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Sports & Recreation

Through a Diamond: 100 Years of Japanese American Baseball
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Since Horace Wilson, an American schoolteacher in the "land of the rising sun," introduced baseball to his students in 1872, Japanese have been mad for the game. The author, a writer, actor, filmmaker, and director of the Nisei Baseball Research Project, chronicles this fervor.

Like their European counterparts, Japanese immigrants came to America looking for a better way of life. They were also victims of racism and xenophobia, which prevented their full participation in American life. Unlike their fellow immigrants, however, Japanese émigrés did not dissuade their children from playing baseball. "Much like Negro Leagues for African-Americans and the women's professional leagues," Nakagawa writes, "…baseball provided a vital and vibrant way… to participate in America's pastime."

Nakagawa's narrative incorporates the game on all levels, and the scores of photos portray the progress of the game and the joy it brought to the Issei (first generation American-born Japanese), Nisei, Sansei and Yonsei (second, third and fourth generations).

The author tells the stories of professional players such as Masanori Murakami, the first Japanese national to reach the majors, as well as Ryan Kurosaki and Don Wakamatsu, the first Sansei and Yonsei, respectively, to reach baseball's highest level. He describes the men behind the scenes—the architects and ambassadors of the sport—such as Kenichi Zenimura, a player, coach, captain, manager, and organizer of amateur teams, who was considered the "father of Japanese American baseball." Another pioneer was Hawaiian-born Wally Yonamine, the first Nisei to play professional ball in Japan. Although not as famous as Jackie Robinson (the first black to play in the majors), he was met with similar racial taunts and death threats.

During World War II, thousands of Japanese were displaced to internment camps, where they continued to play. After the war, the sport offered them "a way to reconnect with their communities and regions." It was also a main component of rebuilding a war-ravaged Japan itself. American armed forces, led by General MacArthur, sponsored tours by American all-star

teams to boost morale, leading to a renewed interest in the game as well as a new-found alliance between the former enemy nations.

Through a Diamond was written before Ichiro Suzuki, Tsuyoshi Shinjo and other native-born Japanese became such hot commodities. Their exploits might call for a new edition in the near future.

Ron Kaplan