
Reviews of Books

Robert Whiting, *The Meaning of Ichiro: The New Wave from Japan and the Transformation of Our National Pastime*

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Ichiro Suzuki is the Sachin Tendulkar of Japan.

It can be assumed that anyone who understands that sentence is both well-traveled and has an inordinate interest in world sport. Such a person is also likely to appreciate the fact that one of the most accessible ways into a culture is through an understanding of the games people play. Sports, like languages, have grammars and accents. The same game may be played with as much local variety as a language that transforms into regional dialects. Indeed, a solid working knowledge of world sport can be more useful than a Lonely Planet and a Swiss army knife when visiting a foreign land. This critic has discovered first hand that any traveler who can pass comment on the Corinthians' pre-Socratic era (and know that it has nothing to do with classical Greek civilization and everything to do with football in Sao Paulo prior to the arrival of a certain floppy-haired midfield master of the back heel) will always be made welcome on a jaunt through southern Brazil. This critic has also benefited from the hospitality of plantation tea pickers in a mountainous region of Kerala, India, as a direct result of a conversation about Shane Warne's inability to trouble Vangipurappu Venkata Sai Laxman with his reverse spinning flipper on sub-Continental pitches. Sport is unique in its capacity to be so thoroughly local (the masonesque fellowship of suburban colours) yet so universal (the borderless semiotics of bats, balls, applause and statistics).

All of which may explain why Aichi Prefecture in Japan cares less about the fact that it has a gross domestic product rumoured to exceed that of Belgium and Holland combined than it does about having produced a will-o-the-wisp lead-off hitter for the Seattle Mariners - third worst team in American major league baseball in 2004. Sales of globe-girdling Toyota cars may fill the pockets of Nagoya's workforce, but it is tales of the fleet-footed Aikodai Meiden High School alumnus that fill the daily tabloids. Indeed, on the very weekend in October 2004 that Nagoya's own ball club, the Chunichi Dragons, celebrated its first Central League championship for the new millennium, the story was relegated to secondary status by local papers due to events at Safeco Field, Seattle - Ichiro Suzuki broke the 84-year-old record for most hits in a season in major league baseball. For two months prior to this latter achievement, almost every news broadcast in Japan had concocted some version of NHK's life-size cardboard cut-out of the man, marching inexorably, if stiffly, across a numbered studio checkerboard towards this long-standing American record.

Clearly, this is a social phenomenon worthy of study, for it seems to capture a paradox that goes to the very heart of what it means to be Japanese today: joyous pride at matching it with the Americans on the field of physical endeavor, yet a certain desperate desire and child-like insecurity in wanting to be recognized by the Americans for getting there. Robert Whiting has

therefore posed a pertinent and timely question: What is the meaning of Ichiro? Does he represent a bold and confident post-war Japan that can increasingly assert itself on the world stage, or does Ichiro point to the immaturity of a national mindset that is too easily prone to clamorous excitement over the merest international acclaim? Does Ichiro prove that the Japanese way of doing things (the boot camp system of *seishin yakyu*) is right after all, or does the fact that Ichiro got out of Japan indicate that the old ways will have to change or risk becoming irrelevant?

The timing of Whiting's book is made all the more salient by recent events – two of Japan's professional teams (Ichiro's Orix Blue Wave and the Osaka Kintetsu Buffaloes) announced a merger during the 2004 season that precipitated loud, public and on-going demonstrations by fans and then an unprecedented players' strike. On both counts the team owners completely misread the sentiment of their employees (the players) and their clientele (the fans). And the actions of these groups call into question the traditional notion that Japanese baseball (and, by implication, Japan in general) strives for the pure expression of *wa* (or group harmony) - the thesis of Whiting's most celebrated book *You Gotta Have Wa* (1989). It is a notion that is revisited in *The Meaning of Ichiro* –

Wa [is] relected in yakyu in other ways, like uniform playing styles, a mostly conciliatory players union and the paucity of player agents and heated salary disputes ... There has never been a baseball strike in Japan. (p. 67)

Ironically, no sooner had these words reached the bookshops than Japanese players announced their first ever strike.

The significance of the walkout cannot be underestimated – in taking such action the players are making it clear that neither they nor the every day fans can be taken for granted by big business. In standing up to the owners, they are standing up to the top brass of such corporations as Seibu, Lotte, and Daiei – not to mention the all-powerful Yomiuri group. But these events do not render *The Meaning of Ichiro* out of date, rather they lend weight to one of the book's central contentions – that in the changing face of Japanese baseball we can see the evolution of a young Japan. The clichéd characterization of the Japanese as 'uniform' and 'conciliatory' is eroding, and increasingly we can observe the triumph of the unconventional. This is symbolized by Ichiro's quirky pendulum swing, one that was famously denounced as flawed by Shozo Doi, of Giants establishment fame and Ichiro's first professional manager.

To a large extent this book is a catalogue of unconventional ball players who found the lure of foreign adventure more attractive than the droning comfort zone of the local *oendan*. Whiting chronicles an oddball cast of misfits and prodigies, of whom Ichiro is merely the most famous. Almost all of these characters, for one reason or another, could not fit into the salaryman-like system of Japanese ball, in which a player lives as a virtual slave to the corporation for the term of his working life. There is the 'accidental pioneer', Masanori Murakami, who stumbled off a pitcher's mound in Fresno into an historical footnote when he got an unexpected call-up from the San Francisco Giants while on virtual study leave from Japan's Nankai Hawks in the California minors. There is Hideki Irabu, the big, brooding son of an American GI (who he never met) and an Okinawan woman, who left behind fame in Chiba to throw fireballs in Yankee stadium – only to be chewed up by the Big Apple and regarded as an expensive joke by the city's relentless Lettermans.

We are of course treated at some length to the intriguing (if somewhat familiar) tale of Hideo Nomo's escape from bondage at the Kintetsu Buffaloes – thanks to his clever exploitation of a loose retirement clause in the players' agreement that allowed him to become the first Japanese

star on the major league scene. And while Nomo's story (as unlikely as his pitching style) is certain to become legend in the history of Japanese sport, it is the shady figure in the background who made it all happen that most intrigues – the half-Japanese/ half-American players' agent Don Nomura. Like Irabu he never knew his American father, but to make things worse he was deserted by his mother, who later became famous as the loud-mouthed wife of baseball player and manager Katsuya Nomura. In a Shakespearean twist, the man treated as a lowly *gaijin* in his own country reaped revenge in later life by convincing Nomo and other Japanese stars to storm through a legal loophole into major league careers – thus breaking the iron grip of Japanese teams on local players.

We are told how young Nomura had the insolence to tell Kintetsu president Yasuo Maeda, in discussions over Nomo's release: "If you don't have enough money then why do you have a ball club? Maybe Kintetsu should sell the team to somebody who knows how to run one." How prophetic these words seem now – after the publication of Whiting's book, Kintetsu collapsed in a financial shambles, the first domino in a series of events leading to the revolution currently enveloping the game. In a strange echo of Nomura's words, we are now seeing the dot com yuppies such as Rakuten and Livedoor stepping in where the traditionalists like Maeda failed.

Given everything that has happened since the publication of *The Meaning of Ichiro*, it is more than likely that Whiting is hurriedly preparing an updated second edition. Because baseball is so dear to the Japanese heart (both of the establishment and of the masses), the story of this sport tends to closely resemble the wider narrative of the nation. From this point of view, the book is a good read for anyone new to Japan, or anyone interested in gaining an insight into current trends – sporting, societal, and economic. However, those comments come with the rider that anyone who has no interest in athletic pursuits will likely find this book a little too left field (so to speak). Conversely, for those who do know about sport and Japan, there may not be much here that is new – Whiting says himself that his intended audience is North Americans.

The fact that foreigners will always come to Japan to play (and manage) baseball, and Japanese will, thanks to Nomo and his followers, always seek fame in the major leagues, Whiting has a never-ending source of amusing yet enlightening cross-cultural theatre. For sport, like any job, inevitably expresses culture; but whereas in most jobs the cross-cultural dramas, conundrums, and misunderstandings are confined to the privacy of the staff lounge or the meeting room, in sport they are played out in public. It may be too early to say exactly 'what Ichiro means', or it may be that he reflects the fact that Japan is, like any country, a multi-faceted place that can no longer be easily pigeon-holed. After reading this book I feel strangely compelled to provide the Japanese answer: it depends.

