



P.O.V.'s 'Kokoyakyu: High School Baseball'

By Kenneth Eng, Alex Shear and Takayo Nagasawa

Tuesday, July 4, 2006, 10 p.m. on PBS (Check local listings)

Filmmakers' Statement

BASEBALL UNITES THE WORLD

It started back in January of 2001, while we were working in India on the Projectile Arts' documentary "Take Me to the River," about a phenomenal Hindu gathering. We wanted to make another film with Projectile Arts that would bring an inspiring cultural experience to America. Surrounded by 20 million Hindu pilgrims at the world's largest religious festival (the "Kumbh Mela"), naturally our thoughts turned to baseball. (We both grew up in Boston as hopeless Red Sox fans.) Ichiro Suzuki was about to become the first Japanese position player in Major League history. We were fascinated – the whole idea of Japanese baseball was so mysterious to many Americans, and we knew it could be a great window into Japanese culture.

Of course, Ichiro's first season in the Majors turned out to be one for the record books – on top of the personal hardware (the Batting Title, the Gold Glove, the Rookie of the Year Award, and Most Valuable Player), Ichiro led his team to an American League record 116 wins.

We discovered Robert Whiting's book *You Gotta Have Wa*, and learned for the first time about Japan's National High School Baseball Tournament, known as the Koshien Tournament for its famous stadium. We learned that ever since baseball was introduced (by an American teacher) at Japan's most elite high school in 1872, the heart and soul of Japanese baseball was in the high schools. That's where baseball has been taught for more than 100 years, with the reverence of a martial art that is meant to shape the character of young men.

The Koshien Tournament is an 86-year-old national festival that combines the pageantry of the Olympics, the popularity of the Super Bowl, and the purity of a Sumo match into an 11-day event. Day after day, in 100-degree heat, with 50,000 cheering fans in attendance and millions watching on television, young men face the ultimate test of fighting spirit. Massive cheering sections led by relentless brass bands travel from the far corners of Japan to root for their home team. Add to all this, the fact that every game is win-or-go-home, and you can see why every game feels like the seventh game of the World Series.

We wanted to create a film following a few high school teams on their summer quest, but we quickly learned what we were up against. When we contacted experts with our idea, their advice was often "good luck – you'll need it". As we learned, Japanese high school baseball is an institution with an old-fashioned devotion to amateurism. This amateur spirit takes many forms: umpires and ushers are volunteers, advertisements are removed from the fences, and until recently high school players were prohibited from any contact with professional players. This dedication to amateurism in sports is a thing of the past in America, where college football programs receive seven-figure fees for appearing in Bowl games.

At that point, we joined forces with producer Takayo Nagasawa and traveled to Japan to meet with the high school baseball authorities. With her help, and because we were willing to accept commercial restrictions, we were able to convince the authorities to authorize a high school baseball film. In the summer of 2004, we became the first foreigners to shoot at the Koshien Tournament. This film is the result of the efforts of many people on both sides of the US-Japan relationship, who helped in a spirit of friendship. We are humbled and honored to be a part of that effort.

During production, we followed two high school teams on their quest for Koshien. Chiben Academy in Wakayama is a powerhouse baseball school, led by the legendary Coach Takashima, and they looked poised to return to Koshien and take a shot at their fourth National Title. Tennoji High School is a top public school academically, but vying with 190 other schools in the Osaka “shoot-out” district means their chances of making it to Koshien are microscopic. But in baseball, nothing is certain. That’s why they play the games.

We hope that **Kokoyakyu: High School Baseball** will immerse American viewers in a new world, where familiar things sometimes take on an entirely different meaning. We hope they will be inspired to explore and learn what they can from cultures that may not be a part of their daily lives. It’s a small world these days, and it’s getting smaller.

- Director/Editor Kenneth Eng
- Writer/Producer Alex Shear

