

Baseball: A Global Sport



by Todd Tuell

The Waseda University baseball team from Japan journeyed to the United States in 1916.

Have you ever heard the expression that something is as American as baseball? That may have been true at one time, but today baseball is a global sport. From many parts of Asia to countries throughout Latin America and the Caribbean, and even to a few footholds in Europe, baseball has long been beloved outside of our own country.

It is a common misconception that American servicemen introduced our national pastime throughout the world during and after the Second World War. In truth, the history of baseball in many countries dates almost as far back as it does here in the birthplace of the sport.

At the time of the U.S. Civil War, the rules of the game of baseball had recently been codified. Previously, different versions of the game were played in different regions of the country. As Americans all began playing the same game,

popularity exploded. During this same time period, the United States found itself having a far greater role in global affairs. The game was so popular, college students and professors, American businessmen, and the crewmen of naval and trading vessels took baseball with them around the world.

Japan is one country where baseball has flourished from its first introduction in 1873 by an American professor, Horace Wilson. In the late 1860s, after a long period of isolation, six Japanese ports were opened to Europeans and Americans. The government was moving the country to become more westernized politically and socially. This time period in Japan is called the Meiji (MAY-JEE) Restoration.

Wilson was hired by the government to help modernize the country's education system. While teaching English at a Tokyo university, he began to believe that athletics should be a

A crowd of spectators leaps to its feet in applause at a baseball game in Havana, Cuba.



Spalding began publishing baseball guides in 1889.

early as the 1860s, college students returning home from the United States brought the game to many islands in the Caribbean. In Cuba, baseball gained intense popularity as a form of resistance to their Spanish oppressors. Their rulers banned this new sport and demanded Cubans attend bullfights to honor Spanish tradition. The ban on baseball only increased the game's popularity. Baseball became a symbol of the independence and equality that the Cuban people sought.

The principle of equality remained a part of baseball's history in Cuba. Beginning in 1900, black players were allowed to play in the highest levels of baseball alongside white players. This occurred long before it happened in the United States with Jackie Robinson breaking the "color barrier" in 1947.

It is widely believed that invading U.S. Marines brought baseball to the Dominican

more significant part of education. He organized students and instructors into teams to play the first game of baseball in Japan. Baseball gained so much popularity that clubs were organized at other universities. The game quickly spread to Korea and other areas of Southeast Asia where Japan had close relationships.

From Mexico, Panama, and Venezuela to Cuba and the Dominican Republic, baseball has a long history in Latin America, too. As

Republic in 1916. Actually, the game goes back much further in this island nation, too. It was brought in the 1870s by Cubans who were fleeing the violence of the Ten Years War against their Spanish rulers.

With baseball's similarities to cricket and the United State's historical connections, it seems strange that Europe is one place that baseball has not experienced much popularity. One exception is Italy. In this instance it is true that interest in baseball did come with its introduction by American soldiers who taught the game to Italian youth following World War II. Italian baseball's growth was fueled during the decades following the war by the successes of Italian Americans, in particular Joe DiMaggio.

It wasn't just by "accident" that baseball has spread to so many places. A great deal of baseball's popularity around the world can be credited to men like Albert Goodwill Spalding. Spalding was a professional baseball player in America in the 1870s. He was one of the first players to use a glove to field baseballs. His contribution to baseball is more significant, however, as the founder of the A.G. Spalding sports equipment company. In 1888, Spalding began a world tour with a group of professional players. The purpose was not only to introduce the sport through exhibition games, but also to promote his company's baseballs, bats and gloves in these new markets. His world tour included New Zealand, Australia, Italy, France, and

Many Cuban players have left their country to join the Major Leagues. Yasiel Puig is a Cuban-born All-Star outfielder for the Los Angeles Dodgers.



When Ichiro Suzuki signed with the Seattle Mariners in 2001 it was big news in both the United States and Japan. He was the first Japanese-born position player to sign with a Major League team.



Yomiuri Giants first baseman Daisuke Nakai catches the throw as Rakuten Eagles' Casey McGehee (3) grounds into a double play in the second inning of Game 5 of baseball's Japan Series at Tokyo Dome on Oct. 31, 2013.

David "Big Papi" Ortiz of the Boston Red Sox is one of many current Major League stars from the Dominican Republic.

England. He even organized a game in Egypt at the base of the Great Pyramid at Giza.

Love for baseball starts in our youth. An increasing number of countries are sending teams to the Little League Baseball World Series. Each year, there are more kids around the world introduced to the sport and an increasing number who grow up to play at the highest level in Major League Baseball. Currently about 28 percent of Major League players are born outside of the United States.

Not only is there a long and rich history to this game throughout the world, with stars like Ichiro Suzuki and Big Papi, there are also more people tuning in to watch. It is impossible now to claim baseball as just our own. It belongs to the world.

Todd Tuell is a frequent contributor to FACES.



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The United States isn't the only country with a professional baseball league. Japan, Australia, Korea, and Cuba are among the many countries that have their own leagues. Japan's Nippon Professional Baseball league consists of 12 teams.