

Foreign trade-off

Baseball in Japan is not unlike America's version but adjustments are necessary



Elizabeth Holzemer

YOKOHAMA, Japan — Toyota. Honda. Sony. These are the more familiar names of quality Japanese exports, but major league baseball is embracing its newest Japanese import, Seattle Mariners sensation Ichiro Suzuki.

Suzuki, a seven-time batting champion, honed his skills while playing for the Pacific League's Orix Blue Wave. He's

the first Japanese position player to move to the States, after a growing list of Japanese pitchers.

But American players already have a history of coming to Japan that dates to the 1950s. This season, my husband, Mark Holzemer, who signed a one-year contract with the Yokohama BayStars, is one of roughly 50 Americans who traveled overseas to play Japanese professional baseball.

This is my fourth foreign tour of duty accompanying Mark out of the country during a career that has taken us to Canada, Mexico and Venezuela. This is Mark's 14th professional season since being drafted by the Anaheim Angels from Mullen High School in 1987. Mark has pitched in the major leagues for the Angels, Seattle Mariners, Oakland Athletics and Philadelphia Phillies.

We believe our previous journeys to foreign lands better prepared us for the 2001 Japanese baseball season.

Preparation is everything

It starts with spring training, which began Feb. 1, on the island of Okinawa, where the days are much longer and more grueling than those in the Grapefruit and Cactus leagues. The Japanese pitchers are expected to throw 2,000 pitches in a 24-day period.

A typical Japanese spring training day begins at 7 a.m. with a team walk and stretch, followed by a mandatory team breakfast. Practice begins at 9 a.m. with an hourlong stretch and running program. The rest of the day consists of drills, conditioning, running, hitting and more conditioning. Mark's day usually ended about 4:30 p.m., and this was before the exhibition games started.

From 5:30 to 6:30 p.m., there was a team dinner, followed by an hourlong meeting to discuss areas of improvement.

Preparation to the Japanese is everything. And during this time the Japanese do not encourage families to be a part of this intense, monthlong training period.

Where American spring training is viewed as a warmup for the regular season, the Japanese place a greater emphasis on exhibition games. Games are played in small towns and parks throughout Japan to drum up fan support for the upcoming season.

Major differences

Japanese baseball is remarkably different than the American format. Instead of 30 teams — as the American and National leagues have — Japanese baseball is divided into the Central

and Pacific leagues, with six teams in each. The BayStars are the only team that exclusively uses its city's name; the remaining 11 are named after the corporations that own them.

Each team is allowed to have four *gaijin*, or foreign players, on the active big-league roster. The Yokohama BayStars' imports include Mark, pitcher Shane Bowers, infielders Dave Doster and John Zuber and recently signed outfielder Anthony Sanders. Mark, Dave and John all have had stints with the BayStars' minor league team, the Shonan Searex.

During the regular season, each team plays only the other five teams in its division.

A frustrating difference in Japanese baseball is the nonexistence of double-headers and makeup games for rainouts. Every rainout, which happens frequently during the Japanese season, is made up at the end of the season, regardless of the standings. Players don't know when their season ends.

Another strange aspect is the home-games-away-from-home concept. This would be the equivalent of the Colorado Rockies playing the San Francisco Giants in Fort Collins on Colorado State's baseball field. This is another way for teams to generate fan support. Each team generally has 15 home-away-from-home games a season.

What's also missing is interleague play, the wild card and the playoffs. There are no Mr. October in Japan. The top team in each league plays the other at the end of the season (when-ever that is) in the best-of-seven Japan Series.

Secret strategies

Another peculiar aspect of Japanese baseball is the custom of not announcing starting pitchers until 40 minutes before the start of the game, when they exchange starting lineup cards. No lineup changes can be made at this time, so the teams must guess which pitcher they think will start the game and adjust their lineups accordingly.

With only six teams in each league, the Japanese think that by hiding their starter until the last possible moment, they might have an edge over their opponent.

When it comes to the game, there are obvious differences between the Japanese and American styles of ball. Japanese baseball relies more on base hits, bunting and speed; American baseball focuses on power and high-scoring games.

The strike zone is smaller in Japan; they do not call pitches on the corners. Because of this, an average Japanese game lasts nearly 3½

PITCHER

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マーク・ホルツマー

投手 Mark Holzemer

● 69年8月20日生 (32歳) ● 米国コロラド州出身

● 185cm 77kg 血液型A型 ● 左投左打

高校 明徳 U.K. ミューレン高中 セネカ州 中央大
エンゼルズ マリナーズ アスレチックス フィリ
ズー 横浜 01年

大リーグ・フィリーズから経験豊富なカウスポーがやってきた。今は抜けて速い球を投げるわけではないが、抜群のコントロールとカーブ、シュート、スライダース、そしてウィニング・ショットとなるチェンジアップと多彩な変化球を織り混ぜながら、打たせて取るハッカミー（間ヤクルト）に似たタイプの投球。キャンプ中は後野球の全てを吸収しようと、何事にも積極的に取り組んでいた姿勢は、シーズン本番で必ずや生きてくるだろう。

年	球団	試合	先発	勝利	敗戦	セーブ	打点	打数	安打	本塁打	盗塁	犠打	犠打	犠打	犠打	犠打	犠打	犠打	犠打	犠打
98	フィリーズ	27	1	0	0	0	0	11	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
99	フィリーズ	30	1	0	0	0	0	11	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
00	フィリーズ	30	1	0	0	0	0	11	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
01	ベイスターズ	30	1	0	0	0	0	11	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

By getting with their programs, Yokohama BayStars fans can peruse the stats of Mark Holzemer, a Mullen High School grad.



Days off provide players in Japan a respite from the rigors of their job. Mark and Elizabeth Holzemer spent time enjoying the cherry blossom season at the Sankai-en Garden at Yokohama, Japan, in April.

Photos courtesy of Elizabeth Holzemer

hours.

Another difference is that starting pitchers can't be in uniform and watch the game from the dugout if they're not playing. Instead, they watch the game on TV from inside the locker room. The only time a starting pitcher is in the dugout is the day he pitches.

Every loss is followed by a team meeting to discuss what went wrong and how the team could have improved its performance. There are no plush locker rooms with music or after-game dinners as in the States. After games in Japan, players shower and go home. It's a more businesslike approach to the game, which is hard for American players to adjust to.

Even though the national anthem isn't sung before each game and there isn't a seventh-inning stretch, when you get down to it, baseball

is the same game.

It doesn't matter if you're an American playing in Japan or a seven-time batting champion playing in the United States like Suzuki, there are new obstacles to overcome. Whether it be the food, the language or cultural differences, you have to adjust to the new style of baseball to succeed.

Unfortunately, Mark's team hasn't been successful this season. The BayStars are in fifth place in the six-team Central League with a 22-30 record. Hopefully, things will improve.

We keep reminding ourselves of Yogi Berra's famous phrase, "It ain't over till it's over."

That works in any language.

Elizabeth Holzemer is the wife of former major league pitcher Mark Holzemer.