team.

When a team wins, its fan base grows. Toward the end of the 2006 season, Sapporo Dome, with a seating capacity for 40,000, was filled up in every Nippon Ham game. The stands turned into a sea of Fighters team colors, and the waves they made, made it seem as if the stand itself was swaying. When Nippon Ham officials spoke of “enthusiastic fan support” behind the team's victory, they were not just being diplomatic. Considering the fact that Nippon Ham's winning average was close to 100% when Sapporo

Photo: Hokkaido Shimbun Press

Dome was filled up with Fighters fans, it makes sense to claim that the 2006 championship was the outcome of combined team-fan effort. A total of 1.7 million fans went to watch Nippon Ham games in 2006, an increase of 17.4% over the previous year, the biggest growth rate among the 12 professional baseball teams in Japan.



Jubilant Nippon Ham players share their joy as they clinch the Japan Series title in game 5 against the Chunichi Dragons.

A Shift Toward Decentralization

One think-tank in Sapporo calculated the economic impact the Nippon Ham Fighters generated for Hokkaido in the 2006 season at over ¥20 billion. For economically stagnant local cities such as Sapporo, an economic impact of such size is no small matter. The team itself and business operators at Sapporo Dome were not the only beneficiaries. The spending also benefited the city's mass transport carrying spectators to the dome, local restaurants and sundry baseball goods merchants. In Hokkaido, the mainstay of the region's economy used to be agriculture, fisheries and public works. As these main economic activities are in a slump, the economic ripple effect of professional baseball cannot be overlooked. In this sense, the 2006 season provided the first benchmarks for assessing whether professional baseball can become a key factor of regional economic growth.

For the future of Japanese professional baseball itself, it is important to give due attention to what Nippon Ham has done. In recent years, the popularity of Japanese professional baseball has gone through some kind of structural erosion, partly as people have found new ways to spend their leisure time. Professional baseball in this country has traditionally been fixated among a few popular teams, such as the Yomiuri Giants in Tokyo and the Hanshin Tigers in Osaka. Apart from Hanshin, baseball attendance and TV viewership have been shrinking in both leagues. Unlike the major leagues in the United States, baseball teams in Japan are not scattered around the country. Japanese teams tend to concentrate in major population areas centered around Tokyo and Osaka. In other words, it was the epitome of centralization.

Things started to change in 2004, when Nippon Ham moved to Sapporo, the capital of Hokkaido. In the following year, the Rakuten Golden Eagles set up shop in Sendai, the core city in the Tohoku region. Both are Pacific League teams – teams that bore the brunt of the blow as professional baseball lost its once preeminent

mass appeal. And it was these two Pacific League teams that moved to local cities for the sake of survival. To be sure, moving to a local city involved risks, but the 2006 season clearly shows the moves saved both teams.

In the end, the 2006 Pacific League pennant race pitted Nippon Ham against Softbank of Fukuoka, a duel between a team based in northern Japan and another based in Kyushu, southern Japan, while the battle for the Japan championship pitted Nippon Ham against the Chunichi Dragons, the pennant-winning Central League team based in Nagoya, central Japan. This battle to be No. 1 in Japan involved neither a Tokyo nor an Osaka team, a symbolic sign that the centralized power in Japanese baseball has started shifting toward an age of decentralization.

“You Can Make It, If You Try”

Even so, is the future of the Hokkaido Nippon Ham Fighters assured? To this question, the most likely answer is “apparently not.” Shinjo Tsuyoshi, one of the most popular players in the team, retired at the end of the 2006 season. Ogasawara Michihiro, another key Nippon Ham player, was traded to the Yomiuri Giants. Such are the vagaries surrounding Nippon Ham that not even people with close ties to the team could predict how the 2007 season would turn out.

If a team is weak, the fan base shrinks, like an ebbing tide. This is a fate facing all professional sports. If fans and corporate sponsors start to drift away, money becomes a problem and it would affect efforts to bolster the team lineup. There is absolutely no guarantee that Nippon Ham will not fall into such a vicious cycle.

There is but one way to avoid such a fate: Build a team that can win. The Nippon Ham owners, who have started making serious efforts to train players through the farm team system, have apparently decided to develop a training program where they can refill their player ranks with new talent. Specifically, Nippon Ham officials do not see their farm team as the rehabilitation place for underperforming top team players. Instead, the Nippon Ham farm team is viewed as a boot camp for young players, where a minimum of 300 at-bats has become the norm for promising players. As Nippon Ham General Manager Takada Shigeru put it, “At our farm team, our mission is to train young players; we don't care about the game results.” That observation perhaps underlines Nippon Ham's determination to build a can-win team.

For the Nippon Ham fans in Hokkaido, they have obviously started dreaming of a repeat in the 2007 season, images of their Nippon Ham heroes electrifying the crowds of Sapporo Dome, the excitement of seeing a sea of Fighters team colors on the stands, the expectation of the birth of new stars. In just three years, the Hokkaido Nippon Ham Fighters have wiped clean all the unease surrounding them prior to their arrival in Sapporo. They have unmistakably given the 5.5 million people in Hokkaido courage and hope, bringing home to them the message that “you can make it, if you try.”

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Matsuda Tetsunori is director, Sapporo Area Department, Editing Bureau, Hokkaido Shimbun Press