

Whiting, Robert. *You Gotta Have Wa*.^{*} New York: MacMillan, 1989. Pp. xii, 339. Bibliography, illustrations. \$17.95. [*From the Japanese, *wa* means team spirit, unity, the team always comes first.]

My library had three books on Japanese baseball—a biography of Sadaharu Oh, an illustrated book called *The Zen of Base and Ball*, Whiting's earlier book, *The Chrysanthemum and the Bat*—and now this interesting, and quite significant book. Whiting has lived in Japan for many years, written books in Japanese, and covered sports for Japanese language newspapers. He now travels with his Japanese wife, who is employed by the United Nations. As an American, with more than half a lifetime in Japan, he is the best qualified person one could imagine to interpret Japanese baseball to an American audience.

This is a deceptive book. One idly picks it up, hoping to learn something more about the Japanese love of baseball, the Japanese major leagues, and their perception of baseball (the American national sport) by persons whose national sports included baseball, but also sumo wrestling. However, as one watches baseball in the languid summer, or begins to wile away the winter hours making large scale fantasy trades for the teams of one's choice, it is increasingly clear that baseball is like a Kabuki drama. The actors play out stereotypical roles, often holding wooden masks to indicate their character; the lines are known by the audience at least as well as the actors; plots are timeless, unchanging—baseball and the Kabuki take all viewers to another world, in which there are no new challenges, and the results are utterly predictable.

As I write, Bill Buckner is welcomed with an ovation at a Boston sports dinner, and the papers discuss his possible return. For, if truth were really known, Buckner's error, Bucky Dent's home run, Slaughter's dash and Terry Moore's catch of No. 9's last at bat in the seventh game, are all open field renditions of the Kabuki drama, offering much, but always taking it back even as the audience is aware that that eventually must always occur.

However, Whiting's excellent book is more than this. It is a discussion of how the game is taught and played in Japan. He provides excellent vignettes, mostly from actual interview, of what it is like to play in Japan as a North American. He describes coaching techniques, which rely on mind-numbing repetition of movements, absolute slavish obedience, and a frame-work in which losing can not be tolerated except as living proof of physical and mental failure. He is especially good when dealing with the most famous Japanese professional

teams, Tokyo Yamiuri Giants and their great slugging first baseman, Sadaharu Oh.

The most important chapter in the book is called “The Schoolboys of Summer,” which discusses in detail the summer rites of *Koshien*, the single elimination high school tournament held annually since 1915 which epitomizes the tenacity, total commitment, religious frenzy, and theatrical aspects of Japanese baseball. Winning this tournament would be as if the smallest high school in Indiana after winning the state basketball championship, then moved to Iowa where they became their weight class wrestling champions, just prior to scoring 700 in their verbal S.A.T. examinations. High school baseball is part of the curriculum in Japan; its players and coaches represent values which used to be described as Bushido, and participation in this ritual on “the sacred dirt” of Koshien stadium is the acme of high school life. Close to a million persons attend the games in the summer, and half that at the spring invitational tournament. One Osaka school has been in the tournament 25 times, and has won it six times. Whiting gives us a good strong picture of this school, as well as the tournament.

The book has good material on the history of Japanese baseball, now over a hundred years old, much on American professional visitors (“mercenaries” as Leon Lee termed himself and his colleagues.) *Gaijen* (foreigners) have played in Japan for many years, but usually have detested the experiences (but not the money.) It is a marriage of convenience, but until the gaijen are prepared to be coached like the Japanese, endure physical attacks for errors or failures at bat, and live in what is truly a carp dwelling place, they will never become a true part of the Japanese game. However, it is worth mentioning that many of the great Japanese players have actually been Korean, or Formosan natives, but being Oriental is most important as well as being a good player.

For me, I want the lazy days of my own Kabuki theatre—where, at any time I can bring back Williams’ wonderful swing; Dom or Jimmy Piersall going to the triangle to take one away from Joe, Boo Ferriss blowing down the pinstripers, or even Dick Stuart catching a routine out at first. But, Japan is not the United States, and for them, forever, it would be the day that they won at Koshien. This is a lovely book, well illustrated, written from an insider’s point of view, but also with the love that this game demands.

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