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**Fitts, Robert K. Issei Baseball: The Story of the First Japanese American Ballplayers**

Reviewed by Lisa Timpf

In *Issei Baseball: The Story of the First Japanese American Ballplayers,* Robert K. Fitts provides an intriguing in-depth look at a previously undocumented piece of sports history.

The “Issei” of the title refers to Japanese-born individuals who have emigrated to other countries, in this case the United States. While the book primarily focuses on Issei experiences with the sport of baseball, Fitts also touches on the sport’s introduction to Japan, and its importance to Japanese immigrants. The bulk of the book is set in the first two decades of the 20th century, although Fitts also provides insight into the experiences of some of the Issei ballplayers whose families were sent to relocation camps during World War II.

Three main aspects of Issei baseball involvement are discussed: league and pick-up play, barnstorming teams, and visits to the United States by squads representing Japanese universities. But Fitts goes deeper than recounting scores and team histories. Background information about the lives and experiences of Ken Kitsuse, Harry Saisho, Kiichi Suzuki, and other key figures personalizes the events.

Many of the earliest Issei baseball enthusiasts were first exposed to the sport at private schools in Japan, where they were sent “to study Western ideas and knowledge.” (2) It was here that many of them “fell in love with the new American game of baseball.” (2) Some were so smitten with the sport that they decided to forego the expected path of developing a career and life in Japan, and instead traveled to the United States to pursue their dreams of baseball stardom.

A significant portion of the book is devoted to the various barnstorming teams that roamed across the country playing local nines for a share of the gate. In the early 1900s, barnstorming teams were in vogue for a very practical reason. As Fitts notes, “In most small towns the game was the primary form of entertainment, offering respite from the drudgery of back-breaking rural life.” (74) Owing to the difficulty and slowness of the transportation of the day, many people were unable to take time off to travel to games. Instead, they waited for the games to come to them. Thus, barnstorming teams which criss-crossed the country to play against home-town teams were immensely popular. To enhance their draw, many of these barnstorming teams focused on novelty themes: for example, Guy Green, who would go on to found the first Japanese barnstorming team, also had a team composed entirely of Native Americans.

Just after the turn of the century, many Americans were “enthralled by Japan and all things Japanese.” (78) In 1906 Guy Green “decided to capitalize on the interest in Japan by creating an all-Japanese baseball team to barnstorm across the Midwest.” (79) The 1906 tour lasted 25 weeks, with the team logging over 2,500 miles while playing between 150 and 170 games. Though he advertised the team as “all-Japanese,” Green supplemented his roster with Native Americans and Caucasian players. Nonetheless, it’s true that many of the positions on the squad were filled by Japanese players. Those who participated saw it as a life-changing experience.

Green did not renew the Japanese barnstorming team for subsequent seasons. However, it did serve as the model for numerous similar efforts over the years, some more successful than others. A team formed by Harry Saisho in 1911 was one of the most productive of these ventures. A ledger containing information about gate receipts, expenses, players’ salaries, and other information survived through the years, providing an intriguing look at the financial aspects of the tour. Fitts notes that, “daily expenses included about $8 for hotels, $10 for meals, and a few dollars for miscellaneous items.” (174) Gate receipts varied. At times, the team’s bank account was well in the black, but a succession of games with low attendance, or a spate of rain-outs, would rapidly eat into reserve funds. At one point in the tour, “the team had only $11.39 to its name.” (185)

At the end of the season, some players had to borrow money to get back home. But most did not begrudge the experience. As Fitts explains, “for a season they had been professional ballplayers, minor celebrities playing in front of tens of thousands of people and featured in hundreds of newspapers across seven states.” (205)

In addition to recounting the baseball exploits of Japanese Issei, Fitts also provides a flavor for what the immigrant experience was like for these individuals. Japanese immigrants were not necessarily welcomed to the United States with open arms, though the degree of animosity varied from city to city and state to state. Organizations like the Asiatic Exclusion League fomented negative sentiment. In some cities, there were physical attacks against individuals of Japanese descent. The Issei baseball players were not insulated from these effects. Particularly with the early teams, newspaper coverage was often derogatory toward Japanese players and fans alike.

Despite the less than congenial reception, Japanese ballplayers helped to break down existing prejudices. In some cases, “baseball would serve as a bridge between the two cultures, bringing them together with a shared passion for the game and providing a path toward respect, acceptance and assimilation.” (73) Players on the university teams “acted as ambassadors, spreading goodwill toward Japan through their gentlemanly behavior and expressions of friendship.” (170) For the Japanese immigrants who enjoyed the sport as spectators, attending baseball games strengthened a sense of community.

*Issei Baseball* includes 18 pages of pictures and images. These range from team and individual photos to artifacts like advertising cards from the tours, as well as cartoons representative of some of the negative portrayals of the Japanese ballplayers in the media.

Fitts’ research materials included newspapers, periodicals, and books, as well as primary source items like schedules and log books from the various tours. Fitts also conducted oral history interviews and pored through unpublished manuscripts. The supplementary material in the back part of the book includes a list of known Issei baseball clubs from 1904-1920, partial rosters of selected teams, and schedules and game results.

The product of four years of research, *Issei Baseball* provides a fascinating insight into the experiences of Japanese baseball enthusiasts in the early 1900s, placed within the context of American culture. The inclusion of background information about the personal lives and experiences of the players lends depth to the book and lifts it above a mere recitation of facts. Three-dimensional and unflinching, *Issei Baseball* is, in the end, a testament to the trials and tribulations these players, bitten hard by the baseball bug, were willing to endure in order to participate in their chosen sport.

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Fitts, Robert K. Issei Baseball: The Story of the First Japanese American Ballplayers. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2020. 344 pp. Photographs, illustrations, tables, appendices, bibliography, index.