

Hideki Matsui in the Footsteps of Ruth and Gehrig: Coming to the New York Yankees from Japan – The View from the Player and the Front Office

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Columbia Business School



On November 18, 2015, the Center on Japanese Economy and Business (CJEB) at Columbia Business School (CBS) hosted a special event for the Columbia community featuring remarks by Hideki Matsui, retired Major League Baseball (MLB) All-Star, the 2009 World Series Most Valuable Player, and currently special advisor to the general manager of the New York Yankees; Jean Afterman, senior vice president and assistant general manager; and George Rose, advisor for the Yankee's Pacific Rim Operations and CBS alumnus of the Class of 2000. They presented their standpoint on the cultural, business, legal, clubhouse, and on-field challenges encountered during their careers in the baseball industry. The session was moderated by Hugh Patrick, director of CJEB, who noted that this symposium was part of a public program series honoring CJEB's 30th anniversary and CBS' Centennial anniversary.



Hugh Patrick, Hideki Matsui

Mr. Matsui dreamed of playing for the Yankees after being inspired by his former manager, who was a big fan of Joe DiMaggio, the Yankee's famous centerfielder. In 1999, after the Yomiuri Giants failed to make it to the Japan Series, Mr. Matsui flew to New York to watch the MLB playoffs at Yankee Stadium, where he found himself in awe of the atmosphere. This experience left a strong impression on him and a desire to return to New York.

When he became a free agent in 2002, he started the process towards signing with the Yankees. In 2009 – 10 years after that experience at Yankee Stadium – Mr. Matsui and the Yankees won the World Series, which he recalled as the highlight of his career.

Mr. Matsui opened up his remarks by comparing Japanese and American baseball from various aspects. Baseball is well-established in Japan, and participated at all levels – starting from little league to college, with high school baseball being the most well-received and popular among viewers. On the other hand, collegiate-level baseball holds more popularity in viewership in the United States.



In Japan, baseball training heavily concentrates on the fundamentals of baseball from early childhood through to the professional level, which is known as Nippon Professional Baseball, or NPB. In general, practice is more rigorous and methodical in Japan than in the United States. For spring training, baseball players in Japan spend one month reviewing the fundamentals before start of the preseason, whereas in the United States, only one week is spent on the fundamentals and adjustments are made throughout the games.



At top, left to right: Hugh Patrick, Hideki Matsui, Roger Kahlon (Matsui's interpreter), Jean Afterman, George Rose

Mr. Matsui then went on to discuss the different approaches to player development between Japan and the United States. Each NPB team can have up to 70 players, allowing the team to focus on developing each individual player, so that it results in each one contributing to the team. Through this approach, coaches have substantial authority over their players in Japan, which is also true at the amateur level. Mr. Matsui, who is currently involved in the Yankees' player development, noted that in the United States, because there are many more players, the teams focus on only a few potential individuals. As a result, there is a tendency to give up on players much earlier in the United States than in Japan.



Hideki Matsui

Both countries have excellent facilities, but in Japan, the rainy season occurs in June and July, so six out of the twelve professional teams have dome stadiums. In Japan, nine out of the twelve teams have artificial turf, whereas in the MLB, only two teams (Toronto and Tampa) have artificial turf. Artificial turf puts far more strain on the body compared to natural grass. Mr. Matsui surmised that, if more Japanese stadiums had natural grass, perhaps his career

could have lasted longer because, around age 34 or 35, he began having knee problems.

The season schedule in the NPB is similar to the MLB. Both leagues play for about 6 months from late spring to early fall, with the NPB playing 143 games and the MLB playing 162. In Japan, the schedule is less exhausting as there is only one time zone and the travel distances are shorter. Every Monday is an off day in Japan for the baseball players.

The cheering style of the fans also differ between the two countries, although both are very enthusiastic. Many games at the Tokyo Dome often sell out because many fans from the visiting team attend. Despite this, Mr. Matsui observed that fans do not often jeer during the games in Japan, whereas Yankees fans frequently do. At the same time, he appreciates the Yankees fans' ability to switch between cheering and taunting.

Mr. Matsui finds the media in Japan and the United States to be relatively similar, especially between his two high profile teams, the Yomiuri Giants and the New York Yankees. He often handled the media by always respecting them, giving them time, and also keeping his emotions in check.

Mr. Matsui had a few observations regarding the game itself. First, the pitches are different. In Japan, pitchers emphasize throwing a clean fastball, and, as a result, Mr. Matsui was not exposed to different techniques of throwing fastballs until he played for the Yankees. Second, the culture on the field is also different. In Japan, the players do not chew or spit gum or tobacco, nor litter in the dugout. Mr. Matsui realized he became accustomed to the MLB once he found himself throwing his cup into the dugout. Finally, in the NPB, pitchers only pitch one day per week, while in the MLB, they pitch on four days' rest. However, pitchers in the MLB rarely throw more than 100 pitches, while in the NPB, the limit is somewhat unclear and pitchers may exceed that number.



Jean Afterman

Reflecting on his years in both countries, Mr. Matsui concluded that it was not a question of which baseball culture is better, but rather about learning to respect the differences in both cultures.

Following Mr. Matsui's remarks, Ms. Jean Afterman took the stage to relate her experience in the front office. Ms. Afterman, originally an agent, began her career by representing Japanese

players who joined baseball teams in the United States. After traveling to Japan and watching a Yomiuri Giants game, Ms. Afterman was inspired to recruit Japanese players. Prior to Ms. Afterman's involvement, there were very few Japanese baseball players in the United States because of a 1967 agreement which prohibited Japanese professional baseball players from playing in the States. Ms. Afterman and her fellow agent, Don Nomura, searched for a player willing to challenge the system and found Hideo Nomo, former pitcher of the Kintetsu Buffalos who eventually signed with the Los Angeles Dodgers. Together, they found a loophole in the agreement: Nomo voluntarily retired from Japanese professional baseball and subsequently, after some litigation, he was allowed to play in MLB, where he achieved great success. Following this experience, it became obvious that Japanese players had the potential and ability to compete and play in the United States.



Jean Afterman

The second player Ms. Afterman and Mr. Nomura recruited was Alfonso Soriano, a Dominican who played professionally in Japan before coming to the United States. He was first signed to the Hiroshima Carp, who signed young players from the Dominican Republic with contracts that did not allow these players to become free agents until 20 years after the beginning of their careers. Nonetheless, Ms. Afterman took on the opportunity to recruit Mr. Soriano, resulting in serious backlash from the Hiroshima Carp, who sent letters to all MLB teams threatening to sue if they signed Mr. Soriano. The case moved its way through the courts, ending in victory for Ms. Afterman and leading to Mr. Soriano signing with the Yankees.

In 2002, aware of Mr. Matsui's new-found free agent status and his interest in joining the Yankees, owner George Steinbrenner sent Ms. Afterman to Tokyo to sign him on to the team. Despite several obstacles, she was able to meet with Mr. Matsui and developed a plan which allowed them to go through legal barriers and begin the transition. He signed with the Yankees in December 2002.

From these experiences, Ms. Afterman observed the significant differences between the U.S. and Japanese players. U.S. players are very focused on getting compensated for their market value, so they change agents frequently, whereas Japanese players are more loyal to their agents. When U.S. players join a Japanese baseball team, the team makes a considerable effort to make them

feel comfortable in many ways. On the other hand, the U.S. teams do not reciprocate this to their foreign players. In fact, originally, interpreters were not allowed onto the field or in the dugout.

Following Ms. Afterman, Mr. George Rose spoke about his experiences in Japan and the United States as a translator for Hideki Iribu – a job from which he took two years off during his enrollment at CBS. Mr. Rose reflected on his role



George Rose

with the Yankees and defended Mr. Iribu’s record, which he argued was better than the common perception because Mr. Iribu was often overshadowed by other excellent players in the Yankees. Mr. Rose left after the Yankees traded Mr. Iribu and returned to Columbia. After a few years working outside baseball, Ms. Afterman invited Mr. Rose to join her on a trip to Japan to interpret, leading into the opportunity for Mr. Rose to establish and run the Yankees’ office in Tokyo. Now, Mr. Rose works on business and baseball operations where he is responsible for coordinating scout trips, trading players to Japanese teams, and making deals for corporate sponsorships. After Mr. Rose’s acquisition of Kikkoman as a sponsor, the Yankees gained many

more Japanese sponsors, and currently has the most Japanese sponsors of any MLB team.



Left to right: George Rose, Hugh Patrick, Hideki Matsui, Roger Kahlon, Jean Afterman

Mr. Rose concluded his presentation with a slideshow of photographs of the Yankees throughout the years, starting with Lou Gehrig. Afterwards, the panelists took on questions from the audience.



Left to right: Roger Kahlon, George Rose, Tomoaki Kato, David Weinstein, Jean Afterman, Hideki Matsui, Hugh Patrick, Takatoshi Ito, Ryoko Ogino