

The continued success and wild popularity of Asian baseball players in the United States has business people in the game focused on future stars from the Far East.

# The Rising Sons of



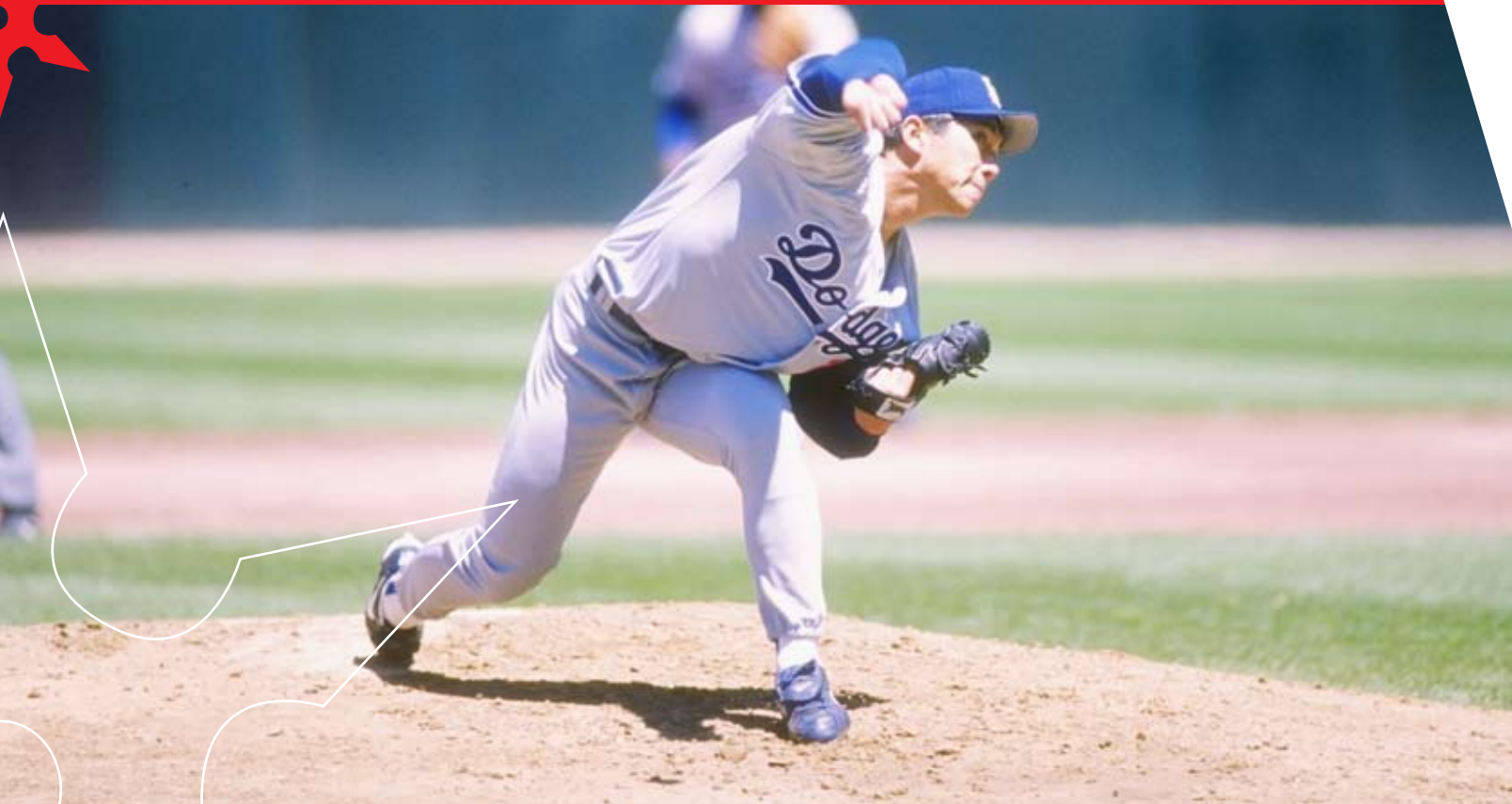
# Baseball

• By Matt Simpson

Boston Red Sox right-hander Daisuke Matsuzaka was one of the most sought-after free agents in recent memory, attracting a media throng with each public appearance.

PHOTOGRAPHY: JUNKO KIMURA/GETTY IMAGES

Hideo Nomo set the bar for Japanese players coming to the United States, achieving instant success and fame with the Los Angeles Dodgers.



**D**

iamondbacks president Derrick Hall is more businessman than baseball man, and like any 21st-century businessman worth his salt, he has one eye focused squarely on growth opportunities in Asia.

And why not?

Considering the splashes made by recent Asian imports like Boston Red Sox starting pitcher

Daisuke Matsuzaka and Chicago Cubs outfielder Kosuke Fukudome (not to mention the sustained excellence of Mariners outfielder Ichiro Suzuki), organizations failing to invest in the Pacific Rim are placing themselves at a competitive disadvantage — both on the field and on the balance sheet.

“When the baseball staff came to us and recommended we make an investment in international baseball, we naturally agreed to do so right away,” Hall said. “There’s a talent pool in Asia that

is becoming increasingly available and we need to upgrade our presence.”

In pursuit of that goal, the club hired Mack Hayashi, a long-time advisor to player agent Alan Nero, as Director of Pacific Rim Operations last fall and then aggressively pursued one of Japan’s top free agents, Hiroshima Carp ace Hiroki Kuroda, in the winter.

Seeking a second starter to fill a gap in the rotation behind Brandon Webb, the D-backs offered a three-year, \$32 million contract to the 32-year-old right-hander. Kuroda accepted a slightly more lucrative offer from the Dodgers, but the message had been sent.

The D-backs — an organization that has employed only a single Asian ballplayer in 10 years — intend to compete in the booming Asian market for ballplayers.

“That was a very strategic recruitment of Kuroda in that it really put us on the map in Japan for the first time,” Hall said. “The primary objective was to land the player and we came very close. Ideally we would have been able to sign the player. The secondary objective was to make it very clear in Japan that this was the direction we were heading in. And that objective was accomplished.”



## NOMO MANIA

Hall experienced the impact a Japanese ballplayer can have on an organization as a member of the Dodgers' front office in 1995. That was the year Nomo Mania struck southern California.

Hideo Nomo was one of the most popular and successful players in Japan throughout the early 1990s. But when the Kintetsu Buffaloes played hardball with him in a contract dispute, he took advantage of a little-known loophole in the strict agreement between the American and Japanese professional leagues to seek riches in the United States.

By announcing his retirement after the 1994 season, Nomo — nicknamed Tornado because of his unorthodox windup — was able to leave Japan and sign with the Dodgers.

No one knew what to expect when the 26-year-old right-hander with the nasty forkball made his Major League debut on May 2, 1995, in San Francisco. After all, it had been 30 years since Giants reliever Masanori Murakami played the second and final season by a Japanese player in the Majors in 1965.

It didn't take long for Nomo to impress. He yielded just one hit and four walks while striking out seven in five shutout innings that day against the Giants.

"We expected Nomo to be good," Hall said. "The way he dominated in a very short time in his first Major League game, our expectations shot through the roof."

Nomo Mania had been born.

Suddenly, the Dodgers were being covered on a daily basis by up to 200 Japanese media members. The photo wells around the field at Dodger Stadium were packed with upwards of 75 photographers a game, and the club had to schedule press conferences on the first day of every visit to a new ballpark.

Tour groups from Asia scheduled their California vacations based on where Nomo's next start fell in the rotation. And the first pitch of any game Nomo started was met with an explosion of camera flashes usually reserved for the World Series.

"The interest in Hideo Nomo was like nothing I had ever seen in baseball before," Hall said. "We were completely overwhelmed and under-prepared when he first came to the United States. He was a superstar. He was a rock star. He was a spectacle."

With his bewildering delivery, Nomo posted a 13-6 record and 2.54 ERA to win a spot on the National League All-Star team and earn the NL Rookie of the Year award. He struck out 236 in 191 1/3 innings to begin a streak of four consecutive seasons in which he struck out at least one man per inning.

Keisuke Kanno, a former ballplayer and now physical trainer with Fischer Sports Physical Therapy and Conditioning in east Phoenix, had a personal investment in Nomo's success.

Born and raised in Japan, Kanno arrived in the United States the same year as Nomo to study physical therapy at Duke University. He considered their fates intertwined as they pursued their dreams in America.

"He was my hero at the time," Kanno said. "But he had a lot of critics. Even some former players and coaches were saying he was going to get shelled and come back. We just didn't know at that time."

Even Kanno wasn't sold on Nomo's chances.

"I wasn't sure if he'd succeed. I was hoping to believe, trying to believe, that he would be good," he said. "We always thought Major League Baseball was such a high level. But one of us came here and competed with those American big leaguers. I think it encouraged us."

## CASHING IN

Kanno wasn't the only Japanese emboldened by Nomo.

Nomo's successful manipulation of the Japanese pro league's restrictive player movement system convinced others — including Hideki Irabu and Alfonso Soriano, a Dominican playing in Japan — to seek out loopholes.

As a result, the Japanese league was forced to modernize player relations by permitting free agency and adopting the posting system, which protects Japanese clubs from losing players to the Majors without being compensated. When a player is posted, Major League teams bid in a silent auction with the highest bidder winning exclusive negotiating rights with the player.

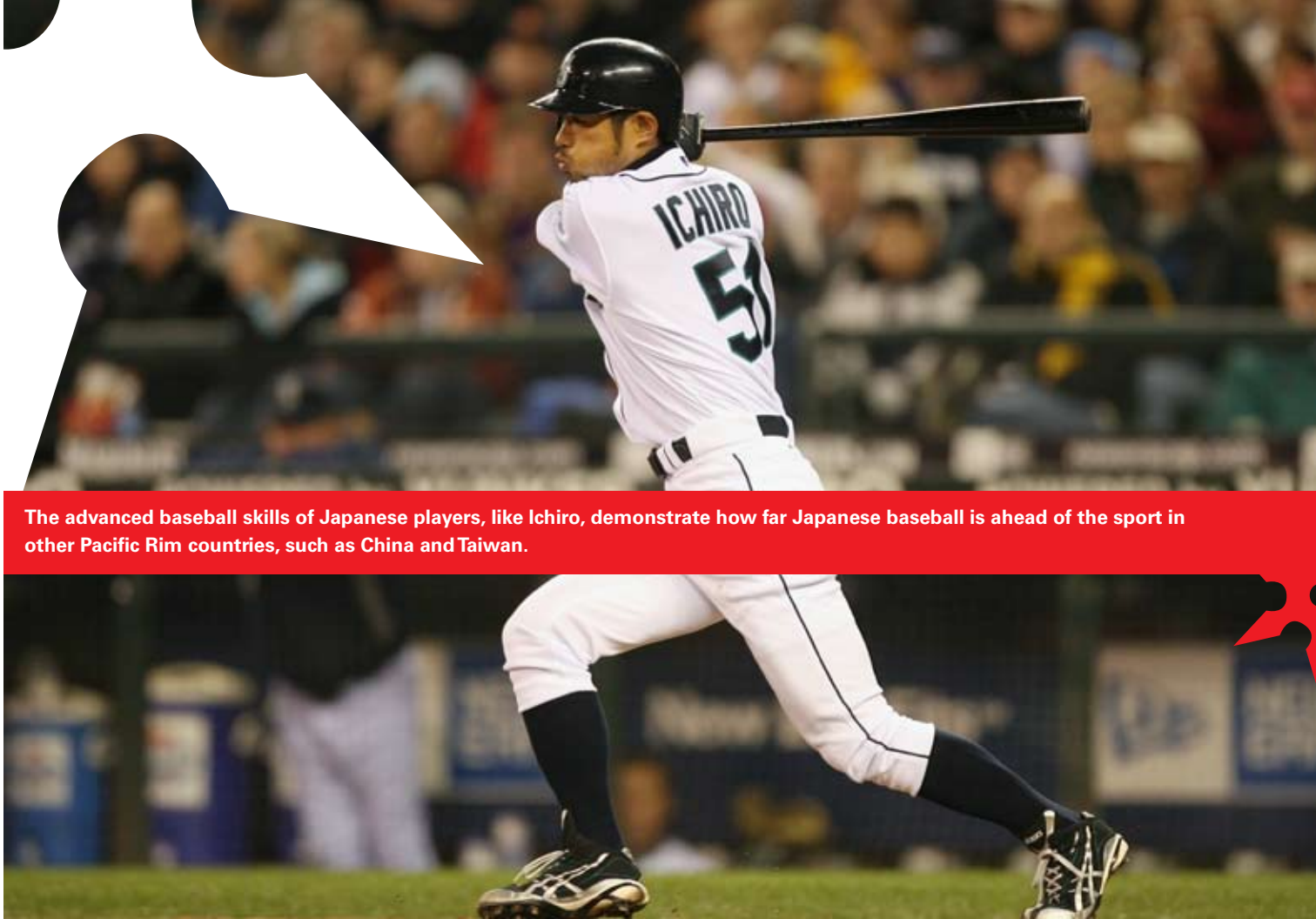
Free agency and the posting system have helped more than 30 Japanese players cash in on Major League contracts and suit up for Major League teams since Nomo's breakthrough.

The Dodgers helped Japanese pitchers join the Majors, and the Mariners broke the final signing taboos.

Ichiro became the first everyday position player from Japan when the Mariners gave him a three-year, \$14 million contract and gave the Orix BlueWave a posting fee of \$13 million in 2001. And Kenji Johjima proved English or Spanish proficiency was not a prerequisite to catching in the majors when the Mariners signed him to a three-year, \$16.5 million free agent contract in 2005.

The floodgates have really opened the last two seasons as 10 Japanese players have made their Major League debuts. There were 16 Japanese players on Opening Day rosters this season.

The list includes Matsuzaka, whom the Red Sox lured away from the Seibu Lions with a six-year, \$52 million contract and \$51 million posting fee in 2006. The contract was the biggest ever awarded to a foreign-born player with no Major League experience. (The Yankees signed Cuban defector Jose Contreras to a four-year, \$32 million deal in 2002.)



The advanced baseball skills of Japanese players, like Ichiro, demonstrate how far Japanese baseball is ahead of the sport in other Pacific Rim countries, such as China and Taiwan.

So why would a club risk so much cash on an athlete who's never proven himself beyond what's essentially a Triple-A league?

A look back at the D-backs' pursuit of Kuroda reveals the answer.

The D-backs had two options for filling the hole in their rotation behind Webb.

One was to sign Kuroda, a 32-year-old right-hander, and they offered \$32 million over three years to do so.

When the D-backs discovered Kuroda was on the verge of signing with their rivals, they turned to Option B and traded for 27-year-old right-hander Dan Haren, who is due just \$16.25 million over the next three years.

Easy decision, right?

Well, not necessarily.

Haren is cheaper, younger and proven at the Major League level. But he came with a hidden cost. To pry him out of Oakland, the D-backs had to trade away six promising minor leaguers, including top 50 prospects Brett Anderson and Carlos Gonzalez.

By signing Kuroda, the Dodgers filled the hole in their rotation while keeping their farm system intact.

The added bonus to signing a successful Japanese player is that it's not just the player who sees his wallet fatten. The team uncovers new revenue streams as well.

"There are revenue opportunities that go along with signing a talented and popular Japanese player," Hall said. "Your games are

televised in Japan, so there's a demand for signage in the stadium. Also, from a tourism standpoint, the player's fans will come and see your team and buy tickets and merchandise.

"With Nomo, merchandise sales went through the roof, and every one of his starts was broadcast back in Tokyo, which translated into commercial opportunities. Our sponsorship sales team was flooded with Japanese companies wanting a presence in Dodger Stadium. It was truly remarkable."

### **B.N.: BEFORE NOMO**

The history of baseball in Japan predates Nomo, as Wayne Grazyk can attest. Grazyk was an All-American New Jersey kid following the Brooklyn Dodgers and the New York Mets before the Air Force shipped him to Japan in 1969.

During his stay, he was surprised to discover that Japan had a professional baseball circuit. Even more surprising was that each team's roster included two Americans. (Teams can now carry up to four foreigners.)

"What really was cool was that there were American players I had seen in the Major Leagues playing for these teams. These guys were here in Japan when I was in the Air Force, and I thought they had long faded into oblivion," he said, recalling the names of former NL All-Star George Altman and Jim Marshall, now the D-backs' Senior Advisor for Pacific Rim Operations.

Taiwan's Chien-Ming Wang has quietly become the ace of the New York Yankees' staff over the past three seasons.

While stationed in Fukuoka, Grazyk fell in love with the country, married a Japanese woman and decided in 1972 that his future was in Asia.

The caliber of baseball wasn't bad; he recalls it being roughly equivalent to Double-A ball. But the caliber of those reporting on the game left something to be desired. One day he cut an article on the previous evening's ballgame out of the English-language Japan Times, corrected about 17 factual errors and returned it to the editor with a note reading, "I can do better."

He's worked in a variety of roles covering Japan's Nippon Professional Baseball ever since and seen the country's love of baseball result in the birth of many stars that never got a chance to test their mettle in the United States.

The list includes Yomiuri Giants teammates Shigeo Nagashima, known in Japan as Mr. Giant, and Sadaharu Oh, whose 868 career home runs still stand as the world professional record. With Nagashima and Oh manning the infield corners and powering the heart of the lineup, the Giants reeled off nine consecutive Nippon Professional Baseball championships from 1965 to 1973.

Marshall, who became the first Major Leaguer to play professionally in Japan when he was traded from the Pittsburgh Pirates to the Chunichi Dragons in 1963, believes both men had what it took to play in the big leagues.

"Nagashima was the golden boy, and Oh was the guy that put up the numbers," Marshall recalled. "Both were magnificent players. It was tough to match them statistically, especially being a foreigner who didn't get pitched to. Both had good plate coverage, and Nagashima had so much range. He could've played shortstop in addition to third base. Both could've hit a lot of home runs, especially in these parks that are built today."

## A DIFFERENT BALLGAME

The power of Nagashima and Oh was a rarity in the Japanese league.

The average Japanese man is considerably smaller than his American counterpart, and that difference translates into less power. (At 5-foot-11 and 175 pounds, Oh was large for his generation, partially because his father was Taiwanese.)

Kanno, who has worked with a diverse list of clients from Randy Johnson to Taiwanese pitcher Chien-Ming Wang, explained how the Japanese body affects the Japanese swing.

"In order to be competitive, Japanese players have to have better mechanics," Kanno said. "We don't have big bodies, so we have to generate power somewhere else. Americans can rely more on muscular strength to generate some power. Even our strongest players are not as strong as American players, so we have to rely on other things."

The physiology of the Japanese player has shaped the Japanese game.



By Matt Simpson

# Area of Operations

Twenty-five players from the Pacific Rim suited up on Opening Day — and none were wearing Sedona Red. Mack Hayashi, the D-backs' new Director of Pacific Rim Operations, is determined to change that.

## Japan (16)

Fukudome, Kosuke (CHI-NL)  
Fukumori, Kazuo (TEX)  
Iguchi, Tadahito (SD)  
Iwamura, Akinori (TB)  
Johjima, Kenji (SEA)  
Kobayashi, Masa (CLE)  
Kuroda, Hiroki (LA-NL)  
Matsui, Hideki (NYY)

Matsui, Kazuo (HOU)  
Matsuzaka, Daisuke (BOS)  
Okajima, Hideki (BOS)  
Saito, Takashi (LA-NL)  
Suzuki, Ichiro (SEA)  
Taguchi, So (PHI)  
Yabu, Keiichi (SF)  
Yabuta, Yasuhiko (KC)

## Australia (4)

Huber, Justin (SD)  
Moylan, Peter (ATL)

Rowland-Smith, Ryan (SEA)  
Thompson, Rich (LAA)

## Taiwan (3)

Hu, Chin-Lung (LA-NL)  
Kuo, Hong-Chih (LA-NL)

Wang, Chien-Ming (NYY)

## Korea (2)

Baek, Cha Seung (SEA)

Choo, Shin-soo (CLE)

\* Although he did not make the Opening Day roster, Chan Ho Park of Korea was added to the Los Angeles Dodgers' 25-man roster shortly after.



Japanese pro teams are much more likely to manufacture runs by taking walks, bunting and stealing bases than to play for the big inning. And pitchers rely more on deception (remember Nomo's whirlwind windup) than power.

Japanese professional teams deploy their handful of American players at the corner infield and outfield positions as glorified designated hitters. They almost never place an American in the middle of the infield or at catcher.

The reliance on sound fundamentals and the importance of discipline in Japanese culture create a rigid developmental environment that Japanese players carry throughout their careers.

Youth practices last for hours and involve running upwards of 10 miles a day. For the professionals, spring training begins Feb. 1 and the regular season is followed by a mandatory fall camp.

Whereas Major Leaguers first step onto the field at 4 p.m. for a 7 p.m. game, Japanese players are on the field stretching five hours before the first pitch. If it's raining at 3 p.m., the night's game is prone to be canceled because of the interruption of warm-ups.

"When you play baseball in Japan, you're not just playing sports," Kanno said. "You're learning discipline, respect, polite-

ness. That's what I notice when I treat Japanese players. They show a lot of respect and have great work ethic."

Ichiro personifies the Japanese work ethic, as D-backs skipper Bob Melvin discovered during two seasons managing the Mariners.

"He's successful because of his routine, and it's as much psychological as it is physical," Melvin said. "It starts at 1:30 or 2 in the afternoon and it's the same thing every day. He eats, breathes and sleeps baseball. When he goes home at night it's what he thinks about. The season is pretty consuming to him, but his preparation has a lot to do with the results he gets. It really is unsurpassed."

The inaugural World Baseball Classic in 2006 was the crowning achievement of the Japanese developmental system. With Oh managing and Ichiro and Matsuzaka leading the way on the field, Japan overcame several early losses to defeat rival Korea 6-0 in the semifinals and Cuba 10-6 in the championship.

But Hayashi, who split his childhood between the United States and Japan, believes the system's potency is best observed at lower levels.

A Japanese team has won the International Bracket at the Little



Hideki Okajima, left, was an unlikely All-Star in 2007 after signing for just \$2.5 million in the offseason, a small fraction of the cost of teammate Daisuke Matsuzaka.

League World Series seven times since 1998 and won the whole tournament six times since its inception following World War II.

Taiwan, which adopted the Japanese developmental system and even uses Japanese baseball terms due to the influence of Japanese coaches, has won the tournament 17 times.

"Physically, the American players are a lot better, but Japanese players are taught at a very young age that they have to commit to the fundamentals," Hayashi said. "That's why they win those Little League games by one or two runs. They lay down the bunts and they don't make mistakes."

## ASIA'S PASTIME

Baseball was introduced to Asia in the late 1800s, but World War II stalled the progress of the Asian game.

Horace Wilson, an American professor of English at Tokyo University, brought baseball with him to Japan in 1872. The country's first professional league formed in 1936 and the game's popularity exploded after World War II thanks in part to the use of professional teams like the Yomiuri Giants as part of the marketing efforts of their parent companies. (Yomiuri is a newspaper publisher.)

From Japan, baseball spread to Taiwan in 1895. The country's postwar success in youth competition led to the formation of the first professional league in 1989. Wang was one of three Taiwanese players on Opening Day rosters this season.

Korea was introduced to the game by missionary Philip L. Gillett in 1905 and began its first professional league in 1982. Pitchers Chan Ho Park and Byung-Hyun Kim are Korea's most famous exports, but neither was among the two Koreans on Opening Day rosters this season.

The game also found its way to China in the late 1800s, but the political climate has stunted its growth. Baseball was even banned in the 1960s as China's Cultural Revolution sought to stamp out western influence.

The ban effectively stymied development of the game.

"They are a long way from competing with Japan or Korea or even Taiwan," said Marshall, who scouts Chinese teams when they travel to Japan for exhibitions. "It's going to take quite a while to develop the kind of infrastructure it will take to make them successful."

Apathy from a country containing one-fifth of the planet's population — and one of the world's fastest growing economies — is unacceptable to businessmen like Hall.

Earlier this year, the Dodgers and Padres played a pair of exhibition games before sold-out crowds of over 12,000 at Beijing's Wukesong Baseball Field, which will host Olympic baseball competition this summer.

And to increase baseball's profile among China's youth, Major League Baseball International has invested in several programs, including the first ever China Baseball Academy for 12- to 15-year-



Above: Like Daisuke Matsuzaka before him, Kosuke Fukudome made worldwide headlines when he signed with the Chicago Cubs in December. Below: The Taiwanese Little League program has had sustained success, winning 17 championships in the last half century.



olds last August.

"Naturally we have to increase awareness and interest in baseball in their young children," said Hall, who lobbied to have the D-backs included in the exhibition games in China. "Our presence is necessary and I think it's realistic. I think we're just a step behind the NBA. We will catch up quickly, because the international department at MLB does a terrific job."

It will likely be years before a Chinese ballplayer appears in a Major League game.

The nation's first professional circuit, the six-team China Baseball League, didn't launch until 2002, and the Chinese national team was outscored 40-6 in losses to Japan, Korea and Taiwan (Chinese Taipei) in the World Baseball Classic.

Although a handful of Chinese players have had varying degrees of success in the U.S. minor leagues, Harry Kingman is believed to be the only Major Leaguer ever born in China. The son of American missionaries, Kingman appeared in four games for the New York Highlanders in 1914.

"It's a long ways off," Hayashi said. "It's going to be at least five or 10 years before we get a Major League player from China. I

By Matt Simpson



Sadaharu Oh, regarded by most as Japan's greatest player, managed the Japan squad that won the inaugural World Baseball Classic.

## The Best Ever

Many of Japan's best ballplayers never had the chance to test themselves against Major League competition.

**Sadaharu Oh, 1B** ... The son of a Taiwanese father and Japanese mother, he hit 868 home runs in 22 seasons with the Yomiuri Giants before winning over 1,000 games as manager and leading Japan to the championship of the inaugural World Baseball Classic.

**Ichiro Suzuki, OF** ... He of the single name won the 2001 American League MVP Award, proving a Japanese athlete could be an everyday contributor in the field. Ichiro has been an All-Star in each of his seven seasons and won batting titles in 2001 and 2004.

**Shigeo Nagashima, 3B** ... Known as much for his glove as his bat, Mr. Giant won five MVP awards, six batting titles and five RBI crowns while batting cleanup behind Oh. He also won five titles during two stints as the Giants' manager.

**Hideo Nomo, P** ... The 1995 National League Rookie of the Year opened the door for Japanese ballplayers to cross the Pacific. In 11 Major League seasons, Nomo has gone 123-109 with a 4.22 ERA and 8.7 strikeouts per nine innings pitched.

**Katsuya Nomura, C** ... Nomura amassed 2,901 hits, 657 home runs and 1,988 RBI in 3,017 games over 27 seasons – while playing catcher, no less – before going on to a successful career as a manager.

### And Two More to Consider

**Daisuke Matsuzaka, P** ... Boston Red Sox.

**Hideki Matsui, OF** ... New York Yankees.

think it's going to be a while."

### NEW KID ON THE BLOCK

In the meantime, it'll be Hayashi's job to troll the Japanese pro leagues seeking affordable talent.

The D-backs' new Director of Pacific Rim Operations spent the last eight years working as the Japanese representative of Nero, a player agent who has worked with some of baseball's biggest names.

The thought of working for a Major League team always appealed to Hayashi and in 2007 he got his chance. With Nero's help, he interviewed with over half-a-dozen clubs before choosing to join the D-backs in part because of the team's lack of history in Asia.

"We've never had a Japanese player," Hayashi said. "We had a Korean player, Byung-Hyun Kim, as everyone knows, but we haven't really done much else in the Pacific Rim. I thought this was the team that I could help the most."

The D-backs couldn't be happier to have won Hayashi's services.

"That was a big, big victory for us. There were a lot of teams in competition for his services," Hall said. "Mack's reputation and relationships and knowledge of the talent over there will certainly give us an advantage we never had in the past. In Asia and in Japan in particular, every deal starts and stops with relationships. Now we're establishing those relationships through Mack."

Hayashi's emergence as coveted baseball man would have been impossible to predict.

After raising him from the age of 6 in California, Hayashi's parents sent him back to the country of his birth as a high school sophomore so he could learn the Japanese language and culture.

He finished his high school education in Japan and then attended the prestigious Keio University, where he majored in urban planning. After five years working with a Japanese construction firm, he was ready to return to the United States.

That's when, in his words, luck intervened.

A friend of Hayashi's worked as Nero's interpreter and alerted him that Nero was looking for a full-time representative in Japan. Hayashi jumped at the opportunity.

Initially he served as a liaison between Nero and the Japanese clubs that employed between 10 and 15 of Nero's American clients per year. Eventually Hayashi was assigned to represent Japanese players, including Johjima and Rays second baseman Akinori Iwamura, seeking to make the jump to the Majors.

"I was just looking for a job," Hayashi recalled of his fortuitous career change. "I've always been a sports guru — football, basketball and baseball. I actually played football when I was in college. If I had known I would get this job, I probably would have played baseball."

Hayashi is not the D-backs' first Director of Pacific Rim Operations.

Marshall held the title for years under the club's former ownership group, but the job description was quite different. Whereas Hayashi's primary aim is to identify and sign ballplayers, Marshall's



The D-backs aggressively pursued Japanese pitcher Hiroki Kuroda prior to him signing with the Los Angeles Dodgers last winter.

mission leaned more towards public relations.

Just a few months into the job, Hayashi has already impressed Marshall and enlisted the D-backs' ambassador to Japan in his cause.

"My impression is he's very enthusiastic," Marshall said. "He wants me to help him learn a little more about the club's history in Japan and meet some of the people that I've been working with over the years. Hopefully I'm able to get him in some doors."

### A SENSE OF URGENCY

The high demand among Major League clubs for Hayashi's services can be attributed to the surprising 2007 seasons of relievers Takashi Saito of the Dodgers and Hideki Okajima of the Red Sox.

Saito spent 13 seasons with the Yokohama BayStars and failed to win more than six games in a season in his final three years in Japan. In 2006 at the age of 36, he signed a minor league contract with the Dodgers and over the next two seasons shocked everyone by saving 63 games and earning a spot on the 2007 National League All-Star team.

Okajima played 12 seasons for the Yomiuri Giants and Nippon Ham Fighters before joining the Red Sox in 2007 as a free agent for a mere \$2.5 million over two years. His signing was overshadowed by that of Matsuzaka, but it was Okajima who represented the team's Japanese rookies on the 2007 American League All-Star team.

"Everyone knew Ichiro and Matsuzaka," Hayashi said. "But Okajima and Saito, nobody knew them. It's my job to find players off the radar."

With both Okajima and Saito in San Francisco for the 2007 All-Star Game, the lesson was obvious.

Not every club has the resources to lavish cash on a front-line Japanese free agent or risk absorbing the double-whammy of investing a posting fee and contract in a player with no Major League experience. (The D-backs' attempt at Matsuzaka came up far shy of Boston's \$103 million package.)

But every club can afford to risk a minor league contract on a Saito or \$2.5 million on an Okajima.

"We're not going to be able to compete with Boston for Dice-K," Hall said. "But we can certainly find a great reliever or a back-of-the-rotation starter that not everyone is competing for. We'll have to convince them that we're genuinely interested in their success and genuinely interested in making them feel comfortable here in our environment."

The thought of picking up a No. 4 starter or a setup man from Japan may not inspire the imaginations of D-backs fans — at least no more so than adding a journeyman American player to the bottom of the 25-man roster.

But the ability to cost-effectively add a Major League-ready player from Japan — not to mention the memories of Nomo Mania — make the imagination of the businessman inside Hall run wild.

"I don't have a timetable for signing an Asian player other than as soon as possible," Hall said. "I know we're turning over every stone to find that hidden gem over there. When we sign a successful player from Japan or Korea or China and we go visit that country and see D-backs gear all over the streets, it'll be incredible."