Dugout Diplomacy:
Baseball and American-Japanese Relations

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20 July 2004
From the introduction of baseball in Japan until the end of World War II, Japanese baseball has exhibited two competing ethoi: *besuboru* and *yakyu*. In the context of this paper, these two terms represent different ideological trends in relations between the United States and Japan, and are used to describe attitudes and actions of both parties. *Besuboru*, a word obviously borrowed from the English word “baseball,” broadly connotes internationalism, diplomacy, and cultural understanding in this paper. *Yakyu*, a Japanese word literally interpreted as “field ball,” implies militarism, cultural ignorance, and racism. *Besuboru* and *yakyu* are not different styles of baseball, but rather different approaches not only to a game, but also to geopolitics. During the period roughly corresponding to the Meiji era (1868-1912), baseball balanced the competing ideologies of *besuboru* and *yakyu*. The Taisho era (1912-1926) and the first decade of the Showa period (1926-1989) saw the triumph of *besuboru*, not just on the baseball diamond, but also in the arena of international relations between the United States and Japan. The six years preceding the outbreak of hostilities between the US and Japan ushered in a new period of *yakyu* that would ultimately destroy Japanese baseball.

The introduction of baseball to Japan did not occur in an historical vacuum. Japanese baseball was born dually out of Japan’s drive to Westernize, and America’s desire to export its culture. Westernization meant not only the importation of Western weaponry and industry, but also of Western culture. It was not long after the emperor had decided that Americanization was necessary, than an American named Horace Wilson taught the students of Kaisei Gakko in Tokyo the fundamentals of baseball (Whiting 32). The game quickly spread, and by 1896, a Japanese team had challenged an American team, the first international match in the history of Japanese baseball. This event is the beginning of baseball’s delicate balancing act between *besuboru* and *yakyu*. 
The first game between Japanese and American ballplayers, played on May 23, 1896, would demonstrate the competing visions of relations between the United States and the Japanese. The Japanese side, represented by the First Higher School of Tokyo, better known as Ichiko, faced off against the Yokohama Athletic Club’s (YAC) baseball team, which was composed of American expatriates (Whiting 33). The game was set to be played at the YAC’s home field, and this concession by the Americans represented the first time that any Japanese had been allowed to enter the YAC (Roden 524). The Americans received them rudely, believing that they were physically superior to the Japanese (Roden 522). Suddenly the match had been transformed from a game into a battle for national honor (Roden 521). Even before the game was played, the match had taken on significant characteristics of both besuboru and yakyu. The Japanese came to play besuboru, wishing to compete as equals on a playing field. The Americans refused to even acknowledge the ability of the Japanese, and in their racist practices displayed characteristics of yakyu.

The results of the game did not settle the issue, but only intensified the struggle between yakyu and besuboru. Ichiko walloped the YAC by an astounding score of 29 to 4. The Japanese had demonstrated their equality on the diamond, considering it a great victory for the nation (Whiting 33). The humiliated Americans called for a rematch, recruiting players from the Charleston and Detroit, US naval ships stationed in Yokohama. On June 5, 1896 Ichiko thrashed the Americans, this time by a score of 32 to 9 (Roden 524). The implications of this match were not lost on the Asahi Shimbun, which printed a front-page headline, “A Great Victory for Our Students” (Roden 525). This victory had not changed the opinion of the Americans, who asked the Ichiko students to immediately leave the field. One player later commented, “We were willing to leave – after spitting three times” (Roden 525). Although the Ichiko students had initially practiced besuboru, trying to assert equality among
nations on the diamond, they now turned to *yakyu*, stooping to the Americans’ level, by spitting on their field.

A third game between the two sides only deepened the conflict between *besuboru* and *yakyu*. In the third match, a team made up exclusively of sailors played *Ichiko* at *Ichiko’s* field. The Americans marched through the campus with a band playing patriotic songs, acting as if they were about to do battle. American dignitaries and Japanese government officials watched from a special section of the stadium, which was overflowing with ten thousand fans (Roden 527). All the war songs in the world could not help the sailors that day, as *Ichiko* humiliated them a third time, this time 22 to 6 (Roden 528). Despite the indignities paid to the Japanese after the second game, the *Ichiko* students invited the sailors for tea and cake after the game (Roden 528). The presence of diplomats at the game and the tea served afterwards represents the *besuboru* tendencies in the series, but the martial procession by the Americans certainly displays *yakyu*.

After their third humiliating loss, the sailors demanded another rematch, but it would be at this rematch that the Americans would finally understand the concept of *besuboru*, even if they still tended to play *yakyu*. Prior to the game, the Americans had recruited more sailors, this time from the flagship *Olympia*. One player had been a professional shortstop before entering the navy. On July 4, the Americans entered the stadium to booming cannons and patriotic songs, and were able to narrowly defeat the students, 14 to 12 (Roden 528). The choice of the American national holiday was not coincidental. The national day was a time for the Americans to rally around their national sport and protect it from the Japanese. After the game, though, the American side cheered for their Japanese counterparts, giving them a “*hip-hip-hooray*” (Roden 528). This was the first instance of the American ballplayers paying the Japanese students any form of respect. For the first time the Americans had demonstrated
besuboru, treating their opponents as equals, if still tending towards yakyu before the game, with booming cannons and patriotic songs.

Despite this setback, Ichiko would continue to pound their American opponents, searching for national pride. Between 1897 and 1904, Ichiko won eight out of the next nine games by a combined score of 230-64 (Roden 528). After a game against Yokohama in 1904, an American expatriate living in Japan wrote to the New York Times, describing the state of Japan as he understood it through their baseball program: “In the course of time this country will be prominent in all those qualities which tend to make a nation great; and, although warlike when challenged, the desire of the ruling classes in Japan is for peace, friendship with other nations, and a magnificent extension of the nation’s commerce and manufactures” (“Japanese Adaptability”). Here is the dual spirit of besuboru and yakyu in international relations. Japan aspires to peace, friendship, and equality among the nations, but will not shy away from a martial confrontation.

In 1905, Waseda University traveled to the West Coast of the United States to play American colleges, ushering in a new era of international competition, one that would greatly advance the cause of besuboru: the student tour. Despite this, most Americans aware of the tour thought little of Japanese abilities, wrongly believing the Japanese to be unable to hit a curveball (“Jap Team”, “Jap Ball”). In covering Waseda’s tour, the press often resorted to racial epithets, as evidenced by a Los Angeles Times headline: “Little Brown Men Learn to Play good ball” (“Jap Team”). Waseda played a few games against Stanford and the University of Southern California (“Jap Team”, “Jap Batters”). While Waseda ended up losing 9-1 to Stanford in the first match, it was an interesting cultural exchange as nearly half the spectators in attendance were Japanese-Americans. This baseball game allowed not only for cross-cultural understanding between the international teams, but also for cross-cultural
understanding between the two American ethnic groups: the Japanese and the non-Japanese, likely European descended, Americans. This is truly besuboru.

International matches increased over the next decade between American and Japanese college teams, exhibited more and more besuboru while still falling back to yakyu occasionally. In 1909, Keio University traveled to Hawaii, defeating all Hawaiian opponents, while also defeating Santa Clara University of California in three games out of a total five played (“Jap Ball”). Later that year Keio played against an all-star squad of American sailors in Yokohama. Over 25,000 Japanese fans attended the game, with one thousand Japanese being selected to cheer for the American squad as a sign of respect (“Jap Ball”). The Los Angeles Times wrote of the match, “Japan is becoming ‘modernized’ and baseball will soon be driving out the ancient and honorable mushroom hunt [an ancient ‘sport’]” (“Jap Ball”). The author continued, “The game is spreading like wildfire and the little players are improving every year” (“Jap Ball”). Simultaneously baseball can be besuboru and yakyu. The game can obviously be used for diplomacy and cultural understanding, as the Japanese who cheered for the United States demonstrate. It also is a manifestation of Japan’s international and Westernizing attitudes. However, it also provides a further excuse for racism, as the Los Angeles Times demonstrates. Although the players were probably shorter than the American players at the time, the adjective “little” implies not only short stature, but a childlike characteristic. It is reminiscent of William Howard Taft’s nickname for Filipinos: “our little brown brothers.” Attitudes like these examples foster racism and a sense of cultural superiority, much like a big brother feels superior to a little brother.

The racism of the American press did not stop after this match. In an article subtitled “Yellow Socks,” an obvious reference to a racist perception of Japanese skin tone, American journalists refer to Japanese pitchers as “slant-eyed baseball tossers” (“Crack Japanese”). Despite the yakyu of the press, though, the international matches continued. From 1909-1911,
the University of Chicago and the University of Wisconsin departed for Japan, intending to play Waseda and Keio Universities (“Long Trip,” “Japanese copy”). When Waseda announced plans to play against the University of California - Berkeley, Stanford, and the USC Law teams, a columnist from the Los Angeles Times commented that it was unfit for Japanese baseball teams to travel to the United States to play against American teams. Moreover, he suggested that if the Japanese baseball team insisted on playing in the United States, an American invasion of Japan was warranted, because American baseball should not tolerate visits by Japanese (Melancholy Dane). The series went off without a hitch, but the column was the height of American yakyu attitudes, which were to gradually decline.

The death of the Meiji emperor serves a convenient temporal delineator in understanding Japanese-US relations through baseball. That is not to say that there existed a causal relationship between the emperor’s death and the relations between the United States and Japan. The Osaka prefectural governor in 1913, Toshiiake Okubo, promoted the game heavily during his rule. It was not coincidental that he was educated at Yale University in Connecticut, which had a premier baseball team at the time (“Baseball Taking”). At about the same time, American baseball owners began to advocate for a true World Series, one that would include all the nations that played the sport at the time, including Japan (“Real”).

The ideology of besuboru flourished in particular at two key points in history: the summer of 1928 and late 1934. Both were highly important, but for very different reasons. The first demonstrated the ability for American and Japanese college students, on a wide scale, to learn from one another. The second showed the friendliness and understanding possible by professional athletes, but that the ideology of besuboru was still vulnerable to yakyu.

The 1928 summer tour to Japan by the USC, Stanford, and Berkeley baseball teams represented a turning point in the competition between besuboru and yakyu. Unlike previous
college baseball tours, this tour sent not only the team, but a horde of students, both male and female, as well as alumni to Japan to experience the country firsthand. Over a span of six weeks, the teams played forty five games while the students studied Japan ("Co-eds"). Japanese Professor K. Shoji of USC taught the students about Japan and explained the itinerary prior to departure ("Co-eds"). Upon return from the tour, the students and players brought back haori coats, swords, tapestries, and embroideries, given to them by the Japanese ("Ball Team").

Although USC won seventeen of the twenty-seven games they played, the true accomplishment was fostering good will between the two nations. An editorial piece in the Los Angeles Times predicted great things from the exchange:

> Somebody has said that these friendly interracial rivalries have had more to do with ironing out differences between the countries than all the diplomacies of years…Cannon balls are giving away to baseballs. It was an expedition of good-will – not propaganda. There were not axes to grind – just ball bats to swing. No suspicions were hidden away in grips – just scorecards. When youth play together, it will be hard for them to fight each other…Possibly the future peace of the Pacific is being assured on the diamonds of America…The world series will not be half as far reaching as the series between Southern California and the Orient. The toss of a baseball may be the die that will decide a country's destiny.

("Baseball Diplomacy")

It is hard not to understate the importance of these cross-Pacific missions to the people of the time. Those who followed the action firmly believed that baseball could usher in a new era of world peace: “Knocking home runs over the roof of the world to the other side of the Pacific is of a kind with flying across the Atlantic” ("Baseball Diplomacy"). This is the height of
besuboru. Nations learning from each other on the diamond, learning respect for each other’s cultures, and treating one another as equals.

The closing months of 1934 only built upon this goodwill spirit, and further promoted besuboru. At a luncheon of the America-Japan Society in Tokyo on November 15, 1934, Prince Iyesato Tokugawa declared, “Between two great peoples able really to understand and enjoy baseball there are no national differences which cannot be solved in a spirit of sportsmanship” (“Calls Baseball Bond”). He continued, saying, “It is no longer possible for you Americans to claim baseball as a national game for America alone” (“Calls Baseball Bond”). He continued, paying tribute to Coach Connie Mack and slugger Babe Ruth, who were on hand in preparation for their baseball tour of Japan.

The baseball tour of 1934 by the premier major leaguers of the day demonstrated the overwhelming power of besuboru. A Japanese professional team, the first of its kind in Japan, was created to play the best America had to offer, including: Babe Ruth, Lou Gherig, Jimmie Foxx, and Charlie Gehringer (Whiting 42). During a procession through the Ginza held to honor the American ballclub, 100,000 Japanese turned out to pay homage to the great Babe Ruth. The Associated Press reported, “The Babe’s big bulk today blotted out such unimportant things as international squabbles over oil and navies” (“Bambino Greeted”). The American and Japanese flags were displayed together, while the stadium overflowed with 60,000 fans (“Bambino Greeted”). Historian Robert Whiting describes the scene at the first game: “Sixty-five thousand people squeezed into Jingu Stadium for [Babe Ruth’s] first game. They bowed reverentially to the empty Emperor’s Box at the start of the contest, and then screamed banzai rusu for the rest of the afternoon” (Whiting 42). At Koshien Stadium in Osaka, the Japanese erected a bust of Ruth, which still stands today (Whiting 42).

The Americans crushed the Japanese in that tour, but that was not what was important. Besuboru triumphed. The level of cultural understanding fostered by the trip was
immeasurable. The United States had sent the best they had to compete against the best of
Japan. It was a competition of equals. Even Ruth advanced the cause of cultural
understanding when he donned a kimono (“Bambino Goes Native”).

The seeds of *yakyu* were also sown that trip by both Japanese and Americans. Mo
Berg, catcher for the American squad, and a brilliant linguist trained at Princeton University,
clandestinely photographed Tokyo for the US military intelligence. His photographs would
later be used for the aerial bombardment of Tokyo during World War II (Whiting 43). The
veneer of the good-will mission was not so good. Some Japanese were also acting in the
interests of *yakyu*, when on February 22 a radical named Katsuori Nagasaki stabbed
Matsutaro Shoriki, publisher of the *Yomiuri Shimbun*. Shoriki’s crime was his sponsorship of
the American tour. On hearing the news, Babe Ruth said, “[Shoriki] wasn’t in the game for
money, but because he believed that baseball would be a good thing for Japan” (“Patriot
Stabs”). This was the beginning of a renewed struggle between *yakyu* and *besuboru*, between
war and peace.

As the world marched ever closer to war in the waning years of the 1930s, Americans
wrongly believed that baseball would prevent Japanese aggression. Not realizing that *yakyu*
had begun to prevail, the press maintained that Japan was still supportive of the United
States. A 1938 article in the *New York Times* cites baseball as an example that despite Japan’s
alliance with Germany, the United States is still the superior cultural influence, and would
therefore prevent hostilities (Hauser). Pearl Harbor, though, changed everything as Japan
definitively fell to *yakyu*.

After Japan bombed Pearl Harbor, Japanese baseball radically changed both in Japan,
and in the American perception of it. Most notably, Japanese authorities banished all English
words from the Japanese baseball vocabulary. Previously, the vocabulary had been imported
wholesale from English. For example, “safe” became “yoshi,” “strikeout” became “sanshin,”
“foul tip” became “satsuda,” and “earned run” became “jisekiten.” (Garland). The purpose of this change was to purge baseball of any possible connection to the United States. Even the official term used to refer to baseball changed from besuboru to yakyu. It was as George Orwell wrote in 1984, “Your name was removed from the registers, every record of everything you had ever done was wiped out, your one-time existence was denied and then forgotten” (Orwell 19). Instead of names, though, it was terminology, and the denial that baseball had ever come from the United States. Japan was at war with the United States, which meant that yakyu had triumphed.

It had been just ten years since the fans in Tokyo had screamed “banzai rusu”, but during combat between Japanese and American forces, all that goodwill had been lost. In fact as Japanese soldiers went out to do battle against Americans, more than a few were heard to have said, “Death to Babe Ruth” as a battle charge (Whiting 45). By the end of the war, the Japanese no longer even played baseball, with or without a Japanese vocabulary. Many of Japan’s best players were sent to the battlefield, with some assigned kamikaze duty (Whiting 46). Yakyu begat kamikaze pilots, which begat only death and destruction, including the destruction of baseball in Japan.

The conflict between besuboru and yakyu has been evident in Japanese baseball since its introduction. Originally used as a way to keep the Japanese as inferiors in their own nation, it later became a highly touted diplomatic tool, before eventually succumbing to militarization. Baseball itself was not the cause of these uses, but merely tools used by governments.
Works Cited


