Is baseball a global sport? America’s ‘national pastime’ as global field and international sport

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Abstract  A myriad of organized sports and physical leisure activities took shape in the nineteenth century and spread quickly from the West to the Rest through imperial and mercantile circuits. Among them, the competitive team spectator sports of soccer, cricket, and baseball were perhaps the most consequential in reach and influence, adopted and adapted in what I have called elsewhere ‘uncanny mimicry’. The differences in the world histories of the three sports are as significant as their commonalities, and in this article I focus on some of the distinctive features of baseball’s development in the USA and its move through the Caribbean and the western Pacific regions. Unlike soccer and cricket (and American football), baseball developed outside elite schools; it was fully commercialized and professionalized early on; it never had antagonisms or rivalries with amateur or school forms of the sport; and it never had very strong ideological associations with a ‘character’ ethic. On the other hand, it was quickly ‘nationalized’ as the American pastime, and in that image it was emulated and resisted in the locations in which it took root. The argument is extended through a case study of ‘samurai’ baseball in Japan and its uncanny mimicry.

Keywords  SPORT, BASEBALL, JAPAN, TRANSNATIONAL, GLOBALIZATION

I claim that Base Ball owes its prestige as our National Game to the fact that as no other form of sport it is the exponent of American Courage, Confidence, Combativeness; American Dash, Discipline, Determination; American Energy, Eageress, Enthusiasm; American Pluck, Persistency, Performance; American Spirit, Sagacity, Success; American Vim, Vigor, Virility.

Base Ball is the American Game par excellence because its playing demands Brain and Brawn, and American manhood supplies these ingredients in quantity sufficient to spread over the entire continent.

(Spalding 1911: 12)
The articles of this special issue are but the latest to demonstrate how powerfully sports have been a connective tissue of modern life on imperial, international and global scales. Soccer, cricket and baseball were at the core of a myriad of organized sports and physical leisure activities that were formalized in the nineteenth century and spread quickly from the West to the Rest. From the second half of that century, they travelled the colonial, military and mercantile circuits of the world as organizational complexes of skills, rules, equipment and players, creating a global sportscape of local followings, national pastimes and international rivalries. What happened when they arrived in locations around the world has produced a fascinating, rich literature about the dynamics of domestication that often these days goes under the catch-all notion of ‘glocalization’. The term captures the sense that local appropriation is seldom simply assimilating and imitating. Rather, it is generally a process of indigenization – of appropriating the foreign objects and practices by recontextualizing them into local matrices of meaning and value.

However, the differences in the world histories of the three sports are as significant as their commonalities, and in this article I begin with some of the distinctive features of baseball’s development in the USA and its move through the Caribbean and western Pacific regions, with special reference to Japan. Unlike soccer and cricket (and American football), baseball in the USA developed wholly outside elite schools and, perhaps for that reason, was fully commercialized and professionalized much earlier than soccer and cricket. The professional game was never antagonistic to amateur or school forms of the sport, no doubt because baseball as sport never had very strong ideological associations with a personal ‘character’ ethic. At least by the 1860s, baseball was already explicitly ‘nationalized’ as the American pastime, and in that image it was emulated and resisted in the locations in which it took root. There has been a transnational world of baseball for almost a century and a half. From the 1860s, and over time this has linked several circuits of the game within the USA (including Major League Baseball or MLB, the Negro Leagues, and various minor league systems), across the Caribbean and Central America (especially the Cuban, Dominican Republic and Mexican leagues), and through East Asia (especially Japan, Taiwan and South Korea).

Because of these and other related factors, I argue that baseball has never developed the global character of soccer. Despite Albert Spalding’s tireless proselytizing, it is not even the equal of cricket, which became a fully Commonwealth sport with an international competitive balance that disrupted (and de-classed) early English dominance. In the sportscape of world baseball, the US professional association (MLB) has always remained the dominant centre, and this has significantly determined (and distorted) the sport’s local histories, its regional forms and its cross-national linkages. Baseball is, as my subtitle suggests, a sport regarded as the national pastime of several countries in the Americas and Asia that are linked internationally and transnationally, but whose domestic games are far more important than international competition.

The year 2006 illustrated the contrast between soccer and baseball quite instructively. The 18th FIFA World Cup final pool and championship rounds in...
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Germany, after two years of qualifying by its 207 member national federations, demonstrated once again that soccer is the only truly global team sport (just as athletics, under IAAF, is our only really global individual sport). This is true in several senses. There was extensive participation and spectatorship across the North–South divide. FIFA exercises powerful supranational governance in establishing standards and adjudicating disputes. This was a genuinely open world championship competition. There are now in professional soccer generally only limited controls on the movements of transnational players and there was relatively open competitive bidding for media rights and extensive coverage.

Of course, one may point out that traditional powerhouse teams from Europe and South America dominated the championship rounds, that FIFA is a crony-ridden headquarters pursuing narrow self-interest, that financial clout has replaced legal restrictions in controlling the soccer labour movement, and that only a few powerful multinational corporations can vie for primary commercial sponsorship and media rights. Nonetheless, for at least half a century since the 1950 tournament, the FIFA World Cup has been one of the few titles deserving of its name, and FIFA can rightly claim to be in the vanguard of supranational sports governance.

The global scale and transnational nature of soccer stood out starkly against the events of three months earlier, in March 2006. For 17 days, the first ‘World Baseball Classic’ was held in several venues among 16 national teams, grouped into four first-round pools. It was less the scale of participation than the hegemony of US organizational power that revealed world baseball’s skewed landscape. Four of the seven tournament venues were on the US mainland, and two were in Puerto Rico; only the Asian first round pool was played beyond the American flag in Tokyo. The WBC was organized by the US Major League Baseball (MLB) and the MLB Players’ Association, which reserved for themselves a major share of the proceeds. The Classic had been delayed a year over objections by the Commissioners’ Office of Japanese professional baseball (NPB for Nippon Professional Baseball) precisely because NPB felt that the scheduling, logistics, rules and finances of the event had been established by and for MLB. Moreover, the Classic was threatened with cancellation in the winter of 2005 over the US government’s unwillingness to grant visas to members of the Cuban national team.

Of course, in this case too, there are factors that some feel mitigate a simple conclusion that US domination has kept baseball as a parochial sport. It was not lost on many who followed the tournament that Japan and Cuba, the two teams that met in the single-game championship, are the two nations with the most vibrant and autonomous baseball cultures. The US national team advanced to the second round but after winning a close game with Japan that was decided by a controversial call by an American umpire, it was routed by Korea and closed out by Mexico and was relegated to spectatorship.

We may also note that this World Baseball Classic was not the beginning of broad international competition but more precisely an effort by MLB to graft itself onto longstanding and multi-level international baseball organizations and competitions. Though little known, there has been a Baseball World Cup since 1938 – the first was
held in Great Britain with only two teams, from Britain and the USA, and was a five-game series won by Great Britain (thus, England participated in and won a baseball World Cup before joining the soccer World Cup). The organization that has evolved into the International Baseball Federation (IBAF) was formed that year to promote these competitions. With 112 national member units, it now administers several levels of world championship tournaments, including youth, junior, university and ‘inter-continental’; a Women’s Baseball World Cup has been held twice since 2004. The Baseball World Cup itself has been held 35 times since 1938, with Cuba winning the last nine titles (25 of 36 overall, despite not participating several times for political reasons).

Baseball has an Olympic history in that it was played as an exhibition sport first in 1912 and again in 1936 in Berlin before 125,000 spectators at the Olympic Stadium, still the largest crowd ever to watch a baseball game. It was a demonstration sport in the 1984 and 1988 Games before gaining official designation in 1992. To associate it even more directly with the Olympic movement, the IBAF moved its headquarters to Lausanne, Switzerland in 1993.

However, a litany of amateur and professional international competitions and a growing global audience for MLB satellite broadcasts do not make a global sport. Most of the important baseball scholars talk about baseball ‘globalization’, but hesitate to label it a global sport. Peter Bjarkman’s valuable *Diamonds around the globe: the encyclopedia of world baseball* profiles the distinct but intertwined histories of the sport in a dozen or so countries that together characterize what he most frequently terms ‘international baseball’ (Bjarkman 2005). Alan Klein’s new book details ‘the globalization of major league baseball’, by which he means international sources of players and an aggressive marketing of MLB games and products to foreign markets (Klein 2006). And at the end of his new edited collection, *Baseball without borders: the international pastime*, George Gmelch (2006) asks ‘is baseball really global?’ While he tries hard to answer the question affirmatively, he too concludes with an emphasis on the diversification of US professional baseball.

Their caution is appropriate. Baseball is a significant international sport with rich and well-documented autonomous histories in several countries. It is also a transnational sport because, among these national spheres, organizational templates, players, techniques, strategies and spectatorships have continuously circulated. It is not a global sport as measured by what Giulianotti and Robertson astutely identified as globalization’s ‘core process, namely that it ‘relativizes all particularisms’ (Giulianotti and Robertson 2004: 547). There is a single centre to the baseball world and it is in New York, not Lausanne, at the MLB Commissioner’s Office. Baseball has many local vernaculars of a single dominant language, and that is the particular language of US baseball. Throughout its history, US professional baseball has successfully subordinated all challenges to its popularity and profitability (at least from within the sport). For example, early on, Albert Spalding and the National League engineered the collapse of a rival Players League in 1889; and the National League absorbed a second rival American Association several years later and finally, in the early twentieth century, forced a détente with the American League to form
Major League Baseball. Then, in the mid-twentieth century, it turned back a renegade Mexican league (Klein 1997), undermined the Negro Leagues with its own integration, embraced Caribbean players, made a labour peace with its own players’ union, and forced an agreement with the Japanese professional leagues that has created a posting system to facilitate the MLB signing of Japanese stars.

Even at the amateur level, the IBAF remains a minor world federation, for binational politics (namely the continuing baseball cold war between Cuba and the USA) has been overshadowing and undermining its championships for 50 years. The world’s highest profile amateur competition is actually the Little League World Series, carefully managed by ‘Little League International’, the decidedly American organization that also puts on seven other similar ‘world series’ championships of youth baseball and softball. The current format of dividing teams into the United States Bracket and the International Bracket ensures that an American team will reach the finals and this is symptomatic of uneven power in the baseball world, which at all levels tilts towards the United States.

In all this, precisely what has not happened has been a relativizing of the particular shaping force of MLB baseball, to recall Giulianotti and Robertson’s standard. Their measure, applied to sport, does not to reduce globality to relative strength (does the MLB always win?) or geographical dispersion (in how many countries are MLB broadcasts popular?). It draws attention, more significantly, to patterns of governance, vectors of player movement, and flows of media attention and sports capital. In baseball, the centre still holds.

Baseball, besuboru, and beisbol

Why is this so? Baseball’s emergence as an organized sport and its diffusion beyond the USA began even earlier than the English sports of soccer and rugby (the spread of cricket predated all three). Even as baseball was spreading across the USA from its New England and mid-Atlantic beginnings in the 1860s, during and after the Civil War, it was simultaneously moving abroad – to Cuba in 1860, to elsewhere in the Caribbean and Central America soon after, to China in 1863, and to Japan and Korea in the early 1870s. Given this, we might have expected it to have assumed a more global rather than international form in the ensuing century. Albert Spalding certainly did, as he expressed triumphantly in the magazine piece he wrote on his return from leading an exhibition tour of baseball stars around the world from December 1888 to March 1889 (Spalding 1889; see also Lamster 2006). Instead, baseball’s further advance was much slower and in fact depended more on Japan, which promoted baseball in its empire in Korea, Taiwan (Morris 2004), Southeast Asia, and then Oceania (for example, Murdock 1948) as it moved across the Pacific. Japanese immigrants to Brazil and Hawaii promoted the game there in the early twentieth century.

Soccer’s diffusion was slightly later, but it sustained a momentum of promotion and appropriation. Certainly, European continental interest and British imperial circuits gave the sport a far wider zone of contact than baseball. Much is made of the
‘simplicity’ of soccer as responsible for its global reach – its minimal rules, basic equipment, and fundamental skills necessary to play and watch knowledgably. What is more immediately approachable than a round ball propelled gracefully about an open flat rectangle by a balanced number of players? Baseball, by contrast, seems so idiosyncratically complicated. It has an oddly configured field with a diamond infield and non-converging foul lines, base paths and pitcher’s mound. It has arbitrary dimensions and positional skills; gloves, masks, bats and bases must accompany the ball; it has arcane statistics; the intervals on interruption entice coaches, managers and umpires to interject authority and expertise: it is too quirky and arcane to appeal popularly.

Perhaps the features of the two sports do account for some of their differential reach, as Appadurai (1995) and others argue, but other sport cases suggest this is at best incomplete. Basketball, for example, matches soccer in its pace and elegant simplicity (it is but soccer on a smaller scale, by hand rather than by foot and head), but basketball was vastly slower to spread since its invention in 1891. Basketball leads some to find cause in an American parochial disinterest in promoting its own sports abroad. This not only applies to baseball and basketball but also to American football and lacrosse – none of America’s four indigenous modern sports gained any world standing like soccer and athletics.

This too runs against the historical experience. In fact, I would argue three features of baseball’s early international history shaped and ultimately limited its spread. The first was its precocious professionalization in the USA in a league format that created powerful commercial interests and incentives for team ownership, stadium, transport and baseball goods. Of course, much nineteenth-century sporting activity became professional in terms of paying performers, charging for admissions and gambling revenues. This applied to pedestrianism, cycling, bare-knuckle fighting and a host of ‘blood sports’, but baseball was different. People played baseball as much as they watched it and it rapidly stabilized into regular seasons, stadium fixtures, continuing player contracts and monopolistic associations of owner-operators. That is, more than the other early professional sports, it systematized and stabilized its business foundations as a small monopoly of individual owners.

At the same time, and as a way of consolidating and expanding its business potential, baseball was promoted in highly nationalistic terms as embodying American values and inculcating an American character. Much of this national pastime discourse was exhortative and aimed at domestic conditions through decades of massive waves of foreign immigration and internal population movements. The playable spectator sport was a powerful solvent, even though the game perpetuated racial, ethnic and gender exclusions. The same coding of baseball practices as culturally American was the idiom by which the sport was so fervently promoted abroad as a surrogate for more direct political control. Most notably, this was through Spalding’s own tireless efforts, and his 1911 proclamation of ‘America’s national game’ has been a central text in several explications of national sports diplomacy waged through baseball (especially Brown 1990, 1991; Crepeau 1982; and Dyreson 2003, 2005). ‘It has followed the flag to the Hawaiian islands’, Spalding boasted, ‘and
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at once supplanted every other form of athletics in popularity. It has followed the flag to the Philippines, to Porto Rice and to Cuba, and wherever a ship flying the Stars and Stripes finds anchorage today, somewhere on nearby shore the American National Game is in Progress’ (Spalding 1911: 14; see Elfers 2003 for the 1913–14 world tour).

These are strong claims, but misleading history. Cuban students returning from the USA brought the game to the island and, while baseball’s origins in Hawaii have mainland roots, its popularity and strength was borne much more by Japanese immigrant labour (Nakagawa 2001). American sailors on shore playing the game in ports of call had important demonstration effects on local populations, but it was actually several resounding defeats of such a team in the late 1890s by Japanese schoolboys that boosted the popularity of the sport and shaped it in a direction quite different from Spalding’s American style. A third feature of baseball’s early international history is that the countries in which it was most enthusiastically adopted fell within the political and economic orbit of the USA but were not under its direct colonial rule. Missionaries, educators, YMCA instructors, merchants, and others were teachers and models of the American game (Bjarkman 1994; Gems 2006; Reaves 2002), but local players and promoters could and did respond with considerable creativity and even irreverence.

In short, the consequence of the specific political conditions of baseball’s spread was that the distinctiveness of the various national baseball cultures was framed in dialectic with the sport’s central power, the USA. The form of this dialectic is what I turn to now.

Uncanny mimicry: the ideological dynamic of world baseball

Sports of course are among a vast array of institutional complexes and commercial products that form the political economy of globalization (political constitutions, film industries, scientific technologies and fast-food franchises). What sets sports apart is that they are by definition contests, and this has made them inevitable and compelling frameworks for organizing social solidarities and rivalries, emotional attachments, and ideological polarities at intra-societal and inter-societal levels. One cultural idiom for expressing relations of affinity and opposition is that of sporting ‘style’, generally taken to be a distinctive albeit elusive configuration of coaching philosophy, game strategy, player attitudes, and team social relations. Individual players and coaches have styles; teams have style, but the notion is used most broadly (and most problematically) as national styles of sports. Participants, spectators and commentators invest much in defining and defending the style of Brazilian soccer, Indian cricket, Pakistani field hockey, Romanian gymnastics, Soviet ice hockey and so forth. Sports styling is, in effect, a core grammatical construction of sports glocalization.

Styling, though, assumes a different syntax in the world of soccer – an ever-shifting polyglot of continental, national and club styles – than in baseball’s circuits, where for much of its century and a half, styling becomes a response to American claims of authenticity and authority. Under these conditions, what has most frequently developed is appropriation in the form of an ‘uncanny mimicry’ – a condition, to put
it tongue in cheek, in which Sigmund Freud meets Homi Bhabha. By uncanny, I mean Freud’s original sense of the unnerving sensation of encountering something both familiar and foreign at the same time. As I argued above, since the 1860s, Americans have exuberantly exported the game, all the while worrying constantly if those beyond the smell of hot dogs and the strains of our national anthem can and should play it properly. Two of the most enthusiastic promoters of American baseball, Albert G. Spalding and Henry Chadwick, both wrote with messianic zeal about spreading the ‘American game’ (and its American values) to what Spalding once labelled the ‘little brown skin peoples’. It was ‘gratifying’, he observed, to see them playing the American national pastime, but disappointingly inevitable that they could never quite ‘get it’ and ‘extremely unsettling’ whenever they beat us! From Albert Spalding to the latest high-priced and under-performing American star for the Japanese professional teams, the effect of seeing ‘our’ and ‘not our’ baseball at the same time is just that sensation captured by Freud’s uncanny meeting.

What does baseball glocalization look like from the other side? Baseball was taken to Japan and elsewhere in a spirit of enthusiastic mimicry, at least as Homi Bhabha (1984) used the term for how colonial and neo-colonial subjects appropriated their master’s practices with equal measure of anxiety and anger. ‘Mimicry’ is both the pale copy destined to fall short of an original and an aggressive appropriation that imaginatively exceeds the model. It is playful disruption and intentional distortion.

What I am suggesting is that the dynamics of uncanny mimicry have been one significant form of sports glocalization, especially in the case of baseball, a sportscape of plural manifestations across a global playing field but with a single centre that continues to claim the aura and authority of authenticity. I turn to the fate of baseball in Japan to illustrate these dynamics, although I believe we can find equal demonstration in all corners of the baseball world (see especially, Eastman 2005 for Cuba; Klein 1991 for the Dominican Republic; Klein 1997 for Mexico; and Morris 2004 for Taiwan).

Samurai sporting style in an international sportscape

Japan is a strategic case of uncanny mimicry because it is the nation beyond the USA with the longest history of the sport, the largest spectatorship, the most extensive media coverage, and the most elaborated administrative organizations at the amateur and professional levels. Baseball has been regarded as the national pastime sport at least since the mid-twentieth century. Even during the 70 years prior to that, it had no rival in popularity.

The many forms of baseball in Japan, from children’s sandlot through national high school tournaments, university and industrial leagues, to the professional leagues are nonetheless most often reduced to (or essentialized as) a single dominant image. Japanese baseball is samurai baseball. To commentators, both foreign and domestic, it looks just like US baseball but it is really completely different. The same field dimensions and rule book seems to have spawned radically divergent cultures of performance. Free-spirited, hard-hitting, fun-loving, independent-minded American
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baseball players are pitted symbolically against team-spirited, cautious, self-sacrificing, deeply deferential, intensely loyal samurai with bats. As The Economist (1996) opined several years ago:

To Americans, baseball is all about enjoyment and sudden surprises; of spectacular hits, dexterous fielding and cheeky running between the bases. Not so in Japan. When introduced in the late 19th century, baseball was widely interpreted by the former samurai elite to be a kind of spiritual training – a discipline for shaping young minds and bodies. To the Japanese, yakyū (field ball) is seen to this day as a martial art to be practised remorselessly to perfection and then grimly executed with the sole purpose of crushing the opposition.

Such portraits as this form a thick file of media stories stretching over many decades, by visitors and locals alike. An American reporter, for instance, captured his own discomfort at the uncanniness of Japanese baseball in the following report:

‘Japanese Baseball: A Whole New Ballgame’
Orange County (CA) Register, Sunday, Sept. 28, 1997
By Gary A. Warner, Orange County Register

Oh, take me out to the besuboru game
Take me out to the dome
Buy me some dried squid and yakitori on a stick
The orange-colored rabbit mascot is really a kick
For it’s bang the taiko drum for the home team
But if they tie the other team, it’d be great.
One, two, three “sanshin”, bow to the ump, and you’re out
At the old besuboru game.

They do not sing that song during the seventh-inning stretch at Japanese baseball games. In fact, they do not sing anything at all. Oh, the insanely loud home-team rooters in the right-field seats screeching on their whistles and pounding on a big taiko drum will occasionally break into a toe-tapper such as ‘To the Sky with Fighting Soul, Ah Giants’. But that can happen any time. Or rather all the time. From an hour before the game until the final out.


No wait, it is 2-and-3. In Japan, the strikes are called first. But otherwise, it is just like a night at Seattle’s Kingdome or at Dodger Stadium.

Except for players bowing to the umpire instead of kicking dirt on him. And the cheerleaders dancing on the field between innings. The young women with
pony kegs of beer strapped to their backs serving draft from a spigot. The vendors hawking cigarettes or the couples sharing a ‘bento box’ of deep-fried asparagus and raw fish on rice wrapped with seaweed. The players throwing stuffed animals to the crowd after a home run.

Same pastime. Different nations. Baseball in Japan is a game familiar, yet exotic. Unchanged, yet with more twists than a Fernando Valenzuela screwball.

‘There’s fewer fastballs. More full counts. Strategy is what it’s about – bunting, hit and run, moving the man over. Giving yourself up for the good of the team’, said John De Bellis, an American expatriate who covers baseball for the Asahi Evening News, a major Tokyo-based newspaper. ‘It’s baseball, but not the same baseball Americans know.’

Or, as a somewhat less charitable Reggie Smith, the former Dodger slugger, put it after his first year with the Yomiuri Giants in 1983: ‘This isn’t baseball – it only looks like it.’

Indeed, the dominant image of Japanese baseball is that of a society that has actively and forcefully reshaped baseball’s original forms and spirit to fit a set of purposes that turn play into pedagogy, that subordinate the excitement of contest for the demands of character building. Americans gleefully play baseball; Japanese grimly work baseball – and they are worse for it.

Warrior players giving their all for the team has been potent imagery, especially in the international world of baseball, because it is a vividly oppositional metaphor (setting the Japanese East against the US West) that simplifies the often confusing task of sorting out what is common and what is different. That is, as a singular image and a universal label for baseball in Japan, it allows us to ignore important and intriguing differences across teams, across levels of play and across history (precisely, the differences and changes that Japanese fans often find most absorbing about the sport in their own society). It is also conveniently all-purpose. In one simple opposition (group work versus individual play), it purports to describe Japanese baseball (this is how they play it over there), to explain it (they play it that way because they are samurai), and to judge it (usually negatively, because although Americans idealize cowboys, we are far more dubious of samurai). This is sport reduced to eternal, essential national verities.

However, this is only half of the dynamic of uncanny mimicry. American players and commentators may view the repositioning of the sport in Japan – its glocalization – in deprecating terms, but local appropriation of American forms has a very different and decidedly positive valence for many Japanese. The most crucial inversion in the introduction of American baseball into Japan in the late nineteenth century was its positioning within the elite boys’ schools of the time. This happened in the 1880s and 1890s when it became one of a number of Western sports (sharing popularity with
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cricket, rowing and rugby) that were encouraged as student-run club activities at the so-called higher schools, the narrow conduits to the single national university in Tokyo. In this regard, it was less like baseball in the USA and more like American football or like cricket and rugby in Great Britain. All of these school-based sports generated an ethic that games-playing inspired virtue, formed character and developed manliness.

Although these sports quickly found enthusiasts among the elite students who developed organized clubs and spirited inter-scholastic competitions, the associations of school sports with personal character training and a samurai identity were not inevitable. In fact, baseball was highly unusual, and its emergence as school sport par excellence depended on the fortuitous circumstances of a series of challenge games that the baseball club of First Higher School played against Americans resident in the treaty port of Yokohama augmented by fleet sailors. These games have been recounted frequently in the literature (for example, in English, see Guthrie-Shimizu 2004; Guttman and Thompson 2001; Kelly 2000; and Roden 1980); from 1896 to 1904, First Higher played 13 games against the Yokohama Americans, winning 11 and losing only twice. The repeated victories reinforced the prominence of the baseball club among other sports clubs at the school, the status of Ichiko in the world of elite education, and the spread of baseball as a popular sport upwards to the universities and downwards into the national secondary school system.

The particular styling of baseball as embodying a samurai ‘fighting spirit’ owed much to the way this baseball club conducted itself, revelling in punishing practices and proclaiming a rhetoric of self-sacrifice. It no doubt saw its ethic vindicated by the considerable success it enjoyed on the field. However, this was also a decade when elite youth fell under the critical gaze of a populace suspicious of their moral and physical fitness for the prestigious positions soon to be theirs. The ostentatious exertions of the First Higher School Baseball Club and its articulation of ‘fighting spirit’ was in part an attempt to answer these suspicions.

Then, in the late 1910s and 1920s, ‘fighting spirit’ found another influential ideologue – and a slightly different formulation – in the Waseda University player, coach, manager and later newspaper commentator, Suishū Tobita. Like the First Higher club, Tobita stressed a spiritualized and self-sacrificing playing commitment explicitly likened to a warrior code. However, baseball clubs had now come under adult supervision, both at the university and high school levels, and not surprisingly, Tobita insisted on the unquestioned authority of the manager and his coaches in controlling the team. The lines of discipline and hierarchy were redrawn.

Although there were other coaching styles and philosophies, Tobita’s proved compelling at a time, in the second and third decades of the century, when newspapers and transport companies rushed to sponsor sports events and to fan sports fever for corporate profit. Tobita’s stern amateurism was used to temper this emerging commercialized popularity, especially of middle school and Tokyo area college baseball. Tobita’s spiritualization of sport performance also dovetailed the Japanese state’s efforts in mobilizing athletics to counter what it targeted as ‘subversive’ elements among educators and university students in the 1920s and 1930s. Thus, in the mid-
1930s, when a professional league was organized, it adopted some of this amateur fighting spirit into its own image in order to make itself palatable and profitable with a public warmed to sports as character building. Famous managers, star players and leading teams have all appealed to reputed samurai qualities to explain themselves, to exhort others and to distinguish themselves from those foreigners who fall outside this noble heritage.

To be sure, the genealogy of ‘samurai baseball’ is much more complicated than this (as others and I have tried to delineate elsewhere) and this ideologically charged imagery cannot account for the fuller history of the sport in Japan and its multiple attractions to sponsors and spectatorships (Kelly 1998). The symbol of the samurai was deployed to baseball as much to associate the sport as a vehicle for training and displaying certain codes of citizen-worker conduct in Japan, as it was to establish a contrast set with its American counterpart. The baseball player as samurai warrior was but one of many extensions of the image to define and discipline social roles in twentieth-century Japan (especially soldiers, students and workers). The virtues of samurai baseball have shifted since the early days of solidarity with the autonomous student team, to deference to the single adult manager, to the more impersonal loyalty demanded of contemporary players, to the large organization of professional clubs (each with rosters of 70 players, coaching staffs of 20 or more, and front offices of 50–70).

Finally, it is essential to note that part of the lasting fascination in Japanese baseball with the samurai imagery is the sheer difficulty of coaching and performing ‘samurai’ baseball, especially at the professional level. For every legendary example of 1000-fungo drills, of pitchers overextending their innings, of absolute obedience to managerial whims, there are undercurrents and counter-examples of petulance, irreverence, and outright resistance to these practices and demands. As is often the case with moral injunctions, the frequency with which they are demanded is a clue to how difficult it is to elicit their acceptance. Japanese players and fans alike have always been able to distinguish the practices of a sport from its ideology. Much of the continuing fascination of Japanese baseball has been in savouring this gap between saying and playing (W. Kelly 2006).

Future prospects
Among the dominant American professional sports, both the National Football League and MLB have watched enviously through the 1980s and 1990s as the National Basketball Association succeeded in a highly profitable international campaign to advertise its games and stars and sell its products in markets around the world (LaFeber 2002). Both the NFL and MLB sought to emulate this expansion, but there are few analysts who share Spalding’s conviction in the destiny of any of the three to attain global standing. In the case of baseball, several factors severely limit such a prospect.

First, the very organization of sport obstructs sustained multinational league competition. Of the major sports, baseball has the longest seasons; an American
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professional ball team plays 162 regular season games a year (Japanese teams play a 140-game schedule) plus pre-season exhibitions and post-season playoffs. Moreover, post season tournament play in baseball at the university and professional levels are multi-game series (for example, best-of-seven for the World Series and Japan Series). The logistics of international travel would require substantial truncation of its format, which is highly unlikely. Cricket’s compression of multi-day test matches to single-day competitions had its analogue at the 2006 WBC in a single-game championship – which was widely criticized as one of the worst features of the Classic.

Even more importantly, as with the NBA and the NFL, MLB financial interests lie much more with marketing its ‘product’ to the rest of the world rather than promoting autonomous zones of baseball and ceding some jurisdictional powers to other national federations and an international body like IBAF. In fact, MLB has joined with USA Baseball, the national federation that administers US participation in world championships at all levels, in part to protect its control (for an extended discussion, see John Kelly’s brief but pungent 2006 account).

Its extension to other parts of the world is also intended to developed foreign sources of new player talent, and in this MLB has been strikingly successful. The MLB team baseball academies in the Dominican Republic have become critical channels for recruiting young and inexpensive prospects, the machinations in enticing Cuban players to defect and sign with MLB clubs, and the extensive scouting efforts in Japan and other East Asian countries have resulted in the increasingly multi-ethnic composition of MLB teams. The effect is to draw the best players to the USA rather than to nurture elite level competition elsewhere. The consequences of such asset stripping were long ago evident in the Dominican Republic, where only an abbreviated Winter League remains of what had been robust year-round league play that rivalled the MLB and attracted some of its players during their off-season (Klein 1991). The costs of the accelerating bright flight of Japanese stars for the long-term prospects of the professional leagues in Japan is uncertain, but attendance and television market share of NPB are in decline and JPB has been unable to negotiate an equitable bi-national agreement with MLB over player movements.

Ironically, the continuing internationalization of baseball in the form of current MLB initiatives will only undermine its prospects of ever becoming a global sport. Many think that anti-American politics (unrelated to baseball) within the International Olympic Committee has precipitated the dropping of the sport (and softball) from the official Olympic roster. Whatever the cause, its absence from the only meaningful supranational multi-sports organization will consolidate the present configuration of the baseball world as a dominant centre of economic clout, jurisdictional authority, and ideological aura constraining though never wholly dominating a penumbra of baseball nations that have fashioned some space for autonomous development through the dynamics of uncanny mimicry. Indeed, the American reporter in the Japanese stadium was not watching ‘a whole new ballgame’, but had come upon a sibling form of the sport that had been raised under different historical conditions and whose mimicry of its older sibling was so uncannily discomforting to him.
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References


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Is baseball a global sport?