A Whole Different Ball Game by Michael Shapiro

The Seibu Lions, 1988 Japan Series champions, celebrating victory over the Chunichi Dragons.

The most predictable thing about the Japanese all-star baseball team’s unpredictably strong showing against the Americans this fall was the inevitable question about what in Japan is called “the real World Series.”

For decades the Japanese baseball establishment has spoken of the day—always distant—when the nation might be ready to take on the Americans in a contest for global baseball supremacy. This talk often died quickly when the American all-stars, weary from the long season at home but enticed by all the money being offered by Japanese sponsors, came over to throttle the best of the Japanese.

Two years ago New York Mets manager Davey Johnson brought over an especially powerful team that took all but one game from the Japanese, and in the process beat them by the sort of lopsided scores reminiscent of the prewar years, when Babe Ruth came to play and sat in the outfield under an umbrella, convinced that no Japanese could hit the ball out of the infield.

Same Rules, Different Game
This fall Sparky Anderson’s American side left town a winner, but barely so. The final game ended in a scoreless tie. The Japanese did what they were not expected to do: they pounded Los Angeles Dodger pitcher Orel Hershiser, which no American team had come close to doing in the closing months of the season; their pitchers overwhelmed some of America’s best hitters; and the Japanese batters came from behind, beating Americans in the late innings—a time when Japanese teams of the past were certain to fold. From that surprising showing emerged the obvious question: What would happen if they played for real? The Americans would win, and not just because they are bigger and stronger.

That the Americans would triumph tells a good deal about the nature of two very different games in two very different societies. The baseball played in America is not the baseball played in Japan. The Japanese play Japanese baseball. The rules are the same, as are the distances between the bases and the number of balls and strikes. But the games are different. What the Japanese have done in the past fifty years with the most quintessentially American game is nothing short of remarkable. They have refitted it for local consumption—as they have been adept at doing with most everything that has ever come into the country. They have seized upon the elements of the game that celebrate what Japan wishes to celebrate in itself.

The Japanese are good at baseball in almost every way, save one: failure, or rather the willingness to fail. Because failure has been all but eliminated from the game Japan has devised for itself, that game is doomed to being second best when the tall and sandy-haired fellows come to play.

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My conclusion is based on four years of observation and upon the tutelage of, among others, Leon Lee, Leron Lee and Randy Bass, Professors Emeritus of Japan’s College of Hard Knocks: the academy of foreign ball players. Some 250 Americans have come to play in Japan. Many have gone home richer but with nervous stomachs, the latter a condition induced by long seasons spent asking themselves, “Why?”

(1) “Why does the umpire tell me that he must give some assistance to the weak Japanese pitcher and call balls in the dirt strikes against me?” (2) “Isn’t a strike a strike and a ball a ball?” And, (3) “Why does the manager say, ‘I want to get away from the rational theory of baseball and try other things,’ after calling for a pitch out with the bases loaded and two men out, thereby walking in a run?”

The answer to the second is no. The answer to the first and third is: because he did. It is an answer frequently heard and seldom satisfying. Only when a player learns to accept it can he begin being comfortable playing baseball in Japan.

The Lee brothers spent, respectively, 10 and 11 years playing in Japan. Bass, a slugger, succeeded as no American ever has at the Japanese game. It was they who were sought out by the newly arrived

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foreigners, eager to know what to expect and how to react. The advice was always the same: forget everything you ever thought baseball should be; you’re in Japan now. Though not a player I nevertheless took my place at my mentors’ knees. And then, when the lessons were done, I looked again at ballfields that had seemed very much like those I’d seen at home. But when I looked a second time I saw that the form had changed and the game taking place before me was only superficially like the one I’d left behind.

Lesson One: Honne and Tatamae, or the Truth You Mean and the Truth You Say

There is one pitcher in Japan who throws baseballs at people’s heads. His name is Osamu Higashio. Until his retirement at the end of the past season, he had hit some 150 batters during his long and distinguished career. No one else had even come close. But more significant than Higashio’s insistence upon declaring the outside part of the plate his (and woe betide the batter who invaded his space) was his willingness to confess to his penchant for aiming an occasional pitch at the man at bat. Higashio, a wiry man with a quick smile, was blunt, in the way that country people in Japan often are. What he said and what he did were one and the same. And in that he was alone.

Japan’s baseball is built upon the premise that what the nation lacks in speed and size it makes up in will. Baseball people call this “Fighting Spirit.” So crucial is “fighting spirit” to the Japanese definition of the game that there are even drills to hone it. The most notorious of these was the dreaded “Thousand Ground Ball Drill” in which the victim stood in the infield and fielded a thousand grounders in rapid succession. Often he would fall to the ground, gasping. That is when the coaches would begin aiming batting balls at him. Oxygen was often required when the drill was done.

“Fighting spirit,” however, represents the tatamae of Japanese baseball, the truth that is stated. It is rare to see a Japanese player display such spirit on the field, such as sliding hard into second base to break up a double play, or barreling into a catcher to dislodge the ball from his mitt. That sort of behavior would not do in a small and narrow country where people live on top of one another. But because the inclination toward aggression exists in the human heart, Japanese players are taught to talk about aggressive play a lot, although never actually displaying it.

Only Higashio threw at people’s heads. That was his place, just as it was Shigeo Nagashima’s to be Japan’s Babe Ruth (not Sadaharu Oh. Oh hit the home runs; Nagashima was the star) and just as it is for Hiromitsu Ochiai to be the bad boy of the game. Everybody knows that Ochiai will brag and practice when the mood suits him and demand a lot of money from his bosses. But only Ochiai can do that. Japan is filled with surrogates—the violent teenagers of “Be-Bop High School” movies, the insulting wiseguy TV comics—who can do what people would like to do but which society deems unacceptable.

It is not acceptable to play baseball aggressively. But it is good to talk about it. That way the nation can celebrate its
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considerable will and noses do not get bloodied. A few years ago an American named Tim Ireland came to play second base for the Hiroshima Carp (who, incidentally, are not named for seafood but for a company, like all the other teams). Ireland was a marginal player with little power. But he did have “fighting spirit.” The problem with Ireland’s “fighting spirit” was that he meant it. His was “fighting spirit” of the homen variety. No one told him that he was not supposed to slide into infielders with spikes flashing. He lasted two years and never quite understood that the truth you state does not necessarily have to be the truth you mean.

Lesson Two: The Way of Baseball, or Form over Content

In Japan there is a way to hold a bat. Actually, this varies by team. The Nippon Ham Fighters generally bat one way and the Yakult Swallows another. The batters might hold their hands high, or might stretch their hands out over the plate just before the pitch is delivered. While in America young hitters are reminded to seek a zone of comfort in the batter’s box—“get comfortable up there, son…”—Japanese rookies spend a lot of time learning to bat like everyone else.

They spend hours in batting practice, and when they are not at practice, they are swinging a bat at the air. Before they go to sleep at night, rookies take a few hundred practice swings. The idiosyncratic major league batting styles that American boys grow up trying to imitate—“Look at me Dad, Stan Musial, just like a corkscrew!”—are seldom, if ever seen in Japan. (For an exception, see Lesson One, under Ochiai, the designated rebel, whom mothers do not encourage their sons to emulate.)

Form, be it in the arrangement of flowers or the manipulation of a sword, is central in Japan where learning is accomplished by observation and imitation. Consistency is a virtue. And practice perfects consistency. Saying that Japanese baseball teams practice is like saying that Donald Trump makes deals.

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They practice for two hours a day during the season—when Americans are loosening up in the field and taking batting practice; and they practice when the season is done—when the Americans are either playing winter ball in the Dominican Republic or going to banquets. When it is too cold to practice in Japan they practice in Hawaii or Arizona. That is called pre-spring—training training. Spring training follows. Then comes the season. Practice in Japan is interrupted only by games.

“Doing” Not Playing Baseball

Practice affords a player the chance to sharpen skills in the manner his coaches see fit. There are not a lot of errors in a Japanese baseball game. The men in the field have handled more grounders and fly balls than there are people at Kama-kura beach on a Sunday in August. Practice ensures a measure of predictability, which is a satisfying feeling for the people of a thin archipelago spread across a fault line and subject to the whims of the typhoons and tidal waves. What cannot be made predictable is lamented; but that which can is rehearsed until it is perfected. Games matter in Japan, but not nearly as much as practice does. A player can be benched or sent to the farm team for having a bad practice. Coaches supervise practice, watching for lapses, noting consistency. There is no room for error in practice, no allowance for saving one’s best for the game. Victory is all well and good but unless it comes appropriately—it right. And once you get it right you keep practicing to make sure you do not slip.

No one said it was supposed to be fun.

Lesson Three: Better To Bunt than Not To Bunt

The operating principle in American baseball is called the “Big Bang Theory,” a philosophy advanced and extolled primarily by Earl Weaver, the great Baltimore Orioles manager. The theory dictates that the winning team will score more runs in one inning than the loser will score in all nine. To that end it is necessary to play for the big inning—to achieve the “big bang.” This means risk. It means not surrendering outs on sacrifice bunts. It means taking the chance of hitting into a double play with a man on first, but also of advancing that man to third with a base hit, having two men on base and maybe scoring a bunch of runs.

The operating principle in Japanese baseball is “a run at a time.” When a man reaches first the next man, with less than two out, will always bunt, thereby sacrificing himself, surrendering an out in the interest of moving the baserunner that much closer to home. The Japanese are fine bunters.
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They have practiced bunting. They can move a runner from first to second every time. They can take part in the creation of a single run. For a long time I wondered why some manager didn’t just start playing for the “big bang” and tell his men to swing away. My tutors disabused me of this idea. If one team did that then the harmony would be broken, the harmony that comes when the game is played predictably. Teams know what to expect from one another. If one team was to break from the field and play by different rules, it might win. But then everyone else would, in a sense, lose.

Everyone bunts. With less than two men out. Always. Just as everyone cheers when the designated cheerleaders (you can spot them in their uniform shirts and caps, white gloves and wooden clappers) instruct them to cheer. Everyone sings the same songs—“You’re tough and strong and wild with the number 45 on your back...”—and refrains from offering gratuitous comments on the quality of a particular fellow’s play—“You stink, you bum!” Japanese baseball’s pleasure is a shared experience, on the field and in the stands.

Seizing the Moment, Paying the Price

The consequence of these lessons came for me one afternoon in the Yokohama Stadium, where I sat next to Leon Lee, the younger of the two Lee brothers. Young boys were clamoring for his autograph and Leon politely told them, in Japanese,

"Later, please." The Baltimore Orioles were in town for an exhibition series, and Leon and I were anxious to watch.

In truth, the game was not much of a contest. The Americans were scoring seemingly at will. But in an unspectacular moment the elements of “fighting spirit,” predictability, and form came together in a way that would exemplify why Japanese baseball is good for Japan, but not when Japan wants to beat America.

The Oriole batter hit a hard bouncing ball toward first base. The Japanese first baseman locked his eyes on the ball. And then for a brief moment, he froze. He watched the ball and Leon could see—and helped me to see—that he was trying to remember what he had been taught to do and what he had practiced to do with a ball bouncing just the way this ball was bouncing.

The problem, however, was that the ball was bouncing unusually, which is inevitable in a game played with a round ball, cylindrical bat and on a sloping playing surface. So there he stood, at first, waiting. The runner was a speedy man, and the first baseman would have to charge the ball to catch him at the bag. But to charge the ball would have meant risking flubbing the play. And so he waited for the ball to come to him, seemingly calculating that the longer it took to travel, the more familiarly it might bounce.

Hiromitsu Ochiai, the "bad boy" of Japanese baseball.

The ball reached him just as the runner reached first. The first baseman caught the ball. In the American context of the game that would not have mattered because the runner was safe. But in Japan the first baseman had not failed. He had not dropped the ball. He would not incur the wrath of his manager. He was safe to play another day.

The problem is that baseball is a game of motions repeated in seeming monotony. And, then, at a key juncture in the game, something a little different happens. A ball bounces unusually; a curve ball does not break sharply enough, even though it looks like a ball. And it is those moments that must not only be seized, but conquered. The team that can squeeze an advantage from them is the team that wins.

So dismiss the home runs and the strikeouts that strength provides. Think of the subtler moments. Because that is where America will beat Japan in baseball, today and tomorrow.

Of course none of it matters, not when compared to the price Japan would have to pay to beat the Americans. They’d have to adjust their game to the Americans’ game—setting players free to trust their instincts, letting them risk the failure of the muffed play, letting them play.

But then the game would lose its essential quality: it wouldn’t be Japanese baseball anymore.