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Samurai Baseball vs. Baseball in Japan—Revisited

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This is in response to Charles Hayford's piece, "Samurai Baseball vs. Baseball in Japan." In his interesting and well-written essay, Hayford calls *Bushido* the invention of twentieth-century Japanese Nitobe Inazo. He quotes William Kelly, who says that "Samurai Baseball" was "shaped by important elements of the nation in the early 20th century—education, industry, middle class life, the government, and above all the national project." And he also quotes Ruth Benedict, who called *Bushido* "a publicist's inspiration," But surely, he must be aware of the antecedents—the various forms of *budo*, as well as the seventeenth century version of *Bushido* as described by Yamaga—which were already there, be they invented tradition or otherwise.



Nippon Ham Fighters.

The famous First Higher School of Tokyo baseball team, founded in 1886, certainly drew from that martial past, when they incorporated elements of the martial arts into the training regime of their players. The Ichiko team motto became "Bloody Urine" and players were forbidden to say the word "ouch" in practice, because it was considered a sign of weakness. Their pitching ace's arm became bent from throwing so many curves balls after school that he took to hanging from branches in the cherry trees at the edge of the field to straighten out his arm. Twenty-six-year old team manager Kanae Chuman believed that this brutal approach to the game suited the Japanese character and was the reason that his team was able to defeat an American team from the Yokohama Athletic Club in the series of famous games that turned baseball into Japan's

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national sport. School authorities preached character and exhorted students to demonstrate the "true spirit of *Bushido*," while the students themselves cited the "samurai spirit" as a motivating factor. [i]

The team reached back into Japan's martial history for inspiration and made their mark on the public consciousness long before Nitobe came along to mythologize the samurai and long before "early twentieth-century elements" stepped into shape Japan's approach to sport. They did this, not because of some government policy, but simply because they wanted to win.

Their methods are still with us today. In fact, Ichiko's approach to the game set the pattern for amateur and professional baseball all the way into the 21st century. "Samurai Baseball" stayed in vogue because it workedã€€best, not because public policy- or opinion-makers or political leaders dictated it.

Ichiko was not exactly an exception. Yamaoka Tesshu looked into the past when he established his Shumpukan School of swordsmanship in 1880.ã€€There, beginning students went through 1,000 consecutive days of practice, an idea straight from Miyamoto Musashi's *Book of Five Rings*, and ended it with a final exam of 200 consecutive contests, all held within a 24-hour period. (The highest level examination consisted of 600 matches in three consecutive days.) This regimen was designed to achieve a state ofã€€"selflessness," which Tesshu defined as the "essence of *Bushido*." [ii]



Yamaoka Tesshu, founder of the Shumpukan School of swordsmanship.

Then there was Kano Jigoro's invention of *judo*, which came about because Kano, a small man, was tired of being bullied by bigger highã€€school classmates. He found someone to teach him the ancient art of *jujitsu*, a fighting method employed by the samurai class, that hadã€€fallen into some disrepute because of its use by delinquent gangs. Kano went quickly on to develop his new sport, but also incorporated the old martial arts idea that training should be an ordeal and that spiritual discipline should be emphasized as much as physical conditioning. Hisã€€training regimen featured camps held in mid-winter, with participants rising at 4:00 a.m. for barefoot runs in the snow. He also taught that virtue was as important as technique. His *Kodokan* , established in 1882, became nationally popular after his students emerged victorious inã€€matches with the Tokyo Metropolitan Police *jujitsu* squad. And all this occurred too before Nitobe and company came along. Again,

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itã€€happened, not because of any government program or popular samurai literature, but because Kano had had sought an effective way of fighting inã€€which a smaller man could defeat a larger opponent. [iii]



Kano Jigoro, inventor of *judo*.

In his article, Hayford cites Karl Friday, who criticizes the idea of explaining modern conduct by reference to historical samurai. Hanging the label of *bushido*, he quotes Friday as saying the "warrior ethic of medieval Japan involves some fairly overt historian's sleight of hand," and adds that "much of *bushido* was at odds with the apparent behavior norms of the actual warrior tradition." Well, while there are various interpretations of the theory and practice of the "Way of the Samurai" from the *Heike Monogatari* through *Five Rings*, *Bushido Shoshinshu*, *Bukyo Yoroku*, *Hagakure*, and the Nitobe tome, there is also common ground in terms of the intense focus on dedication, submergence of the self and commitment to spiritual strength.

Yamaga promoted the concept of sincerity in the pursuit of excellence and perfection (*makoto*) at all times and to "devoting oneself to dutyã€€above all." [iv] Yamamoto, the author of *Hagakure*, preached: "Aã€€man must become a fanatic to the extreme of being obsessed by death." [v] Daidoji taught that a peacetime samurai should "live in accordance withã€€the paths of loyalty and filial duty" and that his powers should be employed with full-scale energy and devotion or with the intensity of attitude and effort that would have been given to his efforts in the field to win a battle and save his lord's life. [vi] D. T. Suzuki wrote, quoting a master Tokugawa-era swordsman Odagiri Ichiun, "swordsmanship is after all not just the art of killing, it consists of disciplining oneself as a moral and spiritual and philosophical being." [vii]

Of course, there were contradictions in theory and practice, just as there areã€€contradictions in theory and practice of baseball in Japan, but the fundamental "samurai" system is still alive and well, as one would see on a trip to most training camps in late January or as a close inspection of the habits and deportment of Japanese Major League Baseball imports would reveal. (A visit to Kasumigaseki or Marunouchi late any evening will demonstrate similar truths and disabuse.) Japan's Olympic baseball team manager, Hoshino Senichi, one of the most popular people in Japan, recently declared on CNN that he has punched his younger players as part of their baseball education (March 4, "Talk Asia").

Do modern Japanese in 2007 spend a lot of time thinking about *Bushido*? Probably no—-unless they went to see Tom Cruise in *The Last Samurai*, which has spawned a whole new raft of books inã€€Japan about the way of the warrior. Their behavior indicates its influence is still there.

The activities of the Nippon Ham Fighters front office may provide an instructive object lesson

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in this regard. In 2003, they hired American Trey Hillman to revamp their losing franchise. But when his American style approach to managing the team did not produce the desired results, they demanded Hillman adopt a more traditional Japanese system. In response, Hillman instituted nine-hour days in spring training, dropped his pitch limits on starting pitchers and set a new team record for sacrifice bunts. In the process, he won the 2006 Japan Championship, earning praise for becoming the first American manager to make the transition from baseball to “yakyu” (field ball), the official name for the game in Japan.



Trey Hillman, manager of Nippon Ham Fighters, 2006 Japan League champions.

Some other observations:

—I wrote "The Samurai Way of Baseball and the National Character Debate" because I was invited to be the keynote speaker at the 2005 baseball conference at Michigan State University. I was told that the conference would be scheduled around me if need be and that Dr. William Kelly would also be invited. Given Kelly’s criticism of my work it seemed obvious what was expected of me. The subsequent paper I wrote was my first and only foray into academic publishing.

The only other time I’d ever addressed Kelly’s work was in 2004, with the publication of *The Meaning of Ichiro*, a full 10 years after he had begun discussing “The Whiting Problem.” My editor, Rick Wolff, at what was then Warner Books, was so disinterested that he would only allow the material to appear in the "Notes and Sources" section, because, as he put it, “nobody gives a damn.” In fact, *The Meaning of Ichiro* marked the first time I’d ever been allowed back of the book matter. Until then, editors in America and Japan had routinely refused my requests to include detailed notes and indexes, citing paper costs and lack of interest on the part of the reader, which was just fine with me, as long as my books sold.

Contrary to what Hayford implies, I’ve never felt the need for “props by American academics.” The people that I have always looked to for validation have been other journalists and editors, as well as, of course, my readers, the vast majority of whom do not live on college campuses.

—The idea of my book, *Chrysanthemum and the Bat* (*C&B*) grew out of a series of conversations I’d had with friends and coworkers in Tokyo about how Japanese culture revealed itself at the ballpark. It manifested itself later, in 1972 when I moved to Manhattan and started telling people about Japan. Baseball there was the subject that held their interest. And, as I indicated in my earlier article, the idea of writing a book was prompted in part by my general frustration at having had to wade through the dense work of Benedict, Reischauer, and others. Hayford’s observation that American scholars were already rejecting their style of scholarship is gratuitous, since my only point was that these books, like other most academic treatises and texts on Japan, lacked

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passion and real flesh and blood characters. What I wanted to do was write a book about contemporary Japan that had living and breathing people in it, not academic cutouts, a book that would communicate something about modern Japanese society to the general public and one that people would not want to put down after a few pages. I have nothing against academic modes. But, for me, there are more interesting ways to get at the truth.

- *C&B* was not a book about "unique Japaneseness." It was a work about the Japan I lived in from 1962 to 1972 and a code of social behavior that contrasted greatly to that in America, a code that was seen most clearly, in my opinion, through the game of baseball. That system needed a name and the samurai metaphor, if imperfect, seemed as appropriate as any other.
- *C&B* is not a historical work. Anybody who reads it for an analysis of sixteenth-century samurai is reading the wrong book. In its 250 pages, there are two paragraphs on *Bushido* and its use is symbolic. My knowledge of *Bushido* at the time had come from *The Book of Five Rings*, *Hagakure*, a couple of courses I'd taken on Japanese history, and Imai Tadashi's prize-winning 1964 film, *Bushido* about seven generations of a family that suffers at the hands of the samurai ethos. I had not even read Nitobe's work. There is a liberal dose of hyperbole in the "Samurai Code of Conduct for Baseball Players" (SCCBP) which was my own sometimes tongue-in-cheek interpretation of the unwritten rules existing at the time. It was not a point-for-point match of any of the samurai codes that appeared over the centuries, not Musashi's, not Yamaga's, not Daidoji's, not Yamamoto's, and certainly not Nitobe's. The fact that these historical codes were themselves "invented tradition" was, for my purposes, irrelevant to the SCCBP. I assumed that would be obvious. I find it ironic that I'm sitting here discussing it in this manner 30 years after the fact.
- *C&B* had nothing to do with Ruth Benedict's book. The title started out as a joke and went from there. The editors used it because it made them laugh and caught people's attention.
- *You Gotta Have Wa* was not just a book about the clash of two value systems and the difficulties Japanese and Americans had in getting along with each other. It was also about the clash of Japanese within their own system, as the profiles of Murata, Kinugasa, and Hara contrasted with Egawa, Ochiai, and Kiyohara—two sets of characters on opposing sides of the spectrum—revealed. The lessons these stories tell are self-evident. As Kelly might put it, they show us that the individuals discussed "are not like each other."

Some minor corrections: I have lived in Japan on and off since 1962, not since the early 70's . . . It was not *C&B* but *You Gotta Have Wa* that was chosen one of the hundred most interesting (not important) Japanese books of all time. The book was so selected not by a panel of academicians, but literary experts, writers and editors . . . *C&B* was, in fact, the first thing I had ever written. Contrary to what Hayford suggests, I have never tried to write professionally about the LDP or any other related subject. My only effort in that regard was a college thesis I wrote on political factions in Japan . . . I don't think there is much of an age difference between Kelly and me, much less a generational one . . . My use of "choice specimens of academic jargon," as Hayford put it, was purely intended as irony, as was the reference to Japanese big leaguers not wearing

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top knots or committing seppuku . . . I have no personal animus toward Kelly. He makes some very good points. However, I disagree with many of his observations, including those on the infield audience in Japan—which he says "by and large behaves like crowds at American ballparks," and his claim that the Yomiuri Giants' attempts to deny Randy Bass the home run record in 1985 were due to their desire to win the game. [viii] . . . Hayford implies that Kelly's standards of evidence (which he did not identify) are somehow superior to mine, but in these instances that is clearly not the case. To suggest that I'm dealing in stereotypes and not adequately sourced reporting is mistaken.

In the end, I feel we are speaking two different languages. When I use the term national character, I use it to help describe what I see, to make sense of a complex phenomena, and to point out a shared feeling or understanding of what things mean. To say that the samurai ideal has no value because of contradictions and lack of uniformity is like saying Christianity has no value because of its many different sects and churches.

Robert Whiting is the author of numerous books on contemporary Japanese culture, especially through the sport of baseball, including The Chrysanthemum and the Bat, You Gotta Have Wa, and The Meaning of Ichiro. See "The Samurai Way of Baseball and the National Character Debate."

He wrote this article for Japan Focus. Posted on May 29, 2008.

Charles Hayford's original article, Samurai Baseball vs. Baseball in Japan is here.

See also, Robert Whiting, The Samurai Way of Baseball and the National Character Debate.

See also William W. Kelly, Is Baseball a Global Sport? America's "National Pastime" as Global Field and International Sport.

Notes

[i] The Ichiko practice was routinely described in *Tobita Suishu Senshu*, *Yakyu Kisha Jidai*, *Besuboru Magajin*, a comprehensive collection of works by famed baseball manager and writer Tobita Suishu (1886–1967), published in 1960 (pps. 30–31). A summary of the Ichiko-YCAC games appears in the encyclopedic Koryoshi, (pp. 799–810), published by Dai-Ichi Koto Gakko Kishukuryo, September 10, 1930. Accounts of Ichiko stars appear in *Yakyu Nenpo*, published by Mimatsu Shoten Nai Yakyu Nenpo Henshu-bu, in 1912 (pps. 309–17) and *Undokai* 47, April 1912. Kanae Chuman came up with the term *yakyu* (field ball) for baseball, wrote the first book about it, entitled *Yakyu*, which was published by Maekawa Buneido Shuppan in 1897. He also helped develop the martial arts approach to *yakyu*, which he believed suited Japanese better than the American approach. The development of baseball as a martial art is described in *Kindai Puro Supotsu no Rekishi Shakaigaku*, by Kiku Koichi, published by Tokyo, Fumaido in 1993, (pps. 88–122). Retired school principal Kinoshita Hiroji exhorted Ichiko students to "demonstrate the true spirit of Japanese *Bushido*," as reported in the two-part piece "Yakyu-bun-nan Shiwa," by Saito Saburo, appearing in *Yomiuri Supotsu* 5, no. 8, July 1952 (pps. 71–73) and 6, no. 9, August 1952 (pps. 64–66). Former Ichiko players cited the samurai spirit as a motivating factor in: "Yakyu Bushi," an article appearing in a commemorative work published by the Alumni Association of the first Higher School of Tokyo, February 28, 1903, entitled "Yakyu Bushi Fukisoku Dai Ichi Koto Gakko Koyukai." The aforementioned Tobita frequently cited the Ichiko approach as the foundation for all Japanese baseball, the last instance of which was an extensive interview he did with NHK radio in August 1962.

[ii] Tesshu's philosophy is described in *The Way of the Sword*, by Winston L. King, Oxford

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University Press, New York, 1993 (pps. 238–43).

[iii] See: Kano Jigoro, *Kodokan. Also see: Nunoi Shobo; Kano Jigoro, Zansei Koga, Kaneko Shobo; The Father of Judo,* Brian N. Watson, Kodansha International; Kaneko Shobo. *Sekai No Denki*, Akira Kiribuchi, *Gyosei;* Kano Jigoro, Nihei Kato. Shoyo Shoin; *A History of the Kodokan*

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