

Japan takes its baseball serious

United Press International
TOKYO — The big American with the 10-foot bat steps up to the plate and fixes the young Japanese pitcher with an evil grin.

It is the top of the ninth, the count is 0 and 2 and the honor of the Japanese nation, not to mention the game, is at stake.

The rookie pitcher's nerves falter like hired guns whose help is needed but not really wanted, most American players lead well-paid but lonely lives in Japan.

"Americans over here walk on thin ice," said one player. "If we do something wrong, it's magnified a hundred times. If we're five minutes late for practice, it's a big deal. Everything we do wrong is blown out of proportion."

There are 23 Americans now playing ball in Japan, including ex-major leaguers like former Los Angeles Dodgers' slugger Reggie Smith and Warren Cromartie of the Montreal Expos.

Several of them agreed to talk candidly about their problems provided they were not quoted by name. As one first-year player put it: "I want to stay here for a couple of years. But if you use my name, I'll be back in the States by the end of the season. Guaranteed."

In Japan, one of the first things a foreign player learns is that loyalty is more important than a .300 batting average. Criticism of a team by a player is not taken lightly.

From the moment they arrive, foreign players are faced with a host of problems for which most are unprepared.

"The first shock comes when you find out there's nobody to help you settle in. My orientation consisted of showing me to my apartment and telling me when to report for practice," said one former major leaguer.

"They don't show you where to shop or where to catch your train," another player added. "My wife was so scared when we first arrived that she wouldn't leave the apartment for weeks."

Each team has an interpreter, but most of them speak poor English and do little to help the players deal with off-the-field problems.

However, it is on the field that the real problems begin.

Baseball may be an American invention, but in adapting it to their society the Japanese have infused the game with so many unique values that it bears only superficial resemblance to its foreign parent.

"When I first arrived I thought

that baseball was baseball no matter where you played it. But it's not true," said one player. "The rules may be the same, but it's a whole different game here."

The foreign player for English-language publications in Japan. "They must never outshine the Japanese stars," who are the players the fans come to see.

"You're the foreign helper. You fit in to help, not to be the star. You can't do too well. They won't let you," said one player.

"If I strike out, I've let down the team. But if I'm hitting well, my strike zone gets wider," complained a veteran slugger.

A foreign pitcher had the opposite complaint. "Last year I was throwing the ball real hard and had some good games. But then my strike zone seemed to shrink considerably," he said. "Maybe I'm paranoid, but certain things happen in games that don't happen unless they're happening to us."

The bushido code teaches that Japanese players are members of a family headed by a father-like manager who looks after their welfare.

But resentment by lesser paid Japanese players, coupled with the cultural and language differences, deny the foreigner the emotional rewards and make for segregation off the field.

"I've been here five years," said one veteran outfielder. "In five years the Japanese have asked me out for a drink twice. Only twice. I found my own way here. Nobody helped me."

The fifth-year outfielder is an exception. Of the 23 Americans here now, only six have made it past their second year. "Most give up or don't get asked back," says Graczyk.

But those who stick it out have a powerful incentive: money — and much more of it than they can make in the States. A promising Triple A player can fetch as much as \$100,000 a year, tax free, while a big-name major leaguer can make five or six times that.

"Sometimes I get real homesick. But I'm making a helluva lot of money over here. I'm making a future for myself," said one player.

A former Triple A star earning five times what he did in the States put it this way: "Back home my salary barely made the house payments. But here, if I stick it out a little longer, I can go back a rich man. Sure, it's tough. But financially, it's worth all the headaches and heartaches."

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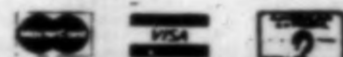


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Air Force picks Knorr as first quarterback

United Press International
AIR FORCE ACADEMY, Colo. — Air Force football coach Fisher DeBerry said Tuesday he had picked Brian Knorr to start at quarterback in the Falcons' opening football game Sept. 1 against visiting San Diego State.

Knorr, a 5-11, 182-pound junior from Lenexa, Kan., was selected over junior Bart Weiss of Naples, Fla., after a duel for the starting berth that began last spring.

The starter's job was left vacant by the graduation of Marty Louthan, who led the Falcons to an 18-7 record and two bowl victories during the past two seasons.

"Brian graded out higher than

Bart, but they are still close," DeBerry said. "They are both first-team material, and I'm sure they'll both be playing in games."

"I have great confidence in the abilities of both players and they are both very talented in their own ways," he said. "However, the nature of our offense necessitates that we have one quarterback so that the personality of our team can begin to emerge."

Knorr played in five games last year and finished with 72 yards rushing, including three touchdowns, on 10 carries. His best game was against Texas-El Paso, when he came off the bench to gain 27 yards, including two touchdowns, on four carries.

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