

Sport and Community in California's Japanese American "Yamato Colony," 1930-1945*

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Hot windswept summers commonly blanketed southeastern Colorado. "There were nothing but sand dunes in the the whole area," recalled Yuk Yatsuya, who spent the war years in the region.¹ Indeed, the arid land held little personality. Miles of desolation served as a constant reminder of one's isolation. But, during the summer of 1943, the crack of a bat against a ball intruded the serenity of the barren land. Amidst the Colorado hinterlands, hundreds of people gathered around a makeshift diamond set inside a barbed wire enclosure as two teams prepared to do battle against one another. In the direction of center field, the fences and lookout posts, manned by machine guns, decorated the scenery beyond the outfield fences. The encampment at Amache, Colorado, was not a pleasant place to live, but it is where the Dodgers of Livingston, California, began play that year. They, like other Japanese Americans, were in the midst of their second year of confinement in one of ten internment camps strewn across the United States during World War II. Their freedom impaired, baseball and other recreational activities were major factors in maintaining community cohesion. Through sport, the Japanese American faction from Livingston, and others like it, nurtured cultural camaraderie, competitiveness, and pride. These activities, of course, were vital throughout their years of internment. But their importance and development, to be sure, preceded the evacuation period.

During the first decade of the twentieth century, several first generation Japanese families, Issei, came to Livingston, California, a farming community which lies in the center of California's rich agricultural San Joaquin Valley. Led by Kyutaro Abiko, a San Francisco newspaper publisher and businessman, in 1904, they formed an agricultural settlement known as the Yamato Colony.²

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1. Interview with Yuk Yatsuya, August 19, 1991, Cortez, CA.

2. Kesa Noda, *Yamato Colony: 1906-1960* (Livingston-Merced, CA: Livingston-Merced JAACL Chapter, 1981), pp. 1-7.

Like so many of their contemporaries from other countries, these agrarians came with high hopes and an eagerness to do well in the "land of opportunity." However, anti-Asian legislation, which included the 1907 Gentlemen's Agreement, created difficulties for the Issei in their quest to succeed. The 1913 Alien Land Act, for instance, which prohibited Japanese land ownership, "underlined their alienness and encouraged other kinds of discrimination and unpleasantness."³ Indeed, in California such organizations as the American Legion, Native Sons of the Golden West, and the California State Grange fueled xenophobic splinter groups such as the California Oriental Exclusion League and the Americanization League of San Joaquin Valley.⁴ By 1924, another barrier, the National Origins Act, not only curbed immigration from each country to two percent of its proportion of resident aliens based on the census of 1890, but also effectively barred the Issei from attaining citizenship. Prevented by law both from owning land and earning citizenship, many Issei farmers, it seemed, would have little recourse but to leave the United States. Nativists were clearly delighted at the prospect. James D. Phelan, a former senator, expressed the sentiments of many of his fellow Californians when he declared, "The Japs are routed."⁵

But the determined Japanese found loopholes in the law. Members of the Yamato Colony, for example, offset the impact of the Alien Land Act and, later, the National Origins Act, by forming farm co-ops, called *Nogyo Kumiai*. Title to the co-ops was placed in the name of American-born offspring-Nisei-while the parents acted as guardians. In fact, long before the Alien Land Act became law, Kyutaro Abiko and his business contacts had purchased ample plots for the colony. Despite the blatant hostility, Abiko's labor contracting firm, the *Nichibei Kungyosha*, confidently promoted the project in their homeland: "We believe that the colony will become a paradise-a place of welcome for those wishing to move to the United States." Wives, children and "picture brides," many who began their long trek from Japan to the colony since the period of the Gentlemen's Agreement, to be sure, also were vital to the community. "Wives and children," according to Yamato chronicler Kesa Noda, "would give the settlement an assurance of stability and continuity that could not be achieved by the mere ownership of land. Each marriage was seen as a triumph for the man and the community-a building block toward the future."⁶

As the Japanese American community developed, so, too, did organizations

3. Roger Daniels, *Asian America: Chinese and Japanese in the United States since 1850* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1988) p. 143.

4. Valerie Jean Matsumoto, "The Cortez Colony: Family, Farm and Community among Japanese Americans, 1919-1982" (Ph.D. diss., Stanford University, 1986), pp. 22-23.

5. Daniels, *Asian America*, p. 1.51.

6. Noda, *Yamato Colony*, p. 53; It should be noted that while provisions of the 1907 Gentlemen's Agreement curtailed Japanese laborers from entering the continental United States, no provisions barred parents, wives, and children from joining their respective husbands already in America. Furthermore, a bachelor who could show proof to a Japanese consulate in California that he could support a wife-"picture brides" whom many laborers married through a proxy-was granted permission to bring her to the United States, much to the dismay of America nativists.

such as the Japanese Association of America which, founded in 1909, was designed to promote the general welfare of its constituents. At the local level, Buddhist and Christian church assemblies such as the Seinenkai or Young Men's Group, together with the Educational Society known as the Gakuen, and the Kendo Club (the Japanese art of bamboo-stave fighting) sponsored many activities such as talent shows, picnics, and concerts.⁷ Such communal events as these, provided "emotional support," claimed historian Valerie Matsumoto. Furthermore, they served to maintain "as much as they could of the Issei's cultural heritage."⁸

Sport, of course, was also directly tied to highly valued samurai principles: courage and honor. "Stern visage, resoluteness in action [and] physical toughness," claimed writer John Whitney Hall, ". . . were the qualities most admired by the samurai class."⁹ More importantly, the warrior "remained true to his calling and his sense of cultural identity as a Japanese."¹⁰ This approach was not uncommon among many old line immigrants who, according to historian Steven A. Riess in *City Games*, believed that "the maintenance of historic old-world sporting organizations or the creation of new ones which emphasized the ancient and honorable games" was of great importance. ¹¹ Issei in the Yamato Colony followed a similar pattern: the adoption of sport as a means to acculturate at no expense to cultural heritage.

One Issei, Koko Kaji, spearheaded competitive sports, particularly baseball, in the Yamato Colony. Baseball, of course, was not unfamiliar to many of the Japanese migrants. Indeed, America's national pastime planted its seeds in Japan during the late nineteenth century. Robert Whiting, in his book *The Chrysanthemum and the Bat: Baseball Samurai Style*, credits Horace Wilson, an American professor in Japan, for having introduced baseball to that country in 1893. The game, Whiting claimed, was initially "played by kimono-clad youths in sandals. . . ."¹² However, Donald Roden, in his article "Baseball and the Quest for National Dignity in Meiji Japan," argues that, in 1883, Wilson's colleague, F. W. Strange, in his quest to introduce Western sport to the Japanese, included baseball in his own special handbook entitled *Outdoor Games*. In either case, it is unclear if Kaji's adoption of baseball came from his native country or the United States. What is clear is that by the middle 1920s, "Smiling" Koko Kaji formed and managed the Livingston Peppers baseball team which received attention in the town's local newspaper, the *Livingston Chronicle*.¹³

7. Ibid., p. 75.

8. Matsumoto, "The Cortez Colony," p. 51.

9. John Whitney Hall, "Tokugawa Japan: 1800- 1853," in James B. Crowley, ed. *Modern East Asia: Essays in Interpretation* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1970), p. 74.

10. John Whitney Hall, *Japan: From Prehistory to Modern Times* (New York: Delta Books, 1970), p. 219.

11. Steven A. Riess, *City Games: The Evolution of American Urban Society and the Rise of Sports* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1989), p. 94.

12. Robert Whiting, *The Chrysanthemum and the Bat: Baseball Samurai Style* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1977), p. 3. See also Donald Roden, "Baseball and the Quest for National Dignity in Meiji Japan," *American Historical Review* 85 (June 1980): 511- 34.

13. Noda, Yamato Colony, p. 87.

Many Nisei inherited their love for baseball from their elders. As the Yamato Colony grew, second generation Americans of Japanese ancestry continued Kaji's legacy by forming community-based teams. By the middle 1930s, many of Kaji's "Peppers" were past thirty and the club dissolved. However, as young adults, Nisei athletes in the Yamato Colony organized another community team, the Livingston Dodgers. "By the time we got out of high school we developed our own sports activities," recalled Fred Kishi, a local sports star in the region.¹⁴ Indeed, throughout the San Joaquin Valley Nisei athletes formed amateur adult teams and eventually established baseball leagues. From 1934 to 1941, the Central Valley Japanese League consisted of eight teams. Sponsorship of most clubs came from churches and local merchants.¹⁵ "We played against Walnut Grove, Lodi," remembered Kishi. "These were all Nisei leagues and we played for probably about three or four years actively in this league. Most of the Nisei players developed their expertise playing in [these] leagues."¹⁶ So great was their love of sport that team members often assisted their mates on the farms to make time for baseball. "Every weekend we had the Livingston Dodgers," said pitcher Gilbert Tanji, "so every Sunday when I had a hard time getting away all the boys used to come and help me with certain work so I could take off Sunday early."¹⁷ Fred Kishi emphasized that a special chemistry brought the team together. "The players on this team knew each other practically from the day we were born; we went to church together, we played on Saturdays together, and we went to high school together, so it just fell into place," he pointed out. Coach Masao Hoshino, an Issei, stressed unity both on and off the field. Kishi remembered that Hoshino "had good psychological methods of getting us together. He made us go to Sunday school before we went to any games, so it was a very close-knit group that we had."¹⁸ Former player, Robert Ohki added, "the manager always used to say, you guys got to go to church or we're not going to play on Sunday." ¹⁹

By the middle 1930s, sport activities throughout the Yamato Colony had expanded beyond baseball. While the Dodgers competed in an all-Valley League on Sundays, a number of Japanese American softball clubs formed throughout Central California and participated during weekday evenings. The participants on the softball diamonds ranged from high school age to elderly Issei players. At times, they also competed against Caucasian teams from Livingston. During the winter, basketball replaced baseball as the area's most popular sport; both male and female teams were in abundance.²⁰

Rivalries, of course, emerged to liven the competition. Among the most intense was the baseball competition between Livingston and nearby Cortez. Like its counterpart in Livingston, the Cortez Young People's Club (CYPC),

14. Interview with Fred Kishi, May 18, 1991, Livingston, California.

15. Mack Yamaguchi Scrapbook, Pasadena, CA.

16. Kishi interview.

17. Interview with Gilbert Tanji, July 24, 1991, Cressey, California.

18. Kishi interview.

19. Interview with Robert Ohki, July 25, 1991, Livingston, California.

20. Kesa Noda, *Yamato Colony* p. 123.

was sponsored by a branch of the Gakuen. The CYPC sponsored cultural events, but by the late 1930s its primary interest turned to sports.²¹ Baseball was so popular that the Cortez players proudly carved out their own baseball diamond amidst the vegetable fields. "We had a great big ballpark," Yuk Yatsuya, former pitcher for the Cortez Wildcats, proudly claimed. "We were the only ones that had our own ballpark."²² Yatsuya was a standout pitcher, who, in one 1939 contest, came within one hit of pitching a perfect game against Lodi.²³ Like the Livingston team, Cortez players also designed their work schedules so as to provide ample time for baseball. "We used to pick berries in the morning, then run to the game, and then we'd come back and finish the work," remembered Yatsuya.²⁴ Yatsuya's teammate, Yeichi Sakaguchi asserted, "We were obligated to the team . . . so we tried like heck to make [the games]."²⁵ The Cortez team, in fact, was unique because its coach, Hilmar Blaine, was a Caucasian, a Shell Oil Company distributor, who delivered gas to farmers in the Yamato Colony. Blaine was a baseball advocate and "helped us get started and then he helped us get uniforms," remembered Yatsuya.²⁶

The fact that Cortez and Livingston were neighboring communities intensified the rivalry between many of the players who attended the same schools. "We didn't care who we won from [sic], just so we won from Cortez. We went to school with the Cortez boys and beat them, maybe seventy or eighty percent of the time," claimed Gilbert Tanji.²⁷ Yuk Yatsuya's competitive spirit still burned brightly a half century later as he reflected on the domination of the Livingston club. The Dodgers were able to "practice more than we did," he claimed. "They [also] had a lot more material to pick from."²⁸ Indeed, between 1939 and 1941, the Livingston Dodgers compiled an impressive record of thirty-four wins and four losses.²⁹

Community sport, of course, was not uncommon within America's ethnic enclaves. In Pittsburgh's black community between 1920 and 1940, for instance, athletics, according to writer Rob Ruck in *Sandlot Seasons: Sport in Black Pittsburgh*, offered residents there "a cultural counterpoint to its collective lot, one that promoted internal cohesion. . . ." In addition, Ruck claimed that, through sports, black residents there gained "a sense of [themselves] as part of a national black community."³⁰ Baseball, in particular, offered millions of foreign-born citizens the opportunity to "Americanize" their communities. According to historian Harold Seymour in *Baseball: The People's Game*, "One way children of foreign birth or parentage could fit into the new culture was to

21. Matsumoto, "The Cortez Colony," p. 85. In addition to the Cortez "Wildcats" baseball team, the CYPC also supported a girls' basketball team known as the "Cherry Blossoms."

22. Yatsuya interview.

23. Yuk Yatsuya Scrapbook, Turlock, CA.

24. Yatsuya interview.

25. Interview with Yeichi Sakaguchi, August 19, 1991, Cortez, California.

26. Yatsuya interview.

27. Tanji interview.

28. Yatsuya interview.

29. Yamaguchi Scrapbook.

30. Rob Ruck, *Sandlot Seasons: Sport in Black Pittsburgh* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1987), p. 14.

take part in baseball, and early on, many of them perceived in it their badge as Americans."³¹ Rudimentary teams, some formed from street gangs, appeared in the German and Italian neighborhoods of the eastern seaboard. Seymour also pointed out that in Chicago's Slavic community, in 1927 "the American Bohemian Alliance there was sponsoring a fifteen-team [baseball] league of nine senior and eight junior teams, furnishing their equipment, and charging an admission fee to the games."³² Mexican American teams in the southwest also utilized baseball as a means of fomenting and cementing family ties and tradition. There, mariachi bands and Mexican cuisine provided entertainment and refreshment in the stands.³³ The Negro leagues were, of course, the most obvious example of ethnic-based teams. They, too, utilized baseball as a means to enter the mainstream. Author Donn Rogosin aptly pointed out, in *Invisible Men: Life in Baseball's Negro Leagues*, that the "black players realized an essential goal of black culture, namely, to prove that blacks and whites were equal, and they proved it in a way that common people understood."³⁴ Racial discrimination notwithstanding, however, many generations of blacks had adopted and contributed to American culture. Newly arrived aliens, on the other hand, needed to acculturate.

Whether the Nisei used sport as a means to enter the American mainstream, however, remains open to interpretation. Like other ethnics, their ambition and drive stemmed in part from the need for acceptance. Academics, for instance, was an area in which they excelled. Noting that Japanese parents often drove their children to maintain high standards, Robert Wilson and Bill Hosokawa observed in *East to America* that "[the Nisei] seemed to sense that in a competitive society in which they operated at a disadvantage, they would need to be superior to compete even equally."³⁵ Sociologist Harry Kitano also saw sport as another means of adaptation to American culture. "The basketball teams served as vehicles for acculturation," he argued. ". . . the Nisei were free to develop in the American pattern. The play, the rules, the goals and values, were all American; only the players were Japanese."³⁶ The teams, leagues, and all of the athletic activities, however, consisted almost exclusively of Nisei. In California's Central Valley, Nisei cultural interaction outside their respective communities was limited. With respect to sport, Nisei competitors were all but insulated from the "outside."

Nisei athletes, to be sure, often found inspiration from their fathers. "I can remember as a child going to church and watching some of the Issei play

31. Harold Seymour, *Baseball: The People's Game*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 96.

32. Ibid., p. 97; Steven A. Riess points out in *City Games* that at the beginning of the twentieth century local politicians in Chicago's Irish community often prodded street gangs to become athletic clubs. Riess, *City Games*, pp. 95-96.

33. Samuel O. Regalado, "Baseball in the Barrios: The Scene in East Los Angeles since World War II," *Baseball History*, 1 (Summer 1986): 47-59.

34. Donn Rogosin, *Invisible Men: Life in Baseball's Negro Leagues* (New York: Atheneum Books, 1985) p. 35.

35. Robert Wilson and Bill Hosokawa, *East to America: A History of the Japanese in the United States*, (New York: William Morrow, 1980), p. 163.

36. Harry H. L. Kitano, *Japanese Americans: The Evolution of a Subculture*, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1969), p. 89.

tennis," claimed Fred Kishi. "In fact, they built the tennis court at our local church site." Kishi's introduction to baseball also came when he was probably eight or nine years old: "Two of my Issei neighbors got involved with a semi-pro baseball team. In fact, Mr. Kaji was their manager."³⁷ In these, and other ways, Issei parents sought to maintain control of their offspring. In fact, sports associations created throughout America by the Issei and other immigrants, "fostered athletic participation by the second generation . . . in hopes of maintaining an ethnic identity for the American-born and reared," claimed Steven Riess.³⁸ Most social activities, hence, revolved around the Japanese community and, often stemmed from the local Buddhist or Christian churches. At the same time, however, it remained imperative that the Nisei acculturate in order to compete in the larger societal framework. "[The Issei] knew [that] their children must absorb the American culture, must be Americans, to make their way in the land of their birth," claimed Hosokawa in *Nisei: The Quiet Americans*. "But they were disturbed that the Nisei were ignoring, and in some cases rejecting, their Japanese heritage."³⁹ Through baseball and basketball, however, Japanese and American culture was bridged with seemingly no threat to traditional values.

While teams competed throughout the decade, changes occurred within the Japanese American community. By the dawn of World War II, a generation gap between the Nisei and their elders came of age. The Issei, for instance, identified in most aspects with Japan. They incorporated old folkways into their churches, press, and civic groups. Moreover, Japanese remained their primary language. "They remembered . . . the Japan of their youth," claimed Roger Daniels. Moreover, because of the rigid anti-Oriental laws of earlier periods "the Issei were probably better insulated against Americanization than were contemporary immigrant groups from Europe."⁴⁰ The Nisei, on the other hand, "had," according to historian John Modell, "inherited from [their] parents a remarkable desire to succeed in the face of hardship, but had also learned the American definition of success, [whereby the] standard . . . made by his parents could not be considered satisfactory."⁴¹ The creation of the Japanese American Citizen's League (JACL) in 1930 best exemplified this generation gap. Among its mandates, this Nisei organization barred Issei from membership and sought to minimize the cultural ties with Japan. Therefore, given the growing polarization, recreational events helped to bridge some gaps.

By the late 1930s, many Issei were too old to participate in athletic activities. Recreational leagues and elaborate sport programs were dominated by male and female Nisei. Basketball, kendo, sumo wrestling and volleyball drew great

37. Kishi interview.

38. Riess, *City Games*, p. 94.

39. Bill Hosokawa, *Nisei: The Quiet Americans* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1969), p. 158.

40. Roger Daniels *Concentration Camps: North America Japanese in the United States and Canada during World War II* (Malabar, FL: Robert E. Krieger Publishing, 1981), p. 22.

41. Modell's quote stems from his paper "Class or Ethnic Solidarity: The Japanese American Company Union," read at the Pacific Coast Branch Meeting, American Historical Association, August 1968 and cited in Daniels, *Concentration Camps*, p. 22.

attention. The Issei, for their part, most of whom might have otherwise disagreed with Nisei goals, encouraged their children's athletic endeavors because of their own interest in sports. By the end of the decade many, it appeared, recognized and appreciated the competitive spirit as part of their own heritage. In December of 1941, however, both generational conflict and all athletic activities came to an abrupt halt.

Japan's surprise attack on the American naval base at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, plunged the United States into World War II. It also provided powerful ammunition for West Coast nativists who, for several decades, had warned of a perceived "yellow peril." Even before the "day of infamy," some Japanese had already predicted their fate. "Our properties would be confiscated and most likely [we would] be herded into prison camps," predicted one Nisei student attending the University of California at Berkeley as relations between Japan and the United States soured.⁴² In the weeks following the attack, government agents saturated Japanese neighborhoods in search of evidence that suggested sabotage. Major newspaper columnists fueled the hysteria when many claimed that a "fifth-column"-espionage activity-operated in their region. Chief among the paranoid was General John L. Dewitt, who headed the west coast command forces at the San Francisco presidio where ". . . confusion rather than calm reigned," for, claimed historian Roger Daniels, "the confusion was greatest at the very top."⁴³ In February 1942, partly in an effort to pacify western xenophobes, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed into action Executive Order 9066, which gave Dewitt the power to evacuate all suspected "enemy aliens" and other perceived threats to national security from areas deemed "militarily sensitive"-i.e., the entire West Coast. The president's order led to the eventual internment of Japanese Americans throughout the Western states. During the spring of 1942, hundreds of Issei and Nisei families were ordered to regional assembly "holding" centers to await further relocation. By the middle of the year, over 110,000 people of Japanese ancestry entered one of ten internment camps in some of the most desolate regions in America.

Prior to the announcement of Executive Order 9066, Nisei farmers working in Stanislaus and Merced counties were understandably uncomfortable. "We were ready for the worst, but hoped that there would be no evacuation," recalled Robert Ohki. "[Then] all of a sudden they put out the order. They never warned anybody. We didn't know how long we were going to be gone."⁴⁴ From December 1941 to February 1942, Livingston farmers utilized the local chapter of the JAACL to act as mediators with the local authorities. In nearby Cortez, Nisei residents found similar circumstances. In fact, social gatherings were strongly discouraged by Caucasian officials. "We didn't know what the future was going to hold for us," said Yeichi Sakaguchi.⁴⁵ During this "interim" period, fear and harassment of Japanese Americans grew. Governor Culbert L.

42. Daniels, *Concentration Camps*, p. 26

43. *Ibid.*, p. 38.

44. Ohki interview.

45. Sakaguchi interview.

Olson of California, for example, contributed to the uneasiness with a radio broadcast which claimed, among other things, that a "fifth-column operated in his state."⁴⁶ Local papers, like the Modesto Bee, described the arrest of Japanese American residents for traveling from Stockton to Merced without a permit.⁴⁷ One article reported vigilante-type raids on Issei farmers in nearby counties, while others described the confiscation of radios from various Japanese homes.⁴⁸ Though the Bee cautioned its readers not to overreact, incidents aimed at Japanese residents continued during the first few months of 1942.⁴⁹ Further south, the Merced Sun-Star ominously tallied the number of "enemy aliens" that resided in that county as if to warn its readers of a possible threat.⁵⁰ Japanese Issei, in particular, attempted to curb the sweeping fear by writing letters to the local papers. One such response came from the president of the Cortez Grower's Association, who claimed, "I own land in America, and I never expect to return to Japan. My children have been educated here and I want them to be good Americans. The association pledges its fullest cooperation with the United States in this emergency."⁵¹

By the middle of the spring, Japanese American communities throughout the San Joaquin Valley received relocation orders. In May, those in the Stanislaus and Merced counties left their beloved Yamato Colony and took up residence at the nearby and hastily built assembly center at the Merced County fairgrounds. "As they entered Merced Assembly Center," stated Yamato chronicler Kesa Noda, "the Japanese began a life that held an odd mixture of restrictions, humiliations, and freedom. . . ." ⁵² In a show of dignity, sports writer Mack Yamaguchi wrote, "We will go without hate or fear, thankful for your unceasing love and understanding. . . ." ⁵³ In a more poignant farewell, Fusaye Obata, in a poem entitled "We Shall Meet Again," penned: ⁵⁴

Some inland points to settle may roam
As leave they must their coastal home
The rest of us in turn will enter
The barracks at some reception center.

Assembly Centers, sixteen in all, were mostly located along the West Coast.

46. Modesto Bee, February 5, 1942.

47. Ibid., January 7, 1942.

48. Ibid., February 10, 1942.

49. Ibid., January 8, 1942.

50. Merced Sun-Star, December 26, 1941, and February 3, 1942. The "enemy aliens" counted by the *Sun-Star* were, of course, the Issei in that region. The issue concerning the evacuation of aliens who had migrated from Axis-led nations provided a clear picture of the racially-motivated arguments on the part of West Coast nativists. By mid-February 1942, a Congressional committee held hearings in Seattle, Washington, Portland, Oregon, San Francisco, and Los Angeles, California. During these hearings there was overwhelming resistance to a proposal by General Dewitt to also include German and Italian aliens in the evacuation process. One San Francisco lawyer, who focused on the potential plight of baseball great Joe DiMaggio's parents, told the Congressmen that "to evacuate [people like the DiMaggios] would . . . present a serious situation" and "would be destructive and have a tendency to lower morale (Daniels, *Concentration Camps*, p. 75). For more information on the eventual relocation of Italian Americans, see Stephen Fox, *The Unknown Internment: An Oral History of the Relocation of Italian Americans during World War II* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1990).

51. Turlock Daily-Journal, December 10, 1941.

52. Kesa Noda, Yamato Colony, p. 137.

53. Yamaguchi Scrapbook.

54. Ibid.

In addition to county fairgrounds, athletic stadiums and racetracks were used to house the Japanese Americans while more permanent internment facilities were under construction elsewhere. Once at the Assembly Centers, however, the evacuees immediately embarked upon improving the conditions there. In less than two weeks, not only did an assembly center newspaper appear, the *Mercedian*, but 'incarcerated' sport also commenced.

Internment, of course, was among America's darkest chapters. While some Nisei characterized their situation as a distinct sign of loyalty, under no circumstances did the evacuees believe their incarceration to be just. Sport helped them endure their trauma and contributed to their sense of dignity. Consequently, athletic activities were embraced in an upbeat tone. Indeed, through sport, the Nisei came together during a period when cohesion was vital. Traditional Japanese activities, such as Go and Shogi tournaments were soon organized. But it was baseball that took center stage.

Along with the Livingston Dodgers and Cortez Wildcats, many players from communities well beyond the Stanislaus-Merced areas, such as Sebastopol, Walnut Grove, and Petaluma, for example, all ended up in the Merced Assembly Center which eventually contained 4,453 residents. The organization of teams, therefore, proved to be no problem. "Once we got into camp, everything fell into place," remembered Fred Kishi.⁵⁵ "We had to get something going," added Yeichi Sakaguchi.⁵⁶ In fact, prior to their entry into the evacuation center, Masao Hoshina reminded his Livingston Dodgers to bring their uniforms and equipment with their other belongings. "We took our uniforms along with us and we played at the Merced County Fairgrounds which had a nice [baseball] stadium there," claimed Kishi. "I'm telling you the intensity of competition was very great and well organized."⁵⁷ In an attempt to temper the trauma of incarceration, Gilbert Tanji optimistically viewed the evacuation site as an opportunity to face greater challenges on the baseball diamond. "We'd win so many games [at Livingston] that pretty soon nobody came to watch us play," he recalled. "So when we got into camp there was more competition-it was more fun."⁵⁸ "They had [games] going everyday and we had a nice ballpark," said Yuk Yatsuya. The grandstand was an attraction to both players and fans, particularly the elderly Issei who enjoyed sitting in the shade. "They didn't care who was playing as long as they could watch the games," stated Yatsuya.⁵⁹ Games were constantly played at the fairgrounds and one player remembered the competition was so intense that "several times we almost came to blows."⁶⁰

Other sports also appeared at the Center. Sumo wrestling matches, described by the *Mercedian* as "a paradise for the girls' admiration," were part of the daily schedule.⁶¹ Girls' volleyball and softball leagues also formed. Finally, as early

55. Kishi interview.

56. Sakaguchi interview.

57. Ibid.

58. Tanji interview.

59. Yatsuya interview.

60. Kesa Noda, *Yamato Colony*, p. 140.

61. The *Mercedian*, June 19, 1942. The *Mercedian* is part of the Jim Tanji collection at the Holt-Atherton

as July, men and women's basketball leagues began play. Their facilities, however, left much to be desired. Both basketball and volleyball players competed on dirt courts, often playing in 100 degree heat. The recreational program at the Merced Assembly Center was paralleled by similar activities at other evacuation sites. At the Fresno, California site, for instance, the *Vignette* enthusiastically kept close watch on that center's six-team baseball league. The entire sports program, in fact, "[provided] the Center residents with maximum recreation facilities and entertainment . . ." ⁶² Farther north, journalists for the Stockton Assembly Center, *El Joaquin*, lauded its constituents for having "a well-rounded recreational program that was rated as one of the best of the wartime civil control administration's centers." ⁶³

At the Merced site, baseball captured much of the attention as ten clubs vied for assembly center "honors." In addition, most of the players participated in the various softball programs that took place daily. The Livingston Dodgers, for example, filled the rosters of both sports while those of the Cortez community mixed in with other "block" teams which lacked enough players. The baseball squads managed to complete up to thirteen contests before relocation preparations forced them to postpone their "season." In the fall of 1942, the Wartime Civil Control Administration (WCCA) received orders to prepare the evacuees to move to more permanent sites. Within a short time, the residents learned the whereabouts of their new "homes." The 1943 baseball season, for the Livingston players and others at the center, would commence in southeastern Colorado. As they prepared to depart eastward, one writer for the *Mercedian* summed up the recreational experience there. "Our good ship Merced' soon will anchor its three and a half month voyage with a chapter of progress in the realm of sports unsurpassed," wrote Kaneni Ono. "During this short time, the enthusiasm and accomplishments rendered by the athletic supervisors have greatly relieved the possibility of a low morale in this camp." ⁶⁴

Over 7,000 evacuees from the San Joaquin Valley and the Los Angeles area crowded into the Granada, Colorado, camp known as Amache. As an enhancement to their discomfort, most of those who arrived in August of 1942 discovered that the compound had a shortage of barracks. Many of the new residents slept in laundry rooms and recreation halls. ⁶⁵ Other problems existed, such as poor plumbing and the scarcity of lumber and other building materials which testified to the War Relocation's Administration's (WRA) poor and hasty preparation for a "humane" internment. The terrain was not much better. "It was the sand dune of Colorado," stated Yuk Yatsuya. "Nobody lived there until they put the camp up." ⁶⁶ Amache was not unlike other camps around the nation.

Western Americana special collections, University of the Pacific, Stockton, California.

62. The *Vignette*, (undated article). The *Vignette* comprises part of the Harold S. Jacoby papers at the Holt-Atherton Western Americana special collections department, University of the Pacific, Stockton, California.

63. The *El Joaquin*, (undated article). The *El Joaquin* is part of the Harold S. Jacoby papers.

64. The *Mercedian* Souvenir issue in Western Americana collections, University of the Pacific, Stockton, California.

65. Edward H. Spicer, Aasel T. Hansen, Katherine Luomala, and Marvin K. Opler, *Impounded People: Japanese-Americans in the Relocation Centers* (Tucson, AZ: The University of Arizona Press, 1969), p. 66.

66. Yatsuya interview.

According to historian Roger Daniels, "All ten sites can only be called godforsaken. They were in places where nobody had lived before and no one has lived since."⁶⁷ The camp sites were primitive at best. Upon arrival evacuees found cramped quarters, a wooden stove, a mop, a bucket, and a broom. "Block" facilities, much like those found in the assembly centers, became homes to entire communities. Finally, schools, dining facilities, and washrooms needed much improvement. Among the major concerns of the evacuees, however, were the issues of recreation and athletics.

Amache had relatively little in the way of sports facilities. There were no gymnasiums, baseball or softball diamonds, and a grassless football field. Basketball and volleyball players again endured dirt courts. "We had to make the baseball diamond and there were no stands, no seats, no nothing-so the crowd just stood around the field and watched the games," remembered Fred Kishi.⁶⁸ Gilbert Tanji's recollected the fierce sandstorms that sometimes intruded on the action. ". . . A lot of times we had sandstorms and sometimes we had to stop playing," he said.⁶⁹ While basketball players also faced less than ideal conditions, relocation officials were at least able to secure the use of the Granada High School gymnasium which stood less than a mile from the compound. In fact, other camps envied the basketball facilities found at the Colorado center. The evacuee newspaper at the Rowher, Arkansas camp, the *Outpost*, determined that the Amache people had "the most fabulous basketball program" because of its access to a gymnasium.⁷⁰ By 1943, the Amache camp had its own gymnasium.

Securing players for recreational activities was no problem. In addition to the athletes from the Stanislaus, San Joaquin, and Merced county areas, Amache also held a large number of evacuees from the Los Angeles basin. The competition, of course, was far more intense than at prior sites. Indeed, during the inaugural football season, a group from Southern California, simply known as the "Santa Anita bunch," brawled with their Sebastopol opponents in one contest. Relocation authorities were brought in to restore order. "Their faces were lopsided for a couple of days," recalled Yuk Yatsuya.⁷¹ Like its counterpart on the "outside," camp sports journalism could also be hazardous. On more than a few occasions, Mack Yamaguchi, who reported for the Granada *Pioneer*, was the recipient of criticism from players who bristled at his portrayals of their efforts.⁷²

Primitive facilities notwithstanding, football and basketball generated much enthusiasm during the autumn and winter seasons. In April, when softball sign-ups were announced, among the signees were the Livingston Dodgers, complete with their original uniforms. Softball was popular at the outset, if only because baseball programs had not yet organized. In all, sixteen adult male

67. Daniels, *Concentration Camps*, 96.

68. Kishi interview.

69. Tanji interview.

70. Rohwer *Outpost*, January 23, 1943.

71. Yatsuya interview.

72. Yamaguchi interview.

teams-many participants in their mid-twenties-formed and participated in two different divisions. The Dodgers, with their extensive experience in the San Joaquin Nisei leagues during the 1930s, as well as in the abbreviated Merced Assembly Center league, proved to be worthy opponents when they competed on the Amache softball diamonds during the 1943 season. Playing in what they called the "National League," the Livingston club captured the title. Shortstop Fred Kishi, who batted a healthy .714, not only was selected to the first team all-star squad, but also was named as the league's most valuable player. Like other talented athletes, Kishi also participated in sports such as football and basketball. Indeed, his basketball prowess earned him the title of the Livingston Rockets' "points-getter in-chief," in the Granada *Pioneer*.⁷³

While the Dodgers excelled in the Amache camp softball circuit, they did not fare as well in the baseball league. Both the increase of talented opposition and the loss of key members due to work leaves or military obligations took a toll on the Livingston club. Playing as one of five teams in the baseball league, the Dodgers finished the 1943 season with a two and six record. Baseball, however, remained popular with the Amache residents at-large. All-Star teams were regularly chosen and, at times, competed against clubs from outside the camp. In 1944, an All-Star squad was picked to represent Amache in contests against a team at the Gila River, Arizona camp. Confident that wartime hysteria had passed, the WRA, after several weeks of debate, granted permission for the games to proceed. In August the Amache baseball club spent one week competing in Gila River then stopped off at the Poston, Arizona camp for eight games before returning to their home camp.⁷⁴ Writer Mack Yamaguchi indicated that Amache reciprocated by enthusiastically playing host to visiting Nisei baseball teams from other camps. "We looked forward to [competing against] other Nisei players whom, during prewar days, the Japanese papers had made famous," he recalled.⁷⁵

While relocation officials apparently viewed inter-camp athletic rivalries merely as recreational outlets, competition on the ball diamond remained intense.⁷⁶ As late as July 1944, two years after having arrived at Amache, one columnist scolded his readers for unsportsmanlike conduct; he lamented that when Nisei compete, "things get somewhat out of hand and usually end up with fists flying."⁷⁷

In 1944, players from the Livingston region did not participate in athletic competition on a regular basis. A year earlier Fred Kishi reported to military intelligence school. Others either joined the service, pursued educational opportunities, or worked in labor outfits. Throughout 1944 and the following year, the Livingston club no longer appeared in the league standings.

By the end of 1945, the internment period came to a close. As the former

73. Granada *Pioneer*, February 20, 1943.

74. *Ibid.*, September 13, 1944.

75. Yamaguchi interview.

76. "Recommended Recreation Programs," No. 1.15, Japanese Evacuation and Relocation Collection, the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

77. *Ibid.*, July 12, 1944.

evacuees slowly returned to the Livingston area, their homecoming was, at times, tainted by vicious attacks that included drive-by shootings on their properties.⁷⁸ These and other problems, such as re-establishing their farms, hindered a return to the routine community activities they engaged in prior to the war-sports among them. Hence, while Sansei-third generation-athletes later emerged to resurrect the athletic competitive spirit seen in earlier years, for all intents and purposes, an era had come to an end.

The Livingston Dodgers and other Japanese American athletic teams, however, had made their mark. Ethnic and civic pride sustained them through ordeals unmatched by other Americans. Like other Nisei, they exhibited what historian Valerie Matsumoto termed "a fierce competitive streak which found outlets in sports and scholarship."⁷⁹ The Central Valley Japanese League, for its part, served as both an arena of competition and a tool of cultural unity. Together with other communal factors, the Niseis' sporting spirit helped maintain community morale during the evacuation crisis. Indeed, the remarkable quickness with which the Nisei formed athletic leagues once in camps testified not only to their love of athletics, but to the strength of their society as well. Their participation in baseball and other sports, both reflected and contributed to their bonding and morale. "I think our sport activities prevented a lot of mental anguish," claimed Fred Kishi. "We expressed ourselves through sports."⁸⁰ To be sure, without the availability of athletics, life in camp "would have been terrible," stated Gilbert Tanji.⁸¹ Mack Yamaguchi said with pride, "We just picked up the pieces, picked up the ball, and started playing."⁸² Without the ball teams, "it would have [driven] you crazy living in a place like [Amache]," said Yeichi Sakaguchi.⁸³ Sports provided important outlets for anxiety and frustration; organized athletics helped the Nisei maintain their competitive spirit under duress. Hence, the Livingston Dodgers and other such clubs not only carried the banner of pride for their community, but also provided a unique episode in sport and ethnic history.

78. Kishi interview. This type of lawlessness against the returning Japanese Americans was, unfortunately, all too common in other regions as well. See Daniels, *Concentration Camps*, pp. 159-60.

79. Matsumoto, "The Cortez Colony," p. 73.

80. Kishi interview.

81. Tanji interview.

82. Yamaguchi interview.

83. Sakaguchi interview.