Comparative Analysis: American and Japanese Baseball

Baseball is a form of popular culture that is often overlooked. It has been an aspect of global culture for such a long time that I think it has become a mundane activity to most individuals. For the American people particularly, individuals have historically grown up going to the field as a young child, and do not seem to recognize the impact that the game has had on the world. Some countries participate in this pastime more than others, and the country of Japan seems to be one of the most notable. Japan is highlighted, especially when discussing baseball, because of the culture of competitiveness that the country is known for. Baseball gives Japanese individuals an outlet to have the ability to make their people proud, while also vying at an opportunity for victory. To the Japanese, a victory is everything, and baseball is the perfect avenue to be declared a winner multiple times. In America, however, the game of baseball is more about the people who surround the players and the cheers from the audience about the team succeeding together more than anything else. This dynamic gap sparked an interest, and I wanted to explore the dichotomy further.

According to *A History of Japanese Baseball*, the game gained significant popularity in 1870, when Hiroshi Hiraka, a railroad worker, came back from an assignment in America after having been introduced to the game in his free time. Upon his return to Japan, he formed the first Japanese baseball club, the Shimbashi Athletic Club, in 1878. According to *Nikkei Baseball: Japanese American Players from Immigration and Internment to the Major Leagues*, the Shimbashi Athletic Club practiced "Nikkei baseball", which is a blend of the traditional Samurai code of bushido and the western ideals of modern baseball as it is viewed today. However, the most significant turning point in the Japanese baseball movement was the 1934 all-star tour. According to *Murder, Espionage, and Baseball: The 1934 All Star Tour*, this team, which

competed in the 1934 All Star tour, consisted of the best players in all of Japan. This was the first instance in which players from different clubs came together in play as “professionals”. Despite challenges, the team collectively called themselves the “Yomiuri Tokyo Giants, and ultimately emerged as successful victors. This prompted the formation of several small teams in Japan, and the sport gained enough attention that the national league was introduced in 1937. According to *"Play Ball!": Baseball and Seattle's Japanese American Courier League, 1928-1941,* teams often played with Americans to prove the countries loyalty during World War II.

American Baseball gained popularity in the 1840s as a way to unwind from the taxing battles on the Civil War. Although Abner Doubleday is said to be the “father of baseball” who lived in Cooperstown, New York, that seems to be no longer the case. According to *Who Really Invented Baseball?* the Knickerbocker Baseball Club of New York was a group that originally thought of the game and player concept. Doubleday made it popular and marketed the game as something all can enjoy. After the war, individuals began to play the game with their friends back home, and eventually formed teams and the national league. In 1903, the first World Series Game was played, and that is when audiences far and wide had the desire to participate as well, making the sport what it is today.

Fan experience plays a vital role in how the game of baseball has evolved over the years in both countries. From this analysis, it was apparent within the stadiums that Japanese individuals value the history of the game in their country with great care, whereas in American baseball stadiums, that is not emphasized as the focus. In an introductory video to this topic, the individual spent more than five minutes out of a ten-minute video (that was supposed to show the wonders of Japanese baseball to an unfamiliar audience) in an on-site museum that was very elaborate in the showcasing of historical artifacts and in celebration of certain points in the origin story of

baseball becoming a Japanese cultural icon. According to *Japan, Sport, and Society: Tradition and Change in a Globalizing World*, author Koichi Kiko describes how baseball in Japan was Culture originally an avenue for respect and discipline, especially in school settings as an activity for younger generations. It was considered an honor to get the opportunity to play, even on such a small scale. In some ways, I think that this concept of having a legitimate museum as part of the "baseball park experience" allows fans to appreciate individuals have taken the game seriously enough to have the dedication required to have the ability to play at such an elevated level. In America, because "honor and shame" ideology is not heavily emphasized, I think fans do not necessarily care about the historical context of baseball while watching the game. Additionally, American baseball has traditionally not been viewed as a sport that justifies respect and discipline, and therefore, players do not get as much on-site recognition when what they do is just as difficult as Japanese players. According to *Career, Family, or Both? A Case Study of Young Professional Baseball Players*, author Marlene Dixon (and others) describes a case study done that examines young baseball players of all levels and the impact that it has on their family life. Dixon concluded that the lifestyle can be hard to adjust to at first, but a routine develops over time and the "separatist mentality," as the author indicates, where the mother takes care of the children at home while the father provides for the family by way of plying baseball professionally, simply becomes reality without any other expectation. Both parties become comfortable within the confines of their respective roles, and it is only on occasion that the roles intertwine. That said, a significant difference between the two cultures, from the fan perspective, is the acknowledgment of sacrifice and staying rooted in humble beginnings.

However, though separated by cultural differences in terms of introductory fan experience, Japan and American baseball teams have equal amount of enthusiasm and fan participation. I think

cheering, in both cultural spheres, is significant to discuss as part of the fan experience specifically in relation to baseball because it is the only sport in which specific chants are specified. For example, the song "Take Me Out to the Ball Game" is traditionally only sung at the American baseball park. According to *An Anthropologist in the Bleachers: Cheering a Japanese Baseball Team*, Japanese baseball spectators can often be seen chanting certain words to encourage the team that they "belong to," such as, "The game rides with the swing of your bat, hit it with all your might, no one can stop you, run, Hiyama, run!" This, of course, highlights a particular player. Similarly, American fans use cheers to inspire other spectators as well as teams during the game. This element of the game brings a sense of impactful unity and community because it is the one time during the game where all audience members are of one mind, and are in a state of hopeful anticipation towards a common goal—for their team to win the game. The article *Rooting Culture: Nostalgia, Urban revitalization, and the ambivalence of community at the ballpark* by author Peter Benson illustrates this motif by emphasizing that "The ballpark plays on desires for "small town" life, to be together, to be a part of "some-thing bigger" or a "community," and to be entertained in the process. Architecture and promotions are meant to make the ballpark into a "home field," not just a generic stadium. They are meant to generate feelings of authentic interconnection between consumption, civic affiliation, and a local economy. Ideals of social identity enacted at the ballpark reflect the broader influence of Disney in urban architecture and planning. Main Street and other cultural spectacles of the theme-park variety make fictions of the past and the future. "As this quote describes, the community aspect of baseball does not only exist inside the ballpark. In Japanese culture, this notion is most prevalently displayed by fans in attendance who play the drums and other instruments to the beat on the chanting. Comparably, in American baseball culture, while instruments may not be

present, a series of hand motions often accompany chants or songs that are traditionally belted at a baseball event. These chants are an example of the community that Benson discusses, because it reinforces the "small town" and "home" feeling.

Player experience is an entirely different "ball game" so to speak. When analyzing player experience, it was apparent that the Japanese baseball players have been conditioned to play professionally from a very young age. According to *"Human face structure correlates with professional baseball performance: insights from professional Japanese Baseball Players",* face structure is important in-home run performance, due to face height to width ratio. In order to produce homeruns with the most consistency in the Major League Baseball arena, the technique must be mastered and ritually practiced. This leads many parents to include their children in leagues where teams compete by age group. Because they do this, there is also an emphasis on playing the game on school sponsored teams as individuals the age of middle and high school. Of course, most Japanese high schoolers who play on the school team play with the intention of advancing to a higher level and pursing the game as a career. It is expected that teenage players, at the very least, attempt to play professionally, and with it comes the pressure to succeed as a result. I have found that the Japanese mentality of maintaining excellence does not stop when a player reaches the major stage. In some ways, it heightens because one almost has to prove that they are worthy of their position on the field. Instead of only their guardians aggressively "encouraging" them to pursue success in baseball, now the public gets to join in the conversation as well. In Japan, the audience is more critical than encouraging, and that aspect of the game impacts player performance and how they view their own ability in comparison to other players on the team. However, the United States does not have that same mentality in regard to player experience. Young children and teenage individuals play baseball, but their parents do not

encourage them to play specifically for the purpose of only to one day play baseball on a larger scale. According to *Prevalence and Consequences of Sport Specialization Among Little League Baseball Players,* players that have immersed themselves in the sport from a young age will typically continue to play on “advanced” teams as they get older (travel) that are necessarily school sponsored, but do not go on to play professionally, due to the competitive nature of professional baseball in the United States. It is a very niche profession, and very few individuals succeed to the point of playing professionally. But, because these individuals have played baseball for their entire lives, it is hard for them to transition out of what the author calls “sport specialization". Sport specialization refers to intense dedication to one’s sport, but it seems like American young adults simply stop pursing that passion that they have poured so much of their lives into because American pop culture has pushed the mentality, according to the article, that individuals must pursue tangible opportunities in order to make a living. The article argues that involving a young child in the game and allowing them to move toward move advanced avenues will establish a weakness in other sports, and a false sense of hope that they might one day be able to play on a large scale. There is no unwritten standard or overarching expectation imposed on young players that implies that they have no choice but to reach the highest level within the baseball hierarchy. If players are lucky enough to play in the Major Leagues, it is more of a celebratory event for the audience filled with pride rather than an event in which the audience can have a critical perspective towards players. Because of this, American players are more likely to focus on their own personal success overall, and even uplift other players to be the best verson of themselves.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that both Japanese and American players each have their own superstitions that is largely centered around culture. In Japan, many players engage in this

type of behavior that is believed to enhance overall performance. According to *Superstitious Behavior Among American and Japanese Professional Baseball Players*, authors Jerry Burger and Amy Lynn discuss that many of these rituals stem from fear of failure and not living up to the standard that those that have become before have set, even though these rituals have no direct connections to superstitious behavior. Japanese baseball players can often be found eating licorice before a game, or entering the playing field from the right, and simply completing these actions gives them a confidence that is highly correlated with positive game performance. The article states that because of this, the majority of Japanese Major League players participate in these on an individual basis because the cultural belief is that the success of team is hinged on how hard an individual works on his own craft. This behavior promotes a culture of individualism that ultimately defines all the players in the entire league. Then, this leads the audience to have a certain reaction as well. Likewise, American baseball players participate in superstitions as well, but they are not the exact same. According to *Superstition in the Collegiate Baseball Player*, author Tom Ciborowski states that practice swings, avoiding walking on foul lines, or wearing a "rally cap" "helped" in relation to better performance, but only when the entire team did them together. If one player did not participate, the individual was seen as disloyal or disrespectful to the team, according to the article. American culture is very team and group oriented, according to the article. While superstitions are accomplished, those behaviors alone are not what warrants success; it is the team working together towards a common goal that results in victory from the American baseball perspective. Fundamentally, both Japanese and American baseball cultures are alike in the sense that superstitions play a significant role in the making of a baseball game.

In conclusion, I have discovered that baseball in Japan and the United States are more similar than I originally anticipated. Though there are differences between the two, they seem to come out of elements of culture that are historically rooted, but the popular culture aspects of the sport are largely the same. Through this analysis, I learned that baseball in Japanese culture serves as not only entertainment, but as a medium that highlights the individual and his own respective accomplishments. However, the team was still a significant part, though second in priority to individualism. This has been so prominent that in recent years, nearly 20% of Japanese players come to the United States with the hope of playing professional baseball. We can compare this to the previous 6.5% within the ten-year span from 2000-2010, according to Kelly. Additionally, this ideology is present in both the player and fan experiences. American baseball, on the other hand, is much more team driven. The fan and player experiences work together mutually as a "unifier". American baseball serves as entertainment, but also a place to remember those who have gone before and those who will come after.

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