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Land of the Rising Sun and Sinking Fastball: Discovering the Japanese Baseball Experience

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Baseball is not my life.

It's safe to say, though, that the latter would be pretty dull if it weren't for America's national pastime. In fact, my life as I know it might not exist if not for baseball—one of my dad's favorite stories is about how he fell for this girl because she blew him away simply by knowing that Barry Bonds was the son of former Major Leaguer Bobby Bonds. The girl was my mom. (Actually, that's one of my favorite stories, too.)

I grew up in Naples, Florida, twenty minutes south of where the Red Sox spring train, forty minutes south of where Morneau, Mauer, and Mientkiewicz started their professional careers, and three hours east of the home of the Florida Marlins. I now live in Connecticut, between Yankeeeland and Red Sox Nation. I attend one of the country's best baseball schools, which also happens to be a Metro ride away from where the '05 NLCS champion Astros play.

The sport has burrowed its way into my system, and I have nothing but respect and undying love for US baseball. But I know, too, that there's a bigger world of bats and balls out there. The winner of the inaugural World Baseball Classic last year didn't even come from the Western Hemisphere. Japan overtook Cuba 10-6 in the final game to take home the title of global champion.

The tradition of baseball in Japan dates to the 1870s, making it not much younger than its American counterpart. The Japanese, then, have had plenty of time to put their own spin on the game. Within the United States alone, factors such as style of play, ballpark atmosphere, and fan behavior vary city by city. In a foreign country, one could expect these differences to be significant as well, simply as a result of the sport being played in the context of a different culture. I am interested in seeing to what extent Japanese society has made its mark on a sport that is so often thought of as "American." Is there a seventh-inning stretch? Do fans heckle? What kind of food is served at the ballparks? To say my curiosity has been piqued is an understatement.

I propose, then, a stadium tour of Japan's ballparks. Armed with a camera, I'll try to

capture the essence of Japanese baseball through a photo essay. Ideally, I would like to see a game played at the home park of each of Japan's 12 major league teams. However, I expect airfare to be costly, and therefore would probably limit my tour to five stadiums in particular:

- Koshien Stadium- the oldest ballpark in Japan
- Tokyo Dome- home of the Yomiuri Giants, arguably the most popular Nippon Professional Baseball team
- Sapporo Dome- the northernmost and most isolated stadium, located on the island of Hokkaido
- Chiba Marine Stadium- the home team, the Marines, are managed by an American (former Mets manager Bobby Valentine). I would be interested to see if the team's style of play has been affected by this.
- Osaka Dome- home of the Orix Buffaloes, former team of Seattle Mariners outfielder Ichiro Suzuki

Visiting this group of stadiums enables me to see two games played by a Central League team (at Koshien and the Tokyo Dome), and three by a Pacific League team.

I would leave for Tokyo in early May, shortly after finishing final exams. After arriving in the capital, transportation between the cities and stadiums would be via bus and high-speed trains. I do not plan to carry more than a backpack (and a camera case!) with me, because of the “touring” nature of the trip. I would stay in hostels or similarly-priced accommodations. Again, airfare will likely be the most expensive portion of the trip; I hope to use any funds that remain after purchasing game tickets and transportation fare to take advantage of other sightseeing opportunities in Japan.

Note: A few days after finishing this proposal, I received my annual baseball preseason issue of Sports Illustrated. The cover story (about the latest pitching acquisition of the

Red Sox, Japanese pitcher Daisuke Matsuzaka) delved a bit into some of the differences between American and Japanese baseball, and how players adapt to transitions between the two leagues. Discovering this article so soon after I had decided that I wanted to see these differences for myself seemed to be a coincidence that merited being included in the proposal itself. Needless to say, the story has only further fueled my interest in traveling abroad and exploring baseball on an international level.