



Asian Baseball Committee

Journal

Volume 6

Number 2

June 2008



Why are the Japanese Leagues Considered AAAA Baseball?

By: Deana M. Lykos

During the end of a Major League Baseball career, a player has to decide to end it all at the top, retire with nagging injuries and barely make it through the season, or still play professional ball at the AAA level. More often than not, ballplayers opt for AAA just so they can still play the game they love, but at a level that has them better than the rest. The past few years, players have discovered that, instead of settling for the ranks of minor league baseball during the low 30s time of the life, they would rather play in Nippon Professional Baseball (NPB).

NPB is the official league of

Japan. Just like MLB, there are two divisions: the Central League and the Pacific League. Both division leagues also have “minor leagues” under them: the Eastern League and the Western League. Other similarities to MLB include the mid-March/ April to October schedule, the July All-Star Game (NPB actually plays three games and not one), and the World Series, which is commonly known as the Nippon Series (or Japan Series). The Pacific League in NPB can be considered the closest to MLB’s American League because the designated hitter is used.



has produced a dramatic increase in players that went from NPB to MLB. Here is a list:

Kosuke Fukudome, 2008–present, Chicago Cubs; **Kazuo Fukumori**, 2008–present, Texas Rangers; **Shigetoshi Hasegawa**, 1997–2001, Anaheim Angels, 2002–2005, Seattle Mariners; **Kei Igawa**, 2007–present, New York Yankees; **Tadahito Iguchi**, 2005–2007, Chicago White Sox, 2007 Philadelphia Phillies, 2008–present San Diego Padres; **Akinori Iwamura**, 2007–present Tampa Bay Devil Rays/Rays; **Hideki Irabu**, 1997–1999 New York Yankees,

See AAAA on Page 2

In This Issue

AAAA Baseball?	1-3
Japanese Pitching	3
Yu Darvish	4-5

More and more in the past few years we have heard of MLB players who were once part of NPB: Ichiro Suzuki, Hideki Matsui, Kaz Matsui, Daisuke Matsuzaka and Kei Igawa. Those players above are the ones that the less-than-average MLB fans can name. In fact the past decade

AAAA continued:

2000–2001 Montreal Expos, 2002, Texas Rangers; **Kazuhisa Ishii**, 2002–2004, Los Angeles Dodgers, 2005, New York Mets; **Kenji Johjima**, 2006–present, Seattle Mariners; **Takashi Kashiwada**, 1997, New York Mets, **Masao Kida**, 1999–2000, Detroit Tigers, 2003–2004, Los Angeles Dodgers, 2004–2005, Seattle Mariners; **Masahide Kobayashi**, 2008–present, Cleveland Indians; **Satoru Komiyama**, 2002, New York Mets; **Hiroki Kuroda**, 2008–present, Los Angeles Dodgers; **Masumi Kuwata**, 2007, Pittsburgh Pirates; **Hideki Matsui**, 2003–present, New York Yankees; **Kazuo Matsui**, 2004–2006, New York Mets, 2006–2007, Colorado Rockies, 2008–present, Houston Astros; **Daisuke Matsuzaka**, 2007–present, Boston Red Sox; **Masanori Murakami**, 1964–1965, San Francisco Giants; **Micheal Nakamura**, 2003 Minnesota Twins, 2004 Toronto Blue Jays; **Norihiro Nakamura**, 2005, Los Angeles Dodgers; **Hideo Nomo**, 1995–1998, Los Angeles Dodgers, 1998 New York Mets, 1999 Milwaukee Brewers, 2000 Detroit Tigers, 2001 Boston Red Sox, 2002–2004 Los Angeles Dodgers, 2005 Tampa Bay Devil Rays, 2008 Kansas City Royals; **Takahito Nomura**, 2002 Milwaukee Brewers; **Hideki Okajima**, 2007–present, Boston Red Sox; **Tomokazu Ohka**, 1999–2001, Boston Red Sox, 2001–2005

Montreal Expos/Washington Nationals, 2005–2006 Milwaukee Brewers, 2007 Toronto Blue Jays; **Akinori Otsuka**, 2004–2005, San Diego Padres, 2006–2007, Texas Rangers; **Takashi Saito**, 2006–present, Los Angeles Dodgers; **Kazuhiro Sasaki**, 2000–2003 Seattle Mariners; **Tsuyoshi Shinjo**, 2001, New York Mets, 2002, San Francisco Giants, 2003, New York Mets; **Ichiro Suzuki**, 2001–present, Seattle Mariners; **Mac Suzuki**, 1996, Seattle Mariners, 1998–1999, Seattle Mariners, 1999–2001, Kansas City Royals, 2001, Colorado Rockies, 2001, Milwaukee Brewers, 2002, Kansas City Royals; **Kazuhito Tadano**, 2004–2005, Cleveland Indians; **So Taguchi**, 2002–2007, St. Louis Cardinals, 2008–present, Philadelphia Phillies; **Shingo Takatsu**, 2004–2005, Chicago White Sox, 2005, New York Mets; **Keiichi Yabu**, 2005, Oakland Athletics, 2008–present, San Francisco Giants; **Yasuhiko Yabuta**, 2008–present, Kansas City Royals; **Masato Yoshii**, 1998–1999, New York Mets, 2000, Colorado Rockies, 2001–2002, Montreal Expos.

A much more interesting table is the list of MLB players who are now playing NPB ball (all players listed below are as of 2007).

Chunichi: pitchers Joe Valentine (did not play), Santiago Ramirez and Franklyn Gracesqui;
Hanshin: pitchers Esteban Yan

and Chris Oxspring; **Yakult:** pitcher Seth Greisinger, outfielder Aaron Guiel; **Yomiuri:** pitchers Geremi Gonzalez and Gary Glover, infielders Luis Gonzalez and Joe Dillon, outfielder Damon Hollins; **Hiroshima:** pitcher Jared Fernandez; **Yokohama:** pitchers Scott Chiasson (did not play), Matt White and Joselo Diaz; **Nippon Ham:** pitchers Brian Sweeney and Felix Diaz, infielders Jose Macias and Andy Green; **Seibu:** pitcher Jason Johnson; **Chiba Lotte:** pitcher Justin Miller; **Softbank:** pitchers Jason Standridge, C.J. Nitkowski and D.J. Carrasco, infielder Brian Buchanan, outfielder Adam Hyzdu; **Orix:** pitchers Lance Carter and Wes Obermueller, outfielder Chad Allen, infielder Jason Grabowksi; **Rakuten:** pitcher Ryan Glynn and outfielder Eric Valent.

There is a stark difference in numbers between the two leagues, but why are a good amount of MLB players leaving the states to play in NPB? For the player it is the opportunity to still have MLB type competition without having to play with a younger generation of 18, 19 or 20-year-olds in the minor leagues. The NPB tends to be a great step above minor league baseball all while being below MLB standards. That is why many will view NPB as AAAA (or quadruple A) baseball.

See AAAA on Page 3

Japanese Baseball

Are Japanese Pitchers Mentally Tougher?

By: Chad DeCarlo

If 22-year-old Joba Chamberlain, the future of the New York Yankees pitching staff, were to try to throw a 50-pitch bullpen session before one of his games, members of the Steinbrenner family and General Manager Brian Cashman would be furious. So why did the Yankees' bitter rival, the Boston Red Sox, have their ace throwing 100-150 pitches prior to one of his starts, with the general manager looking on and loving every minute of it?

Daisuke Matsuzaka was a part of a memorable high school playoff run where he had a 148-pitch complete game shutout followed by a 250-pitch win the next day in a 17-inning marathon. The following day, he came into the game in relief to record yet another win after his team made a miraculous comeback. Finally, in the championship game, he pitched a no-hitter, sealing his name in baseball lore at the ripe age of 17.

These numbers are staggering to fans of modern American baseball, but they are a part of the norm in Japanese baseball. Before bullpens became such a vital part of the game, these also were commonplace to Major League pitchers.

According to Robert Whiting, baseball in Japan is like nothing

else. Even those in Japan who are not fans of baseball will still stop just to admire the game. Baseball is much different overseas than in the West because overseas, baseball is completely serious.



Players are not expected to have fun. Upperclassmen in Japanese high schools verbally and physically harass younger players constantly, forcing the rookies to treat them with respect.

The battle between the pitcher and the batter is recognized

as having the same sort of elements that happen in a kendo swordfight. In both instances, the combination of concentration and quick movements are needed to win. This is the main reason why Japanese pitchers stay in the game and never seem to tire. Japanese baseball players must build extreme mental toughness in order to be successful.

It is understandable that Major League officials use the excuse that too many pitches will cause arm problems. Matsuzaka himself has had problems with his shoulder that has landed him on the disabled list. However, if more pitchers in MLB could obtain this same sort of mental toughness, they might not have as much trouble with injuries. In addition, teams could save money by not spending it on relief pitchers. By not having to worry about starting pitchers and their pitch counts, Major League managers might become more mentally tough themselves.

AAAA continued:

Another reason for the unbalanced numbers of players between the Pacific Ocean is the set of rules that the NPB applies. For instance, there are only 12 NPB teams, and each team only has one minor league team. That is a total of 24 teams. In MLB there are 30 Major League teams and six teams in each minor

league system. That is a total of 210 teams. All of the team data concludes to the fact that there are not nearly enough slots in NPB for other players. Also, NPB rules state that there is a certain amount of foreign players that can be on each team; that includes other Asian countries, not just the U.S.

Yu Darvish

Yu Darvish: Japan's Young Pitching Superstar Could Be in MLB by '09

By: *Brian Goodrich*

If you don't know the name by now, chances are you will be learning about someone named Yu Darvish really soon. For most baseball fans in the United States, if his name was mentioned, it would most likely receive little or no response at all. On the contrary, if his name was brought up in Japan, men and women of all ages could talk about Yu Darvish.

At just 21, Darvish has numerous accomplishments while becoming one of the most popular and talked about professional baseball players and celebrities in Japan. Listed at 6-5, the right-handed Darvish has become the Hokkaido Nippon-Ham Fighters' starting ace after playing of Japanese professional baseball. In the 2007 season, he posted a record of 15-5 with an impressive 1.82 ERA in 26 games played. In addition, he also led the league in strikeouts, fanning 210. After such an impressive statistical year, Darvish was awarded the Pacific League MVP in December,

becoming the second youngest player in Japanese history to do so. He also received the Sawamura Award in October. Darvish is the first Nippon-Ham Fighter to ever win the award, which is given to the league's best pitcher. To reward their young superstar, the Pacific League Nippon-Ham Fighters gave Darvish a pay raise which made him the youngest player in Nippon Professional Baseball (NPB) to reach 200 million yen (equivalent to roughly 175 million U.S. dollars).

In 2006, Darvish had another strong season, finishing with a 12-5 record and a 2.89 ERA. The highlight of just his second professional league season came when he helped the Nippon-Ham Fighters win their first Japan Series since 1962. The last title was so long ago, that, when they won it, the team went by a different team name — the Toei Flyers. In dramatic fashion, Darvish started in the series-clinching game, going 7.1 innings and giving up just one run with six strikeouts. Captivating the Japan Series in 2006, Darvish and

the Ham-Fighters were given the opportunity to play in the Konami Cup Asia Series, a four-team tournament consisting of winners from the Japan Series, South Korean Series, Taiwan Series and a Chinese All-Star team. The Nippon Ham-Fighters cruised through the Asia Series with an undefeated record, following the lead of Darvish, who was crowned tournament MVP.

Born in Osaka, Japan in 1986, Darvish is half-Iranian and half-Japanese as his father is from Iran and his mother is Japanese. Skills and accomplishments in athletics is nothing new to the Darvish family as Yu's father once played soccer in college and had the honor of playing for the national soccer team in Iran.

Early in his life, Darvish showed prominent talent as a pitcher. At just 16-years-old, he helped his high school baseball club make a run to the regional championship with remarkable performances. Some

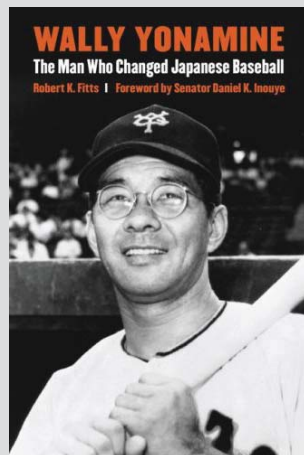
See Darvish on Page 5

Wally Yonamine: The Man Who Changed Japanese Baseball

by Robert K. Fitts

amazon.com

BARNES & NOBLE
BOOKSELLERS



Yu Darvish Continued:

of these performances included striking out 11 consecutive batters in one game and only allowing four hits while throwing a complete game shutout. In 2004, already beginning to be noticed by the media and MLB scouts, Darvish rallied his team with mesmerizing pitching performances in the very popular Koshien National High School Baseball Invitational in the spring and Championship in the summer. After tremendous pitching outings in the Koshien Invitational and Championship, Darvish entered the Japanese Professional League Draft where he was drafted number one by the Nippon Ham Fighters at age 18. From that point forward, the accomplishments and media attention have only escalated.

Since his arrival in professional baseball, Darvish has not only become popular in baseball. He has also made a name for himself in the entertainment tabloids as well. With his adoring female fans, Darvish's celebrity status in Japan can be compared to that of David Beckham in England. In the summer of 2007, Darvish made numerous headlines, from posing nude in a Japanese entertainment

magazine to announcing to the media that 20-year-old Japanese star actress Saeko, who he later married in November of 2007, was pregnant with their child. Controversial stories such as these are nothing new to Darvish. In the beginning of spring training in his



Yu Darvish: MLB Bound?

first professional league season, the media acquired and published a picture of him smoking

a cigarette, which is illegal for a person under 20 in Japan. As a result, Darvish was suspended and received limited play time in the minor leagues. Later, in the 2005

season, Darvish was eventually called up to play for the Fighters and posted a 5-5 record on the year.

So why might this young 21-year-old professional baseball celebrity be of any importance to baseball fans in the U.S? It is rumored that the New York Yankees are interested in signing him for the 2009 season. Along with the Yankees, teams such as the Cubs, Mets and Dodgers have also supposedly taken an interest in Darvish. After the success of highly touted Japanese pitcher Daisuke Matsuzaka with the Boston Red Sox, it is no surprise that MLB teams are looking for Darvish to follow in Matsuzaka's footsteps. With his youth, skills and glamour for the spotlight, it is hard to believe that Darvish could not stand out and excel in the U.S. Even though he has not indicated any desire to play in the United States, the Nippon Ham Fighters are rumored to be willing to post Darvish in the majors. However, the big factor is the asking price which could well exceed the \$51 million the Red Sox paid for Matsuzaka. In any case, the future looks rich and bright for this young Japanese superstar.

The Asian Baseball Journal is the official publication of the Asian Baseball Committee of the Society of American Baseball Research (SABR). It is produced by the students and faculty in the sport management department at the State University of New York College at Cortland.

Asian Baseball Journal:

Editor-in-Chief: David Snyder (snyderd@cortland.edu)

Assistant Editor, Layout and Design: Daniel DePerno (depernod@cortland.edu)

Student Editorial Board: Taryn Donovan, Deana Lykos, Peter Sweeney, Marty Dolitski

Asian Baseball Committee:

Chair: Rob Fitts

Vice-Chair: David Snyder

Webmaster: Merle Branner (<http://asianbb.sabr.org/asianbaseball.html>)

Asian Baseball Blog: Mike Plugh



Asian Baseball Committee
Journal